‘URBS/PASSION/POLITICS’: VENICE IN SELECTED WORKS OF RUSKIN AND POUND

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the representations of Venice found in the works of John Ruskin and Ezra Pound can only fully be understood in the light of historico-political contexts such as the Austrian occupation of Venice, the rise of revolutionary Nationalism and Fascist uses of Venetian history. In contrast to critical approaches that concentrate on the construction of Venice as aestheticised fantasy, this project draws on a range of archival materials to place these two modern literary visions of Venice within their respective historical ‘moments’.

The first chapter examines a range of cultural representations of Venice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Using examples from Ernest Hemingway, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Thomas Mann, it argues against the prevailing myth of the ‘Dream’ of Venice and proposes that literary and other representations of the city should be understood in relation to specific historical events and political anxieties.

The second chapter focuses on Ruskin and demonstrates how his text *The Stones of Venice* can be seen as a counter to the nineteenth-century myth of the ‘dark legend’ of Venice as propagated by historians like Pierre Daru. The third chapter then demonstrates how Ruskin’s Venetian works can be situated within a spectrum of European Nationalist concerns, particularly examining how the 1848 Venice revolution and its aftermath creates an atmosphere of political tension in *The Stones of Venice*.

The following two chapters on Ezra Pound place Pound’s Venetian engagement against the backdrop of early twentieth-century Italian Nationalism. Beginning by discussing the cultural uses of Venetian history under the Fascist regime, these chapters show how Pound’s engagement with the idea of a ‘renewed’ Venice proposed by Nationalist writers such as D’Annunzio, along with Pound’s own Fascist commitment, provide contexts for his visions of Venice in the *Cantos*. Thus the representations of the city in both writers are seen to be crucially connected to the political concerns of Nationalism and the Nationalistic use of Venetian history.
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INTRODUCTION

Approaching ‘literary Venice’ as a topic may seem a foolhardy endeavour. There is much material on the subject and besides, is not Venice, as Ruskin had it, ‘too big’ for proper study?¹ On the contrary, this thesis questions the apparent amorphousness and ambiguity of Venice – its ‘bigness’ – and argues that the time is ripe for a re-evaluation of the meaning of Venice in literature.

The thesis challenges the conception of Venice as a ‘Dream’ or ‘Unreal’ city. The ‘Dream city’ imagery focuses on water and light, mirage and shadow, and upholds a view of Venice as essentially fantastic. Examples from the last forty years include the ‘magical realist’ city portrayed in Jeanette Winterson’s 1987 novel The Passion (‘I hadn’t been to Venice when I wrote about it – which is perfect because Venice doesn’t really exist’) and the Gothic nightmare depicted in Nicholas Roeg’s film version of Daphne Du Maurier’s Don’t Look Now (1973).² Instead of these fantastical visions, however, the research undertaken in this thesis uncovered a ‘Venice’ of cannon-fire, assassinations, blackshirts and Fascist violence forcing itself onto the pages of the texts. The thesis focuses on two of the major writers who found a muse in Venice: John Ruskin and Ezra Pound. In each case, we shall see that the classic ‘Venice myth’ can be challenged and questioned by finding links to forgotten histories, contexts and political movements. Pound’s images of Venice are engaged in a dialogue with Fascist Nationalisms, Ruskin’s evocation of the medieval city in The Stones of Venice is seen as part of a Risorgimento cultural moment and intrinsically connected to the aftermath of Venice’s 1848 Nationalist revolution.

The ‘Dream’ trope of Venice shares many of the characteristics that define what Roland Barthes has designated as ‘myth’. Furthermore, the critical response to literary Venice has tended to accept this trope, imbuing it with too much power and ultimately

² See Winterson’s website at http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/content/index.asp.
capitulating to the myth. This has meant that historico-political interpretations of the images of Venice in literary texts have been neglected. Entranced by the vision, we fail to ground the literary works studied within their contemporary parameters, too often making Venice a metaphor – for desire, the mind, etc. Before I examine in detail Ruskin and Pound’s writings, I show how the ‘Venetian’ works of writers such as Hemingway, Mann and Hofmannsthal are also informed in important ways by historical contexts and political anxieties.

In this sense, the project examines the importance of ‘looking again’ at Venice, paying closer attention to the city in its grounded materiality. A rare contemporary example of this process of ‘looking again’ occurred in November 1996 in the Italian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, where Stefano Boeri and Gabriele Basilico installed 106 of Basilico’s photographs of Italian landscapes. One might have expected predictable snapshots of honeyed Tuscan stone, Romantic groves of cypresses, ‘Canaletto’d’ views of gondolas and canals. This populist tendency is represented in the Venetian Francesco da Mosto’s recent BBC series and accompanying books which reflect a clichéd Italy described as ‘a land of stunning landscapes; its ancient streets hum with modern life, while its towns are packed with masterpieces of art’. By contrast, and refreshingly, Basilico’s pictures represented an Italy of the margins: industrial landscapes and modernistic suburbs consisting of shopping centres and car parks. Basilico’s representations of Venice concentrated not on the historic centre of the Serene City, but on the rail hub of Venice-Mestre, a town that was vastly expanded under Fascism to ‘regenerate’ the Venice area as industrial port and commercial centre. The photographs concentrate on the vast expanse of railway cutting, framed by electricity pylons, the distance giving out to a forest of high-density brutalist housing. In Boeri’s words, this architectural project came with the aim of ‘reconstructing the character of Italy’s urban landscape’, of questioning ‘the relationship between the centre and the periphery’. Furthermore, Basilico and Boeri’s images were ‘likely to rekindle debate over certain old

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Gabriele Basilico’s photographs (1996) present a strikingly unusual image of Venice. The above is a view of the railway cutting at Venice-Mestre.
interpretative scenarios of the Italian landscape’. This kind of ‘looking again’ takes us to the heart of the viewer’s experience, forcing us both to ‘look again’ at our surroundings and ‘look again’ at the way we look, at the very act of looking.

What this thesis – focusing as it does on literary interpretations of Venice – shares with the work of Basilico and Boeri is a commitment to a fresh examination of the urban space and the way it is ‘read’. Essential to the act of looking or reading again is an openness to examining other kinds of material outside of the central texts in order thoroughly to re-evaluate literary imaginings of Venice. As well as reading the central texts of Ruskin and Pound, I have made use of their letters and diaries, alongside background historical material from archives in Europe and the United States, to present a more complex and sophisticated analysis of the meaning of Venice in their writings. Articles in Italian and English journals complete the picture; I thus see the ‘Venetian’ works of Pound and Ruskin as the nucleus of a cultural history project which will aid the scholarly community in re-examining the implications of the image of Venice in modern literature.

The thesis begins with a question: is the misty, dream-like Venice of popular culture the most appropriate paradigm for understanding the appearances of the city in literature? In other words, could more material historico-political contexts be seen to have had any effect on the literary ‘Venices’ studied, or would we always return to the ‘Unreal City’? Of course, when Eliot talked of the ‘Unreal City’ in The Waste Land he was following Baudelaire and not referring to Venice. But it is tempting to see the shadow of the crumbling water-metropolis added to the litany of ‘Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London’. The thesis argues that this ‘cité pleine de rêves’ can and should be placed within a political paradigm.

This is not to deny the importance of dream, fantasy or the erotic in the literary representation of Venice. Collective fantasies of empowerment and renewal – as in Fascist regeneration myths – combine sexual and political elements. Furthermore, an emphasis on power and order in the Nationalistic imagination can be seen to have a gendered aspect. The

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5 Ibid., p.22.
rhetoric of Fascism, with its emphasis on the male leader and its cultic celebration of the
black-shirted male body (fighting or fallen, as Emilio Gentile has demonstrated) betrays a
concern with masculine vitality and male re-enfranchisement. In other words, dynamics of
desire, eroticism and gender identity are at work within the Nationalistic idealising of Venice
(as they may be in the writings of Ruskin and Pound). This thesis demonstrates that some of
the seemingly dream-like or nightmare literary visions of the city can be related to political
anxieties. What is equally true is that political images found within representations of Venice
may have other connotations and resonances. However, my primary concern in this
dissertation is not to uncover the currents of desire at work behind the iconography of
nineteenth and twentieth-century Nationalism, or within the literary texts of Ruskin and
Pound. Instead, this thesis attempts to explore hitherto under-researched links between
Ruskin’s and Pound’s literary responses to Venice and contemporary political debates,
iconographies, and cultures.

There is a huge amount of primary material on Venice. Some of the broader
resonances of Venice in literature and culture are tackled in Chapter One. The figures of
Ruskin and Pound are best suited for the type of reading that this thesis undertakes for a
number of reasons. For both writers, Venice was an extremely important point of reference
(Pound is even buried on the Venetian cemetery island of San Michele). It can be said of both
of them that the city of Venice shaped their writing practice in significant ways. They are also
figures who move between cultural/artistic and political spheres. Ruskin’s extraordinary
productivity means that he is assigned to multiple disciplines – constructed here as
architectural historian, here as art critic, here as proto-socialist and here as evangelical
Christian moralist. The truth, of course, was that he was to some extent all of these things.
Pound also, and notoriously, shifted between political and poetic worlds. But his ideological

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7 See Emilio Gentile, The Sacralisation of Politics in Fascist Italy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
8 A glance at the critical literature on Ruskin bears this out. The titles of monographs and PhDs
published in the last ten years include Ruskin’s God, John Ruskin’s Political Economy, John Ruskin’s
Humanistic Economy, Ruskin and the Twentieth Century, and Designing Utopia: John Ruskin’s Urban
Vision for Britain and America.
commitment to Fascism is not the only example of his transgression of boundaries. In his time he was an art critic, theorist of music, composer, economic philosopher, ‘Orientalist’, impresario, travel writer and unofficial patron of anglo-american modernism.

Yet the main reason for focusing on Ruskin and Pound in this thesis is the existence of specific contexts for each writer’s representations of Venice which have been seriously neglected by critical studies. Both Ruskin’s and Pound’s engagement with Venice came at specific times of political turmoil. Ruskin arrived in Venice to research his huge treatise on architecture, *The Stones of Venice*, shortly after the surrender of Venice’s 1848 revolutionaries. Pound’s engagement with the city parallels the rise of Fascist Nationalism. His first published volume of XVI *Cantos*, containing many images of Venice, was published in 1925, the year Mussolini proclaimed the dictatorship in Italy. Yet there is little criticism that ties the cultural to the political in this area. Important research remains to be done on the history of the modern literary image of Venice.

The key book on the topic of literary Venice, to which this thesis is much indebted, is Tony Tanner’s *Venice Desired* (Oxford: Blackwell 1992). This beautiful, impressive study is the most comprehensive analysis of literary Venice in existence, taking in Byron and Proust, Hofmannsthal and Henry James, Ruskin, Pound, Baron Corvo and Thomas Mann. Tanner’s thesis is that relationships with cities are characterised by desire, with Venice as the most perfect example: the image of the city acts as a vision both erotic and disturbing to many of the writers who have come under its spell. His chapter on Pound rightly stresses the positive connotations of Venice in the poet’s work – as sign of ‘rebirth’ and organic life. However, Tanner’s approach, with its primarily psychoanalytical focus, is not particularly concerned with the way these ‘Venetian’ texts may be said to interact with contemporary contexts. Although a crucial text in opening up the field of ‘literary Venice’ studies, *Venice Desired* largely neglects the historical contexts that inform the literary works Tanner analyses.

Similarly psychoanalytical is the Rodopi Press’s collection of essays, *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 1999), which has an admirably eclectic frame of
reference, from Nicholas Roeg’s film *Don’t Look Now* to the recent detective fictions of Donna Leon. In specific author criticism, the only volume to devote itself (almost) entirely to Pound and Venice is the Italian essay collection *Ezra Pound a Venezia* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki 1985), which was the product of a colloquium on the author’s work held in Venice. The book contains some excellent essays – notably Massimo Bacigalupo’s comparison of Pound’s visions of Venice and Liguria – but none on the historical context of Pound’s engagement with the city. Jennifer Scappettone’s theoretical essay ‘Utopia Interrupted: Archipelago as Sociolyric Structure in *A Draft of XXX Cantos*’ (*PMLA* January 2007 Vol.122,1, pp.105-123) breaks new ground in its approach. Where this thesis differs with Scappettone is in her reading of the city eulogised by Pound as essentially resistant to Fascist ideology. I suggest in Chapter Five that ‘Pound’s Venice’ is a city shaped and modernised by Fascist Nationalism.

We are on more well-trodden ground in the case of Ruskin, with Jeanne Clegg’s and Alexander Bradley’s studies, *Ruskin and Venice* (London: Junction Books 1981) and *Ruskin and Italy* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I Research Press 1987). These are invaluable in establishing chronology, and both engage themselves with the contemporary context as a backdrop to Ruskin’s work in Italy. Robert Hewison’s book, *Ruskin and Venice* (London: Thames and Hudson 1978), assembles a good collection of paintings by Ruskin and others, along with Ruskin’s pencil illustrations and daguerrotypes, to illustrate his fascination with the city. We await Hewison’s companion volume, *Venice and Ruskin*, which is forthcoming in 2009. The Italian collection of essays, *Ruskin e Venezia: La Bellezza in Declino* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki 2001), provides a good range of Italian perspectives. J.B. Bullen’s essay, ‘Ruskin, Gautier, and the Feminization of Venice’, concentrates on Ruskin’s feminising of the city. However, Bullen’s argument about the ‘gendering’ of the city needs to be grounded within a more historical paradigm.

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9 Found in the collection edited by Dinah Birch, *Ruskin and Gender* (Houndmills: Palgrave 2002), pp.64-85. Bullen argues that ‘the language and structure of The Stones of Venice [is]...deeply affected by Ruskin’s relationship with his wife’ and that Ruskin’s ‘libidinal energy’ is ‘displaced [onto] the body of Venice’ p.67, 75.
Tim Hilton’s biography, *John Ruskin* (New Haven and London: 2002) was also a useful tool for establishing chronology and the development of Ruskin’s thinking. However, this thesis takes issue with Hilton’s assessment of Ruskin’s mind as having a conservative, pro-Austrian bent with regard to the political situation of nineteenth-century Venice, and reads Ruskin in a more nuanced way. Michael Wheeler’s study of Ruskin’s religion, *Ruskin’s God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), is another creative, detailed and helpful book – particularly in its chapter on Ruskin’s Protestant engagement with Venice. Wheeler also edited the essay collection *Ruskin and Environment* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press 1995), which was an invaluable resource for constructing a geo-political Ruskin. Denis Cosgrove’s chapter, ‘Mappa mundi, anima mundi: imaginative mapping and environmental representation’ is a particularly useful study of the topographical nature of Ruskin’s writing in *The Poetry of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*.

In the field of Pound studies, I have benefitted from many books that analyse Pound’s cultural and political thought. Tim Redman’s *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991) is a thorough study, and the first to engage in depth with Pound’s relationship to the Mussolini regime. The emphasis of this thesis differs from Redman’s. Whilst his book focuses on the economic attraction of the Italian Fascist regime, I take a more cultural approach.¹⁰ To this end, I have found that Lawrence Rainey’s book, *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1991) is both inspiring and illuminating. Rainey constructs a very subtle argument concerning the relationship between Pound’s politics and the ‘cultural fragment’, in particular Pound’s engagement with the ‘Tempio Malatestiano’, the church of San Francesco in Rimini. Peter Nicholls’s *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics and Writing* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1984) has also been a great help in thinking about the political dimension of Pound’s

later *Pisan Cantos*. All students of Pound must at some point engage with Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era* (London: Pimlico 1991, 1st edition University of California Press 1971). If for Basil Bunting, the *Cantos* were ‘the Alps’ around which all poets had to negotiate their way, *The Pound Era* is the equivalent for Pound scholars. With hindsight, we might wish to engage in a more critical analysis of the relationship between Pound’s cultural endeavours and his politics, but there is still no match for Kenner’s interdisciplinary mind, and his chapter ‘The Sacred Places’ is a good starting point for thinking about *genius loci* in Pound.

This thesis does not provide a comparative study of Pound and Ruskin. However, the comparative field is one that is opening up, as a number of critics are studying the influence of Ruskin, and the parallels with his work, to be found in modernism. Tony Tanner includes a discussion of the similarities between Pound and Ruskin in his chapter on Pound in *Venice Desired*, particularly with regard to their respective positions on culture, usury and capital. The essays included in the book-collection *Ruskin and Modernism*, edited by Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls (Houndmills: Palgrave 2001), make a convincing case for the influence of Ruskin on modernist figures like Pound, W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot. Robert Casillo’s essay ‘The Meaning of Venetian History in Ruskin and Pound’ (*University of Toronto Quarterly* 55, 3 Spring 1986, pp.235-261) is an interesting analysis of the similarities and differences in these two writers’ appropriations of the history of the Most Serene Republic.

Many historical studies have informed this thesis’s attempts to contextualise the literary visions of Ruskin and Pound. Margaret Plant’s enormous *Venice: Fragile City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2002) provides an original combination of historical chronology and cultural material and is one of the very few history books that addresses the ‘modern Venice’ of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Deborah Howard’s *The Architectural History of Venice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2002)

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D. Medina Lasansky’s *The Renaissance Perfected* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania University Press 2004) has been a major influence on this thesis, establishing links between tourism, Fascism, monumentalism and culture. Lasansky’s work has been invaluable in providing a paradigm for thinking about Ezra Pound’s relationship to Venice, Fascism and the touristic. Lasansky shows how many of the iconic monuments of ‘touristic Italy’ – the leaning tower of Pisa, the centre of Florence, the town of San Gimignano – were ‘packaged’ by Fascist Italy to represent a totalising *italianità*. This argument encouraged me to look again at the idyllic representations of Venice in Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*, to question the presentation of the tourist ‘picturesque’ and to contextualise it within Fascist culture. Similarly, R.J.B. Bosworth’s *Mussolini’s Italy: Life Under the Dictatorship 1915-1945* (London: Penguin 2006) and Ruth Ben-Ghiat’s *Fascist Modernities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 2001) have served as excellent, intelligent and detailed overviews of the culture of Mussolini’s regime.

The major author archives consulted were the Beinecke Rare Books Library at Yale University, for Pound, and the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University. Original letters and draft manuscripts in these archives provided insights into the changing resonances of Venice
in the two writers’ minds. A period of five weeks spent in Venice yielded a large amount of original material, including records of the 1848 and Risorgimento period held in the Correr Library, and articles from Fascist era journals and newspapers stored in the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice’s main library. The latter material in particular gave the thesis a new shape, grounding Ezra Pound’s ‘reborn’ poetic Venice in the context of Venetian Nationalist debates under the Mussolini regime. To undertake this research I had to acquire Italian, which enabled me to read the sources first-hand and perform my own translations.

The thesis begins with an analysis of the position of Venice within the modern cultural consciousness. Looking at a variety of literary texts and social phenomena in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I trace the evolution of the modern idea of Venice. Critiquing the idea of Venice as ‘Dream City’, the chapter undertakes a close reading of a few examples of ‘Venetian’ literary texts (works by Ernest Hemingway, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Thomas Mann). I show how these evocations of Venice can be seen to reflect political and social anxieties specific to particular moments in history, for example the aftermath of World War Two (Hemingway) and the dissolution of the Austrian empire (Hofmannsthal). In doing so, the thesis posits a way of ‘looking again’ at what it terms ‘Veneto-philia’, taking the reader beyond cliché towards a more sophisticated evaluation of the meaning of the appearance of Venice in literary works.

The second chapter moves onto a detailed focus on the context of Ruskin’s work, suggesting that his three-part architectural treatise, *The Stones of Venice*, can be read in the context of political ‘Venice myths’ in circulation in the nineteenth century. I have bracketed these myths under the term *leggenda nera*, or ‘black legend’, a myth which portrays the ancient republic of Venice as a dark, mysterious oligarchy. Examining this trope in the work of Byron and other writers of the British Romantic period, the chapter goes on to close-read the work of the most influential historian of the *leggenda nera*, Pierre Daru. Using Filippo de Vivo’s recent work on the *leggenda*, the chapter analyses the political implications of this trope in Daru’s Napoleonic imagination – a discrediting of the republic of Venice in order to
justify its invasion and occupation by the French forces. The chapter argues that Ruskin’s work in *The Stones of Venice* should be viewed as a challenge to this dominant ‘dark’ myth. In my reading, *The Stones of Venice* is engaged in trying to recover a ‘purer’, more positive account of Venice. Ruskin’s work can thus be seen to parallel the concerns of Risorgimento Nationalism in the city, in the context of which the *leggenda nera* was a foreign invention and a danger to patriotic pride.

The third chapter of the thesis develops this idea by situating Ruskin’s work within a continuum of European Nationalisms. Close-reading *The Stones of Venice* alongside relevant letters, diaries and newspaper reports, I show how the work is crucially informed by the context of the aftermath of the 1848 Nationalist revolution and the Austrian occupation of Venice. The chapter describes how the ‘tension’ of this political context informs Ruskin’s descriptions of Venice and shows how the divisive atmosphere of the mid-century city shapes Ruskin’s prose at key moments of the book.

I further compare Ruskin’s work to a variety of British and American responses to the Venice of the nineteenth century, including Charles Dickens’s *Pictures from Italy* and William Dean Howells’s *Venetian Life*. The chapter also demonstrates the way in which Ruskin’s engagement with Venetian restoration projects in the 1870s was construed as part of the Risorgimento project of ‘making Italians’, and how *The Stones of Venice* was received by Venetian figures like Count Zorzi as a ‘patriotic’ text. I demonstrate the highly developed Nationalistic quality of Ruskin’s work, from his early work *The Poetry of Architecture* through to *The Stones of Venice* and beyond. By comparing Ruskin’s work with figures like Michelet, I show how the tone of his writing can be read as sharing many of the characteristics of what we think of as Nationalistic ideology.

The second part of the thesis begins with a chapter examining the background to Ezra Pound’s engagement with the city, looking at the culture of Nationalist and Fascist views of the city in the early 20th century. I place Pound’s early engagement with Venice in the context
of a city striving to develop a modern identity. The chapter shows how conflicts between different kinds of cultural Nationalism alternately located Venice as ancient and modern, ‘Roman’ and medieval, ‘organic’ and artificial. The chapter argues that the Nationalism of F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist attack on Venice also assumes a kind of mythic, dynamic past: an active *italianità* that Marinetti sees in ancient Venice but that is absent from the ‘passéist’ city he chastises. The chapter shows how, within the politics of Fascism, these Futurist or modernist impulses conflicted with conservative varieties of patriotism in Venice. Using original research into Venetian architectural debates of the 1920s and ‘30s, I argue that in Fascist rhetoric the city could be seen as embodying both ‘pure’ medieval *venezianità* (‘Venetianness’) and industrial might (embodied in the suburbs of Mestre and Porto Marghera). The point of this is to show that the ‘Venice’ that Pound engaged with was not a stable, fixed entity but a city undergoing dramatic modernisation, internally conflicted and unsure whether to look forwards or backwards, desiring ‘rebirth’ but wishing to conserve.

In the final chapter of the thesis, I show how Pound’s evocations of Venice in the *Cantos* were created out of his political awareness of a ‘renewed’ Fascist city. The first section deals with the *Pisan Cantos*, written at the end of World War Two. I read the idyllic, nostalgic appearances of Venice in these *Cantos* not simply as personal elegy, but as a nostalgia directed towards a specific, Fascist city. The references to figures like Count Volpi (the Venetian industrialist and Fascist finance minister) and the new ‘Era’ (as Fascist ideology termed Mussolini’s regime) suggest that the ‘Venice’ that Pound refers to is more political than picture-postcard. The chapter then goes on to discuss Pound’s anti-Semitism in the context of his references to Venice. Comparing Pound’s writing with T.S. Eliot’s ‘Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar’ and with Fascist-era Venetian anti-Semitism, the chapter argues that political, racial and touristic concerns are interweaved in Pound’s work.

I then work backwards, in order to trace the development of the political image of Venice in Pound’s poetry. Focussing on his struggle with Robert Browning, I show how Pound’s awareness of the limitations of Browning’s engagement with Italy led him towards a more
material, and ultimately political, vision. The apparent fragility of Venice in Browning’s *Sordello* is transformed into what emerges in *Canto* III as a city organically and spiritually ‘reborn’. I also show how the ‘Venice’ that emerges from the struggle with Browning is informed by Pound’s reading of the Italian Nationalist poet, Gabriele D’Annunzio. D’Annunzio’s Italian patriotism, with its irredentist emphasis and focus on a ‘renewed’ Venice, imbues the images of Venice in *Canto* III with a political edge. This argument is bolstered by Pound’s comments on D’Annunzio in other writings of this period, suggesting a move towards a politically-reborn, proto-Fascist Venice in the 1920s. Pound’s own comments on early Venetian Fascism in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, where he reflects on a 1920s encounter with a group of black-shirts in St. Mark’s Square, suggest that he saw Fascist Nationalism as revitalising the city, bringing what he calls ‘a different kind of excitement’ to places dominated by tourism.

Using original archival research conducted at the Beinecke Library, Yale, I then demonstrate that the Venice of the middle *Cantos* (XVII, XXV, XXVI) is seen by Pound as imbued with a vibrant political life. Pound’s drafts for *Canto* XVII construct ‘urbs/passion/politics/craft/work’ (my italics) as the central concerns of his visions of Venice. Furthermore, using research conducted in Venice, the chapter shows how the moving lions of *Canto* XXV may profitably be linked to Fascist patriotic revivals of the political image of the lion of St. Mark and to the movement to recover the stone lions that were markers of Venetian political power in the Middle Ages. Pound’s lion-images may therefore be connected to Fascist debates relating to the revival of the Venetian empire as a model for Italian expansion in the eastern Mediterranean. Using the scholarship of Renzo De Felice, D. Medina Lasansky and others, I show how the iconography of Venice was used to justify Fascist imperialism in the East. I conclude this chapter by urging that a more sophisticated paradigm be adopted for viewing the images of Venice in Pound’s work. In other words, however much these
‘paradisal’ images may enchant, they should properly be placed within historical contexts that confuse and disturb.12

Note on the Text

All significant quotations from Italian have been provided in both the original and an English translation. In cases where there is no existent English translation I have provided my own translation. In the case of Marinetti’s Italian writings, I have made use of the existing English translation whilst occasionally suggesting alternative translations for individual words in parentheses. Translations from the French of Pierre Daru’s Histoire de la République de Venise and of Filippo de Vivo’s French article on Daru are also my own work. All quotations from the works of Ruskin (excluding letters, diaries and archive material) are from the Cook and Wedderburn Library Edition. All quotations from the Cantos of Ezra Pound are from the 1987 Faber edition, although I have used other editions for comparison, and quoted from various sources for other parts of Pound’s work.

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12 This thesis recognises that Anglo-American or Northern European representations of other Italian cities (particularly Rome and Florence) share some of the characteristics of the literary image of Venice discussed here. Rome has been seen as having a ‘capacity for multiple, indeed conflicting signification’, a city whose ruins ‘become a medium for the exploration of subjectivity’ (Catherine Edwards, ‘Introduction’, Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture 1789-1945, ed. Edwards. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, p.3, p.16). John Lyon has said of the Rome depicted in Henry James’s writings for example that it presents itself as a locus of personal ‘anxiety’ (Lyon, ‘Henry James and the Anxiety of Rome’, in Roman Presences, pp.140-156). However, I suggest that Venice remains in a distinct category – with its liquid ambiguity and its sense of having risen out of the mind, it maintains a sense of surreality and emptiness in the popular imagination. The absorption of more recent images of a ‘busy’, decadent Rome into Anglo-American culture through the popularity of the films of Fellini (La Dolce Vita, 1960, and Roma, 1972) and others suggest a picture of Rome as a less static city than Venice and potentially more ‘real’ and material. See also Michael L. Ross, Storied Cities: Literary Imaginings of Florence, Venice, and Rome (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood 1994) and Daniel Pick, Rome or Death: The Obsessions of General Garibaldi (London: Pimlico 2006).
A METHODOLOGY FOR LITERARY VENICE

‘Venetophilia’: The Background

It was written, then, on my page in the Book of Fate that at five in the afternoon of the twenty-eighth day of September in the year 1786, I should see Venice for the first time as I entered the lagoons from the Brenta, and, soon afterwards, set foot in this beautiful island-city, this beaver-republic. So now, thank God, Venice is no longer a mere word to me, an empty name, a state of mind which has so often alarmed me who am the mortal enemy of mere words.¹

So wrote Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, arriving in Venice for the first time. Here, the appearance of Venice in its actuality – its material existence – brings an almost climactic relief. We know that arrival in Italy is a longed-for dream. Goethe tells us that:

For many years I did not dare look into a Latin author or at anything which evoked an image of Italy. If this happened by chance, I suffered agonies…My passionate desire to see these objects with my own eyes had grown to such a point that if I had not taken the decision I am now acting upon, I should have gone completely to pieces.²

Similarly, Marcel Proust, writing 120 years later, would present his narrator as a child making himself ill pining for Italy. The solid plans for a holiday in Venice and Florence raise the narrator to ‘a sort of ecstasy’; the idea of the Venetian air is ‘indescribable and peculiar as the atmosphere of dreams’ but also ‘accompanied by [a] vague desire to vomit which one feels when one has developed a very sore throat’.³

Venice, when Proust’s narrator finally arrives there in the fifth volume of In Search of Lost Time (1925), is a disturbing reality, not an ecstatic relief. The narrator, lost among the calli and piazzas of the city, confuses ‘the meaning of a dream and the memory of a reality’.

Delaying his departure, he watches the town ‘become alien’:

The town that I saw before me had ceased to be Venice. Its personality, its name, seemed to me to be mendacious fictions which I no longer had the will to impress upon its stones. I saw the palaces reduced to their basic elements, lifeless heaps of marble with nothing to choose between them, and the water as a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, eternal, blind, anterior and exterior to Venice, oblivious of the

² Ibid., p.59.
Doges or of Turner…the palaces, the canal, the Rialto, divested of the idea that constituted their reality and dissolved into their vulgar material elements.\footnote{In Search of Lost Time V, The Fugitive (1925), p.749.}

In contrast to Goethe, what seems to disturb Proust’s narrator is the city’s realness, its solid essence – stone, marble, water, ‘vulgar material[s]’. In other words, the narrator is so in love with the ‘idea’ of Venice that his consciousness of the reality of the city causes crisis. Just as the prospect of actually ‘walking in Venice next week’ causes the child to become ill, so the adult-narrator’s experience of the city seems in danger of dissolving, and this precipitates an anxious crisis: Venice is not a real place but a city where ideas have to be ‘impress[ed] upon its stones’.

So often it is this ‘indescribable’ Venice that persists; it seems the moment the city moves from fantasy to reality, it dissolves. It becomes the ‘city of art’, of literature – a city defined by its foreign interpreters. Later in this chapter, I shall explain how the attempt to understand and critique this mythologising of Venice becomes a methodology for this thesis. In a further early twentieth-century example, in 1913, Douglas Goldring wrote of Venice as a city among places he ‘had long known, in dreams’, whose names had been ‘familiar to me and sweet sounding for most of my life,…in the true sense “dream cities,” for beyond their position I knew practically nothing about them. Their names had stuck in my brain….and romance had grown round them’.\footnote{Douglas Goldring, Dream Cities (London: T Fisher Unwin 1913), p.5.} The ‘dream city’ Venice, it emerges, is also a place where foreign interpretations are already written onto its body:

As the tide passes swiftly up the Grand Canal, one has a vision of Byron plunging into the water from the steps of the Palazzo Mocenigo, to swim in the Lido. Then one can see Musset and Georges Sand…arriving gracefully at the steps of the Teatro Goldoni…Then Shelley, Meredith, Turgenev, Whistler, Théophile Gautier, and a hundred others…have they not all endowed Venice with the glamour of their genius?\footnote{Ibid., p.86.}

Goldring’s vision is of a city whose ‘glamour’ derives from the multitude of foreigners who have visited it; in other words, the city can only be received as a regurgitated artistic creation.
‘I suppose one never sees anything in this place which some poet or other has not already impeccably described!’ he writes.  

Venice was often constructed as a fantastical utopia. Imre Kiralfi’s 1891 exhibition at London’s Kensington Olympia attempted to recreate the city, importing a hundred gondolas and genuine Venetian gondoliers and craftsmen to fill the hall with the atmosphere of the city. Divided into sections representing modern and ancient Venice, Kiralfi’s extravaganza was, according to *The Times*, ‘faithful in all important particulars’: ‘the result is a very pleasing and effective imitation of one of the most romantic and beautiful of cities’. Kiralfi’s ‘Modern Venice’ was a largely de-populated synthesis of canals, streets and bridges, given the ‘effect of distance’ by shrewd ‘employment of perspective’:

There are not many Venetians to be seen in “Modern Venice” but such as there are make a bright and taking show in the picturesque costumes of their native city. Here and there about the building are to be seen some of the caribineers [carabinieri] who serve as the police or gendarmerie of Italy. They are tall, powerfully-built men…Their task on Saturday was one of no slight difficulty, for they had to control the exuberance of an English Bank Holiday crowd, and it is only just to say that they discharged their duties in a manner which reflected much credit on their tact and temper.

The idea of literally representing the Italian policing system for this Victorian holiday crowd seems absurd; the exhibition is trying to recreate not only Venice, but its governmental system as well. This strange ‘Modern Venice’, with its overcrowded space (‘The navigation of so many gondolas was not infrequently a difficult undertaking’), is complemented by the staged balletic spectacle of ‘Ancient Venice’, where dancers performed ‘on the uncertain footing’ of ornamental gondolas and flat-bottomed boats. Despite a few quibbles over historical accuracy – fourteenth-century events performed against a fifteenth-century backdrop – *The Times* concluded that the ‘whole entertainment of “Venice in London” contains…the elements of popular success’.

Such popular ‘versions’ of Venice seem to have been a phenomenon of late nineteenth-century culture – a Victorian ‘venetophilia’. Only two years earlier, Gilbert and

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7 Ibid., p.100.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Sullivan had showcased their opera, *The Gondoliers*, whose first act was set in Venice and accompanied by quasi-oriental music. Sir Arthur Sullivan had wanted the piece to ‘hold out great chances of bright colour’\(^{11}\) in its music and staging, with light, popular melodies and an accessible plot. In its various draft versions it also became less and less political, as what Gilbert described as the ‘red hot Republican’ tendencies of fifteenth-century Venetians were played down on Sullivan’s recommendation.\(^{12}\) In the end, what the public got was a fantastic spectacle like Kiralfi’s ‘Venice in London’: ‘a marvel of stage adaptation, the first [scene] representing no less a space than the Piazzetta at Venice with the columns of the Ducal Palace and the lagoons beyond’.\(^ {13}\)

Such examples suggest a city over-mythologised. Venice is pre-packaged as an aesthetic object and source of fantasy long before any visitor’s plane touches down at the Aeroporto Marco Polo on the terraferma. Critical opinion has tended to follow this lead, stressing the importance of dream and fantasy. I have already discussed Tony Tanner’s work in the introduction to this thesis. Rodopi Press’s collection, *Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds*, follows a similar approach, concentrating on the idea of Venice as mirror, aesthetic object, or dream – ‘nothing is as it seems’, as the character of John Baxter articulates in Nicolas Roeg’s film of the Daphne Du Maurier short story, *Don’t Look Now*.

What emerges as a strong thread from much criticism is the conception of Venice as the ‘Dream City’ *par excellence*. Following the 1970s and ’80s interest in the representation of cities and urbanism, studies of ‘literary Venice’ often neglected the subtle negotiations with contemporary political contexts contained in evocations of the city, instead highlighting ‘the city as mental space’, a canvas on which other anxieties and desires could be projected. Jonathan Raban’s concept of a ‘soft city’ that was ‘plastic by nature’ – available to be moulded to individual subjectivities – was the first of a number of books that attempted to

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\(^{13}\) ‘Savoy Theatre’, *The Times*, 9 December 1889, p.12.
theorise this idea of the city. Over the next twenty years, books such as Burton Pike’s *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* saw the literary city as ‘paved solitude’ – an essentially solipsistic space for embodying ‘man’s contradictory feelings…towards civilization’. Pike sees the importance of modern depictions of cities as hinging on an anxious conflict between the spatial and the temporal, the city resisting ‘the dominating convention of time’, leading to an evasive etherealising in the literary representation of cities. Richard Lehan’s cultural history, *The City in Literature*, provides a subtle appreciation of the modernist city in writers like Pound, Joyce and Eliot: ‘the meaning of the city becomes more dense…we see the city through layers of historical meaning’.

The idea of ‘layers of historical meaning’ is an important one for an analysis of literary representations of Venice. Whilst much has been made of writers’ reactions to Venice’s distant past and its ‘Fall’, the impact of contemporary history and politics has been a subject generally neglected by criticism. Concentrating on the ‘Venetian’ writings of John Ruskin and Ezra Pound, this thesis asserts that contemporary contexts such as the Austrian occupation of Venice, the rise of revolutionary Nationalism, and Fascist culture are reflected in these works; indeed, these historico-political contexts are vital in understanding the two writers’ conceptions and representations of Venice. I suggest that the over-emphasis on the ‘Venice of the mind’ has led to these contexts being sidelined and a concept of the city as erotic/aesthetic spectacle has developed. This idea is common in criticism; Venice, writes J.B. Bullen, is consistently feminised by Ruskin and desired as a symbol of feminine beauty. Likewise Tony Tanner argues that when Ruskin writes about Venice, his prose ‘is little short of orgasmic’, and the city ‘aroused in him extremes of ecstasy…which seem…little short of sexual’. Tanner’s study of Pound, though he is admirably confident in approaching the relationship between the writer’s vision of Venice and his anti-Semitism, spends little time

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discussing Fascism and focuses on the feminine images of ‘Venus-Aphrodite’. Likewise, Proust’s work for Tanner is exemplary of Venice eroticised: ‘to know and experience desire was at once to desire Venice’, ‘He simply – I’ll say it once – wants to f*** Venice’.\footnote{Tony Tanner, \textit{Venice Desired} (Oxford: Blackwell 1992), p. 75, 110, 243, 255.}

Obviously, there \textit{are} undercurrents of sexuality in these writings. Proust’s descriptions of Venice in ‘The Fugitive’, coming as they do in the midst of the narrator’s nightmare of sexual jealousy and obsession, naturally reflect these concerns. A further interesting example is found in the work of D.H. Lawrence, where, in \textit{Lady Chatterley’s Lover} (1928), the writer expresses a visceral disgust at the city’s appearance: ‘the dark side canals with the horrible, slimy green walls, the canals that go through the poorer areas, where…there is a slight or strong odour of sewerage’.\footnote{D.H. Lawrence, \textit{Lady Chatterley’s Lover}, ed. Michal Squires (London: Penguin 2000), p.256.} This is similar language to that which Lawrence used to describe the Freudian view of sexuality, which was to him ‘nothing but a slimy serpent of sex, and heaps of excrement, and myriad repulsive little horrors spawned between sex and excrement’.\footnote{Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious (New York: Viking Press 1960), p.5.} His deployment of such language suggests his use of Venice in \textit{Lady Chatterley’s Lover} as a repository for a certain kind of psychic revulsion; the city embodies not the ‘healthy’ sexual frankness of Connie and Mellors, but a kind of dark perversion buried in the unconscious and associated with Freudian psychic exploration.

Yet even in Lawrence’s work, Venice has other meanings and contexts. In ‘St. Mark’, a poem in his collection \textit{Birds, Beasts and Flowers} (1923), the images revolve around a more vibrant and political Venice:

\begin{quote}
There was a lion in Judah
Which whelped, and was Mark.

But winged.
A lion with wings.
At least in Venice.
The Old Testament images that begin the poem transmute into the traditional Christian iconography that associates the four beasts of Revelation with the four evangelists. In the winged lion of St. Mark, Lawrence also conjures up the emblem of Venetian political power. Furthermore, this power is recent; the line ‘Even as late as Daniele Manin’ recalls the revolution of 1848 and the brief revival of the Most Serene Republic. But Lawrence’s lion is also a spiritual guardian – ‘The lion of the spirit’ – who protects the sheep of the ‘Shepherd’, Christ. This merging of the spiritual and political around the image of Venice (or of its symbol, the lion of St. Mark) recalls Ruskin’s emphasis on the ‘lost’ religious purity of the medieval Republic’s powerful State. ‘The Evangelistic Beasts’, the section of Lawrence’s collection in which the ‘St. Mark’ poem occurs, begins with an evocation to ‘put them back, put them back in the four corners of the heavens, where they belong, the Apocalyptic beasts’. The appearance of St. Mark, then, seems to promise power, spirit, and apocalypse, his wings a ‘soaring consciousness’ encapsulating religion, masculine energy, and political power. As in the work of Ruskin and Pound, the allusions to Venice here indicate a desire for a renewal that is as much political as cultural and personal.

Rather than representing the apotheosis of Baudrillard’s simulacrum, where the reality of what is reflected no longer exists, what these writers were searching for in Venice seems to be the opposite: a primal origin point, a kernel of political, economic and historical truth. With its echoes of a feudal past, a medieval Christianity and an authoritarian, powerful civitas, Venice offered the potential for a radical questioning of the values of modern, liberal democracies. If, for Ruskin, there were warnings for capitalistic London in what he saw as Venice’s hubristic descent and the city’s abandonment of pure religion, there was also

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22 Complete Poems, p.319.
23 Baudrillard’s discussion of Disneyland is apposite here. For Baudrillard, Disneyland is a decoy, hiding the unreality of the rest of America: ‘The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp’. The common association of Venice with Disneyland might lead us to believe that Venice is Europe’s version of the theme-park. But, as this thesis argues, the ‘unreality’ of Venice may be a way of evading politico-historical anxieties embodied in the city. See Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1994), p. 13.
potential for radical renewal in his examination of the city’s ‘golden age’ – a pre-usurious and mercantile paradiso, to which Ezra Pound would later be attracted in the Cantos.

This return to the primordial also characterises the culture of Nationalism, as this project will go on to discuss with reference to both the Risorgimento and Fascism (Roger Griffin has suggested in his study of modernism and Fascism that both movements are ‘primordialist’ and involve ‘the search for transcendence and regeneration’). Ruskin’s focus in The Stones of Venice on the morally pure, early Venice of Torcello, with its ruined cathedral and swampy environment, was mirrored in the settings of Giuseppe Verdi’s roughly contemporaneous Nationalist opera, Attila, premiered at the Fenice opera house in Venice on the 17th of March 1846. Scene Two of the prologue to the work takes place in a swamp, the future site of Venice (‘The Rio-Alto in the Adriatic Lagoons’), where Foresto and other survivors of the Huns’ invasion have escaped. At the premiere, Giuseppe Bertoja’s set designs depicted a misty environment with scattered ruins and half-constructed wooden buildings where the water merged with the sky and a rose sunrise symbolised the birth of the new city. Verdi wanted the sets to be ‘sublime’, reflecting a miraculous feeling of wonder that was also to be heard in the music. A contemporary reviewer wrote that the ‘production…paints in sound the sunrise, and its mild gradual reddening on the waters and barren islets of the pristine Venice’. The creation of this ‘pristine’, prelapsarian Venice was also heavily tinted with a political element; Verdi’s librettist, Temistocle Solera, was a Venetian Nationalist ‘concerned to appeal to Italian and, more specifically, Venetian patriotism’. Solera had changed Zacharias Werner’s play Attila, König der Hunnen to include the scenes showing the foundation of Venice, and shifted the focus away from the Huns themselves towards their proto-Venetian resistors. Verdi’s opera was hugely popular with Italian audiences, and was

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24 Roger Griffin, Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2007), p.96, p.2. Emilio Gentile’s idea of ‘politics as moral regeneration’ (The Sacralisation of Politics, p.3) is also relevant here.
26 Cited in Verdi and La Fenice, p.37.
received with a ‘bellicose patriotism’. The significance of a band of rebels resisting a barbarian occupation (Italians routinely depicted their Austrian overlords as crude and uncultured) cannot have been lost on any of the opera’s audiences.

**History, Politics and Myth**

Over a hundred years later, Ernest Hemingway’s novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), is also concerned with a proto-Venice; its opening chapter places the reader on a Torcello duck shoot where the lagoon is ‘all-ice, new-frozen during the…windless cold of the night’, the sky is ‘gray dim’ and the marsh merges with the ‘open sea’. Furthermore the book’s main character, Colonel Cantwell, is obsessed with a group who he calls the ‘Torcello boys’, Venice’s founding fathers:

“That’s Torcello directly opposite us,” the Colonel pointed. “That’s where the people lived that were driven off the mainland by the Visigoths. They built that church you see there with the square tower. There were thirty thousand people lived there once and they built that church to honor their Lord and to worship him. Then, after they built it, the mouth of the Sile River silted up or a big flood changed it, and all that land we came through just now got flooded and started to breed mosquitos and malaria hit them. They all started to die, so the elders got together and decided they should pull out to a healthy place that would be defensible with boats, and where the Visigoths and the Lombards and the other bandits wouldn’t get at them…So they took the stones of all their houses in barges, just like the one we just saw, and they built Venice.”

This re-telling of the foundation of Venice, a city Hemingway had known and loved since he was young, would at first glance understandably be linked with Cantwell’s own self-mythologising. Like the ‘Torcello boys’, Cantwell is ‘very tough’. Also like the Torcello islanders, Cantwell is preoccupied with health; the desire of the Torcello boys to find a ‘healthy place’ away from the mosquitos is echoed in Cantwell’s pill-popping anxiety and consciousness of physical degeneration. The ‘square tower’ of Torcello and the ‘high campanile of Burano’ which Cantwell notices across the lagoon might also take us down a

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28 Ibid., p.265.
30 Ibid., p.28.
Freudian route; are these phallic signifiers of masculine power and virility? They also feature as markers of an ancient civilisation in the context of a Europe and a Venice devastated by the aftermath of war.

On his way from Trieste to Venice, Cantwell passes a bridge that has been blown up, the effects of the explosion so violent that eight hundred yards away are ‘the smashed buildings and outbuildings of what was now a ruined country house once built by Longhena’. The Colonel concludes: ‘Don’t ever build yourself a country house…or hire Giotto to paint you any frescoes…eight hundred yards away from any bridge’. Recent war has left a scar on the cultural treasures of Italy, and Cantwell’s comment leads to a discussion between him and his American military driver on the virtues of Italian art. The immediate war context seems to act as a catalyst for a reappraisal and appreciation of culture: Longhena, Giotto, Piero della Francesca. In this context, Cantwell’s re-imaging of the primal origins of Venice displays a concern with the fragility of civilisation, triggered by the immediate aftermath of political instability and war.

Like his friend Ezra Pound, whose Pisan Cantos (1948) articulate the desire to renew a dying European civilisation (‘the wreckage of Europe’ LXXVI, 472) by preserving the scattered fragments of art, Hemingway’s work can be read as a complex response to war and political conflict. Though lacking any of the pro-Fascist sympathies that problematise Pound’s literary endeavours, Hemingway’s engagement with Venice is nevertheless framed within the context of a particular historico-political moment. Furthermore, the recent effects of the Second World War are mingled with Cantwell’s memories of the First World War, when he fought with the Italians against the Austrians on the Venetian plane. Cantwell’s personal history is thus mingled with that of a fractured Europe, and his identification with the ‘Torcello boys’ who ‘built Venice’ is connected to a desire to ‘rethink’ civilisation in the aftermath of destructive conflict. The Venice that the ‘Torcello boys’ built was also a spiritual one – ‘they built that church to honor their Lord and to worship him’. This description

32 Ibid., p.13.
parallels the concerns of Ruskin, who in *The Stones of Venice* described a pure Venice where the inhabitants of Torcello gathered round the church singing Psalms. Both Hemingway and Ruskin found themselves drawn to Torcello as a symbol of ‘primal’ Venice, and both writers’ ‘versions’ of Venice are born, I would argue, out of urgent political situations: for Ruskin, the aftermath of the 1848 revolution and the Hapsburg occupation; for Hemingway, the traumatic end of World War Two and of the violent first half of the twentieth century.

There is more in *Across the River and Into the Trees* to support this reading. About forty pages into the novel, as Cantwell glides down the Grand Canal, he speculates that his Italian boatman with ‘only six’ children ‘mustn’t have believed in the [Fascist] regime’.\(^{33}\) The boatman agrees that he didn’t, but it emerges that his brother was a patriot ‘inflamed by hearing D’Annunzio talk’, who volunteered in the First World War and was killed in 1918. This allusion marks the beginning of the importance of D’Annunzio to the novel, and just as Cantwell has identified himself with the ‘Torcello boys’ he also empathises with this artist-warrior. Passing D’Annunzio’s house, he muses:

> They loved him for his talent, and because he was bad, and he was brave. A Jewish boy with nothing, he stormed the country with his talent, and his rhetoric. He was a more miserable character than any I know and as mean. But the man I think of to compare him with never put the chips on the line and went to war, the Colonel thought, and Gabriele D’Annunzio (I always wondered what his real name was, he thought, because nobody is named D’Annunzio in a practical country and perhaps he was not Jewish and what difference did it make if he was or was not,) had moved through the different arms of the service as he had moved into and out of the arms of different women.\(^{34}\)

The move into interior monologue – ‘I always wondered’ – indicates that Cantwell’s D’Annunzio exists in a blurry, insecure part of the unconscious. The ‘Jewish boy’ turns out ‘perhaps’ not to be Jewish at all (true: D’Annunzio was not Jewish), and Cantwell is unsure of his real name. There is significance in making this proto-Fascist figure Jewish, of course: in a post-Holocaust world, Cantwell is re-thinking Fascism’s origins, providing an alternative narrative where a Fascist ‘forefather’ (D’Annunzio’s Roman salute was adopted by

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p.44.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid., p.49.
Mussolini, and Mussolini’s adopted by Hitler) turns out to be its potential victim. The importance of D’Annunzio is that he had ‘talent’, ‘he was bad and he was brave’, an active military man. Along with Dante, who also features as a recurring reference in *Across the River*, D’Annunzio is a ‘Byronic’ fighting poet – military, political, courageous and, like nearly all of Hemingway’s heroes, wounded. And, a few years after *Across the River*, Hemingway would write in defence of Ezra Pound, placing him alongside Dante, Byron and Baudelaire, as among ‘the great poets who have had great trouble in their political and personal lives but whose works have lived on to be a glory to their countries’. We might have identified Pound, ‘the lovely poet and stupid traitor’, as the political poet to whom Cantwell compares D’Annunzio, who ‘never put the chips on the line and went to war’, but such an identification is not clear enough to assert.

What is evident is that through Cantwell Hemingway addresses the problem of a morally complicated world recovering from war. In this world, politics, war and art are confused, and their boundaries blurred. The proto-Fascist icon D’Annunzio emerges from Cantwell’s memories of serving in Italy in the First World War; indeed Cantwell himself ‘had joined with them [the Italians] and uttered, with the tone of command, “Evviva D’Annunzio”’. But D’Annunzio’s contradictions are many:

…writer, poet, national hero, phraser of the dialectic of Fascism, macabre egoist, aviator, commander, or rider, in the first of the fast torpedo boats, Lieutenant Colonel of Infantry without knowing how to command a company, nor a platoon properly, the great, lovely writer of Notturno whom we respect, and jerk.

Cantwell is a soldier with a pronounced streak of the poetic, D’Annunzio a poet who needed to be a soldier. Hemingway admires this combination, as did Pound, but the book is also

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36 See Kathleen Verduin, ‘Hemingway’s Dante: A Note on *Across the River and Into the Trees*’, American Literature 57, no.4 (December 1985), pp.633-640.
39 *Across the River*, p.51.
40 Ibid., pp.51-2.
addressing itself to the anxieties of these contradictions. For the ‘lovely’ civilisation to which D’Annunzio contributes is also that which he has a part in destroying through the belligerent Nationalism that fed into Fascism. D’Annunzio, ‘writer and national hero, certified and true if you must have heroes’ has a ‘doubleness’ in the novel, attracting Cantwell whilst also disturbing him. Passing the poet’s house, Cantwell thinks ‘Christ they [D’Annunzio and Elenora Duse] are dead and I do not know where either one is buried even. But I certainly hope they had fun’. Cantwell’s anxiety is bound up with finding the right historico-political narrative. Can D’Annunzio (and perhaps Hemingway is also thinking of Pound here) be the ‘phraser of the dialectic of Fascism’ and also the writer ‘whom we respect’?

The problems around D’Annunzio are not the only moral complications in the novel. Cantwell’s lover Renata asks him whether he ‘liked’ many Germans:

> “Very many. Ernst Udet I liked the best.”
> “But they were in the wrong.”
> “Of course. But who has not been?”
> “I never could like them or take such a tolerant attitude as you do, since they killed my father and burned our villa on the Brenta and the day I saw a German officer shooting pigeons with a shot-gun in the Piazza San Marco.”

Cantwell’s war-weariness has led him to a tolerance and belief that ‘we’ve all made mistakes’, but Renata’s horrifying experiences undercut this. At the same time, Cantwell realises that ‘civilisation’ cannot escape from the traumatic political past. The sublime music of Bach, for example, is discussed in the context of Goebbels and the ideology of the Third Reich: ‘Komm’ Süsser Tod, he thought. Well they sure bought themselves a nice big piece of Süsser Tod [sweet death] at the end’. Bach, in his high ‘Germanness’ and his idolising of death, becomes ‘practically a co-belligerent’; as with the poetic genius of D’Annunzio, art and ‘high’ civilisation do not remain untouched by war and Fascism.

In this sense, *Across the River*’s Venetian setting – with its art treasures and foundation myths – becomes a microcosm of fractured civilisation. Cantwell has not come to

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41 In a letter to Pound (addressed as ‘Dear Duce’) of 17 March 1924, Hemingway writes that he ‘rates’ D’Annunzio and describes him as the ‘Principe di Monte Nervosa’. Monte Nervoso, in present-day Croatia, was the location of some of D’Annunzio’s military action. *Selected Letters*, p.114.
42 *Across the River*, p.51.
43 Ibid., p.122.
44 Ibid., p.88.
Venice to escape war and politics; rather, the city is the catalyst for a retrospect on the twentieth century’s politically traumatic first half. Hemingway’s letters seem to bear this out. From Venice (Torcello) in November 1948 he writes to his wife Mary, anxious for the fate of Italian civilisation: ‘How is Florence?...Is Fiesole standing up? It was lovely but a little precious...See some of the Etruscan stuff if you are in Umbria’.

Andreas Mahler has suggested that ‘literary Venices’ perform a ‘paradoxical signification’, where the presence of paradoxical, clashing signifiers creates what he suggests (following Foucault) may be termed a ‘heterotopia’. A ‘heterotopia’ – encapsulated for Foucault in the concept of the honeymoon – is both real and imaginary at the same time, or, in Mahler’s terms, a place ‘in which the imaginary can, for a time at least, pose as the real’. Mahler’s development of the ‘heterotopia’ concept leads him to the conclusion that Venice in literature uses the signs of ‘real’ representation to ‘articulate the imaginary’. Ultimately the city is ‘a place...for an anthropology of the self’, ‘a place of fiction’. But, what if, instead of the real articulating the imaginary, the imaginary articulated the real? Or if the real ‘posed’ as the imaginary? So that, in concrete terms, the important thing in Across the River and Into the Trees becomes not Cantwell’s ‘anthropology of the self’ but the way in which the novel uses Venice to engage with the recent traumatic past of war and politics. In other words, what if we do not notice the importance of politico-historical contexts because they come ‘disguised’ within the topos of ‘Venetian’ mythology?

Here I shall use Roland Barthes’ comments on mythology to negotiate a theory for navigating ‘literary Venice’. To Barthes, myth is ‘a type of speech’ (in French ‘une parole’). This is important because myth is thus construed as communication, not as merely empty or ethereal fantasy. Secondly – and crucially for the concerns of this thesis – for Barthes, the ‘life and death’ of mythical language is ruled by history, as myth is ‘a type of speech chosen

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45 Selected Letters, p.653.
47 Ibid.
by history’ (my italics). In Barthes’ terms, myth naturalises the products of history, covering them with the power of mythological signification. Barthes’ concerns are crucially topographical and political. Among the ‘myths’ which he exposes are ‘the writer on holiday’, the western idea of the Orient, the representation of ancient Rome in the cinema, the fascistic anti-intellectualism of the politician Pierre Poujard, and the mythology of the tourist publication known as the Blue Guide. The example of the Guide is key. Whilst the Blue Guide to Spain appears only to know landscape in the form of the ‘picturesque’, Barthes sees that the mythology of the Guide, with its ‘web’ of cultural monuments, is actually ‘best suited’ to the mythic Fascist ‘Spanish-ness’ propagated by Franco. To Barthes, the decoding of the myths of Spain propagated by the Blue Guide leads to the uncovering of an uncomfortable Francoist ideology.

To apply Barthes’ methods to the example of the ‘literary Venice’ then, is to admit that the creation of the city in poetry, fiction and other writings is determined by history and historical context. However, here a problem is encountered. In the creation of ‘literary Venices’, it is often the case that some kind of displacement between signifier and signified has confused the picture. In Barthes’ example, ‘a black pebble’ is ‘a mere signifier’ that can be weighed with a ‘definite’ signified (a death sentence, for example), and thus the pebble becomes a ‘sign’. The pebble is thus a readily available image, waiting to be attached to its meaning. In the example of ‘literary Venice’, however, I suggest that pre-existent layers of mythology complicate the paradigm; the mythical elements of the reception of Venice in the mind – to look at a gondola on the Grand Canal and think ‘romance’, to view a dim Venetian backstreet by night and think ‘suspense’, or ‘secrecy’ – may have complex sets of historical associations which have disappeared from view.

In our time, the myth of Venice may indeed, in Barthes’ words, be ‘adapted to a certain kind of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence’ – in other words, a bourgeois reception of Venice as a romantic idyll, a space of leisure, which at the same time allows the

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49 Ibid., p.113.
visitor the frisson of history. Yet if all previous myths and counter-myths about Venice have been condensed into the image of the city, then what we are dealing with is more complex; the cracks in this image may allow access to forgotten histories. Barthes argues that when a myth ‘becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains.’\textsuperscript{50} It is the task of the mythologist, or myth-decoder, to reclaim the histories that have apparently ‘evaporated’ in the production of the myth. To return to our paradigm, history, multiple histories, may be contained within the simple ‘picture’ or ‘fantasy’ of Venice, which becomes then, the tip of a kind of mythological iceberg. For Barthes:

\begin{quote}
the essential point in all this is that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one’s disposal…the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Re-reading Barthes’ comments in relation to literary ‘Venice myths’, I suggest that to an extent both the ‘meaning’ and the ‘life’ of myth may be retrieved – i.e. that, far from being empty, the mythologies of Venice addressed in this thesis provide access to neglected historical moments. This calls not for the simple refutation of the idyllic picture of Venice, but a dissection of the idyll. What is uncovered is a layering of the different histories that have played their part in the development of the mythic image as received.

Here I shall make a distinction between two kinds of myth that the thesis will examine. One is the fairly straightforward political image: the image of the revived Lion of St. Mark under Risorgimento Nationalism or Fascism, for example. The second is the ‘literary’ myth of Venice: Ruskin’s reading of the ‘fall’ of the medieval city, Pound’s use of the cyclical images of Venetian history, etc. The aim is to read these two different kinds of myths together, thereby removing some of the mystifying content of the second kind of Venice myth. In these ‘weak’ myths, the ‘political quality’ of the object has ‘faded like a colour’and the reader, or myth-decipherer, must work harder to reclaim the historico-

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p.117.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p.118.
For, despite its origins, myth’s tendency is to lead us further and further away from history, transforming ‘the products of history into essential types’. Here is the real danger in the airy, depoliticised idea of ‘Venice’. Constantly in danger of reverting to ‘types’ (the Feminine, the Dream), we capitulate to the mythic, continually placing ‘Venice’ back within the solipsistic mind. For, as Barthes suggests, myth ‘naturalises’ the products of specific historico-political processes; instead of being seen within their historical ‘moments’, literary Venices are condemned to the realm of the ethereal.

Yet, far from there being an opposition between the ethereal literary city and the ‘real’ historical one, the images of Venice in modern literature can invariably be placed within a historico-political continuum. In this continuum, *Across the River and Into the Trees* should be seen not as a piece of Hemingway’s ‘self-anthropology’ – a personal mythology with a ‘Venice backdrop’ – but as a response to political devastation and war. Similarly, Ruskin’s reevaluation of the ancient Republic is paralleled with contemporary Nationalist retrievals of history and Pound’s evocation of the ‘fragments’ of Venice’s art and history is the perfect complement to a Fascist aesthetic.

**Politics and the Tourist**

Walter Benjamin famously described Fascism as the ‘introduction of aesthetics into political life’. The aesthetic draw of Fascism was captivating enough to enchant many, Ezra Pound being a prominent example. Travel guides, including Baedeker – ‘Venice is again rising in importance’ it declared in 1928 – struck a note of optimism for the Fascist effect on the city. Laura Ragg’s 1928 historical travel guide, *Crises in Venetian History*, talks approvingly of the ‘renewed youth and energy of modern Venice’ and the ‘unparalleled efficiency’ of the firm, quiet ‘squadrons of blackshirts’ who escorted foreign visitors through the city for a

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52 Ibid., p.144.
53 Ibid., p.155.
September 1927 aerial spectacular.\textsuperscript{56} Even criticisms, such as a 1934 letter to \textit{The Times} worrying about building developments in Venice, nonetheless claimed ‘the Fascist authorities have done more than enough work of artistic preservation…to earn the gratitude of all lovers of Italy’.\textsuperscript{57} The British media stressed Fascism’s ‘eagerness for the morrow’ which had ‘given a new vigour to the national mind’.\textsuperscript{58} Newspapers, magazines and other forms of cultural commentary responded well to the Janus-face of Fascism; a political system that promised to look boldly to the future whilst reinvigorating the national past. The melancholy that had characterized Victorian travel in Italy was transformed into a firm optimism – as if Mussolini could actually bring back the past as a kind of ‘virtual reality’ of Italian history.

The Reverend Alexander Robertson, a figure linking Pound and Ruskin (he met both of them in his capacity as minister of the Presbyterian Church in Venice), believed that Fascism presented the chance for a spiritual regeneration of Italy.\textsuperscript{59} In his 1928 biography of Mussolini, he wrote that the Duce was a ‘true reformer’ who had ‘raised the whole moral and spiritual tone of society and of the nation’.\textsuperscript{60} Robertson was a Protestant observer of Italy who idolized the ancient Venetian Republic and preached constantly against the Vatican. He wrote that:

\begin{quote}
…never did Mussolini appear to me more of a reformer than when, with the Book of Books in his uplifted hand, he said to the people: “Il Nuovo Testamento è il migliore libro che io conosco nel mondo” [‘The New Testament is the greatest book which I know in the world’]. That is the true charter of labour and of liberty, possessing which, Italy and any other nation will go onward and upward from strength to strength, from victory to victory. As Fra Paolo Sarpi said of the Republic of Venice, “esto perpetua”[may it be perpetual].\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

For Robertson, as this quotation demonstrates, Italy’s revival consisted of a spiritual and political dimension; spiritual, in placing the New Testament as the best book, the \textit{migliore libro}; political, in the reviving of an ancient Italy symbolized by the Republic of Venice. To

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{The Times}, January 21 1934.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{The Times}, October 1932.
\textsuperscript{59} Pound remembers meeting Robertson, with his Scottish accent ‘as ttthickk as three tweeds and a tartan’ in the \textit{Guide to Kulchur} (London: Peter Owen 1938), p.259. Robertson’s acquaintance with Ruskin is documented in \textit{The Bible of St. Mark} (London: George Allen 1898), p.ix, among other places.
\textsuperscript{60} Alexander Robertson, \textit{Mussolini and the New Italy} (London: H.R. Allenson 1929), p.11.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
Robertson, Mussolini’s was a moral renewal that brought back the ‘glory days’ of the Middle Ages. Approving of Fascist temperance and anti-smoking and swearing laws, Robertson writes:

In forbidding swearing, and in many of his prohibitive legislative acts, Mussolini has followed the example of the old Venetian Republic. There are not a few stones still to be seen in Venice…on which are inscribed laws for forbidding gambling, indecencies, swearing etc.\(^{62}\)

Like Ezra Pound, who begins *Canto* XXV by reciting the anti-gambling laws of medieval Venice, Robertson is convinced that Mussolini’s regime has ‘brought back’ an Italian past of spiritual, economic and political purity. If Fascism had a tendency towards violence, it was a price worth paying for the suppression of ‘bolshevism’. Quoting Ruskin, Robertson writes that ‘a Nation once utterly corrupt can only be redeemed by Military Despotism’. Fascist aggression was necessary to prevent Italy being conquered by Lenin and made ‘his war-base to attack other European nations’.\(^{63}\) Granted, there were a few ‘skirmishes’, even in Venice, but these ‘were not…of a very serious nature’: ‘the Labour Hall here in Venice was sacked, its furniture broken into firewood, and all the books and documents in it were burned’.\(^{64}\)

The violent dismantling of the old order is redeemed for Robertson by the efficiency of the ‘New Italy’:

Some years ago I obtained permission to take a British Government Inspector through the cotton mill here in Venice, which is one of the largest in Italy. The Inspector’s verdict was that he had rarely seen, even in Great Britain, a better equipped mill from an industrial and from a sanitary point of view.\(^{65}\)

Such industrial efficiency was mirrored in a new, user-friendly touristic experience of the country, as Robertson records:

From time to time I ask…visitors what are their impressions of Italy. Those who were here…before Mussolini came to power, have invariably answered me: “Why, everything has changed for the better. Neither the country nor the people are the same. Traveling has vastly improved, trains are punctual, carriages are clean and comfortable, we have no longer any anxiety with regard to our luggage, hotel- and shop-keepers are kind and polite, and honest in their dealings with us.”\(^{66}\)

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p.163.  
\(^{63}\) Ibid., p.101.  
\(^{64}\) Ibid., p.109.  
\(^{65}\) Ibid., p.151.  
\(^{66}\) Ibid., p.175.
What is interesting here is that the Fascist ideal of moulding the new nation – the Risorgimento project of ‘making Italians’ accelerated and modernized – is perfectly suited to touristic consumption. Making Italians more ‘honest’, ‘kind’, ‘polite’, making transport more ‘clean’, ‘comfortable’ and ‘punctual’ – these are attributes that make Italy-as-product more ‘consumable’ as a touristic experience. Whereas for Robertson this is a religious revival – ‘[Mussolini] has not only improved the condition of the Italian people materially and morally, but also spiritually’ – to the legions of visitors to Italy it was an improved and more comfortable travel experience that impressed them and made them sympathetic to Fascism.\textsuperscript{67}

In 1930, Baedeker could cite the vastly improved rail conditions (‘very punctual’) in the same breath as it described the activities of the secret police:

The Milizia Nazionale, a Fascist militia, serve on the railways and national roads as frontier guards, and as political police. The traveler should refrain from airing his political views, from taking photographs of beggars, etc.\textsuperscript{68}

For Robertson, it was Mussolini’s evocation of a distant Italian past that attracted the Scottish Presbyterian preacher to Fascism. This Italian past represented to him (as it did to Ruskin and Pound) a spiritual and political challenge to the values of modernity. In his earlier book, \textit{The Bible of St. Mark}, Robertson had openly acknowledged his debt to Ruskin: ‘I told him when I saw him during his last visit to Venice, now eight years ago, that it was he who first opened my eyes…to the meaning of this unique city of Venice’.\textsuperscript{69} Like Ruskin, Robertson saw the ancient Republic of St. Mark as the ‘ideal commonwealth – one in which Church and State were not two separate societies, but one and the same’.\textsuperscript{70} At the centre of the ideal state was the ‘bible’ of St. Mark’s, exercising the power of the Spirit ‘over the hearts and lives of men’.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p.176.
\textsuperscript{69} Alexander Robertson, \textit{The Bible of St. Mark} (London: George Allen 1898), p.ix.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p.22.
unique among Bibles, as the old Republic, of which it was the soul and centre, was unique among Commonwealths.  

The fusion of the spiritual and the political seen in St. Mark’s (‘it embodies and expresses the Religion, and throws light on the Policy of a great Commonwealth’) is a feeling, I suggest, that Robertson finds in Mussolini’s Fascism. This is Robertson thirty years later:

There is more true religion in the country now than there ever was before; I may say more true Biblical Christianity, for the book that is the “best seller” and the best read book in the land is the Book of Books, the Bible!…we may confidently look forward to a still greater circulation of the Bible…throughout the land, and, as a result of that, to Italy attaining to a higher and a higher level amongst European nations, not only materially, socially and intellectually, but also morally and spiritually.

Just as ancient Venice fused politics, society, culture and religion, so to Robertson Mussolini’s Italy raised its standing in the world through a fusion of spiritual and social reform. In 1933, the year of his death, Robertson was still praising an Italy ‘reborn’. Writing to H.M. Gooch, the secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, he points out the prominent place of the Bible in Fascist Italy’s new postage stamps. Gooch, advertising Robertson’s endorsement of the Fascist stamps, wrote to The Times: ‘Il Duce has caused [them] to be issued in estimation of the universality and value of the Gospel of Christ’. The stamps depicted ‘the star and flags of the Royal House of Savoy…saluting the Bible, behind which is a simple Cross, the central meeting-place of the sinner and the Saviour’.  

Ruskin had looked to Venice as a yardstick by which to measure modern civilization; figures like Robertson and Pound believed civilization to be socially and spiritually renewed in Mussolini’s Italy. From very different perspectives (one evangelical Christian, the other neo-pagan) they believed the regenerative work of Fascism would bring the glories of the Italian past back into the living present. For Ezra Pound, the move from America to Europe – Venice, London, Paris, Rapallo – was a project of discovering the roots of civilization, art and culture. This route had already been trodden by Americans like Henry James, who represented for Pound the battle of ‘civilization against barbarism’; in his love of Europe, the

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72 Mussolini, pp.176-177.
73 ‘A New Stamp’, The Times, February 8, 1933, p.8, Issue 46363.
‘exile’ James was embracing something deep and rooted. Venice with its art treasures and layers of history stood, for writers like these, as a sort of cultural defining measure.

These ‘readings’ of civilisation are, of course, related to the rise and ubiquity of the tourist. Ruskin’s, James’s and Pound’s respective engagements with Venice are presented as the ‘real thing’, the authentic experience, as opposed to the surface or touristic. ‘I sat on the Dogana’s steps/ For the gondolas cost too much that year’ begins Pound’s Canto III, placing the poet materially in the city and exiling him from the typical touristic experience exemplified by the ‘gondolas’. Later, in his Guide to Kulchur, Pound would follow Ruskin’s footsteps, ushering the reader to particular paintings and buildings belonging to Byzantine and medieval golden ages:

Ravenna, mosaics. A less known gallery, and three churches in Pisa. San Giorgio Schiavoni for Carpaccio’s, Santa Maria Miracoli, Venice…a Giovan Bellin’ in Rimini, Crivelli in Bergamo, the walls of La Schifanoja (Ferrara)...Don’t miss the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena…

The impetus behind this idiosyncratic tour is related to what James Buzard has described as ‘anti-tourism’, with its horror of the ‘beaten track’ – ‘a region in which all experience is predictable and repetitive, all cultures and objects mere…self-parodies’. Writers like Pound defined ‘their’ ‘Venices’, ‘Italys’ and ‘Europes’ in opposition to the inauthentic, the crass. Such anti-tourism of course needed an object of contempt; for Ruskin, the ‘wretched little cast-iron gaspipe of a cockney’ addressed in St. Mark’s Rest; the anti-Semitic imaginations of Pound and T.S. Eliot, the ‘Chicago Semite Viennese’ tourist in Venice in Eliot’s ‘Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar’. By 1939, Pound’s ‘European’ consciousness had transformed into Axis propaganda; when he wrote ‘the most intelligent men in Europe are now thinking EUROPE’, he had in mind a structure akin to the Fascist exhibitions of the period, which channelled history into solid monumentalism. Pound posited ‘right’ and

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'wrong' readings of history, acting as an alternative Baedeker, highlighting cultural details. Unlike the ‘tourist’ who ‘became the figure incapable of making meaningful contact with, or of grasping signs of, an authentic, integrated “whole way of life”’, the self-appointed literary guides ‘reached for symbols that would express the essence of “whole places”’. Hence Ruskin and Pound approaching the same signed column in San Zeno Maggiore, Verona, both claiming it as the ‘luminous detail’ of the guild spirit of the middle ages, Colonel Cantwell’s obsession with Torcello, Henry James and the equestrian statue outside the church of San Zanipolo in *The Aspern Papers* (1888). Of course, tourism and ‘anti-tourism’ are two sides of the same coin, and both have a political significance. As we have seen, Roland Barthes believed that tourism, like Fascism, traded in ‘essences’ and bastardized histories, where the ‘ethnic reality of Spain is…reduced to a vast classical ballet, a nice neat commedia dell’arte’. Similarly, the ‘renewal’ projects of Italian Fascism, as D. Medina Lasansky has shown, were perfectly placed for touristic consumption – the revival of ancient tournaments and pageants, the aesthetic white-washing and ‘authenticising’ of towns like San Gimignano and Arezzo. In Venice, as this project examines, huge effort was channelled into historical research that ‘brought back’ the reality of the ancient Serenissima into a ‘dynamic’ Fascist present.

Hence the critic can begin to ‘decode’ the myths. But this ‘decoding’, here applied to Venice, has inherent problems. Barthes himself admitted that the myth-decoder can feel an exile, that the mythologist is unable to enter, or even to see, the promised land: ‘his status remains…one of being excluded.’ Furthermore, the myth-decoder ‘cuts himself off from all the myth-consumers’, becoming ‘estranged’ from his fellow human beings in the process of ‘liberat[ing] the myth’. The work the myth-decoder is engaged in seems to consist entirely of ‘acts of destruction’. We are unable to really grasp the thing itself; in Barthes’ terms, ‘we

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78 Buzard, p.10.
79 Barthes, p.75.
81 Barthes, pp.156-7.
82 Ibid., p.157.
constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness’. Yet ultimately this tension, which Barthes sees resulting in the ‘excessive’ speaking of reality, is unavoidable, ‘this is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge’. 83

**Venice, Europe, Civilisation**

Here, let us consider some more examples of how this ‘reconciliation’ – which in practice may appear to be a ‘tension’ – can be applied to literary texts. In the ‘Venetian’ works of Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Thomas Mann (*Andreas* and *Death in Venice*), close-reading illuminates the specific historico-political anxieties informing the texts, taking the critic away from a purely psychologically-focussed reading towards a more historically contextual paradigm.

In this context, Hofmannsthal’s work can be seen to have consistent topographical concerns. Ten years after the last fragment of his Venetian novel *Andreas*, he wrote an article for *The Dial*, an Anglo-American modernist literary journal that regularly published writers like Pound, Joyce and Eliot. Hofmannsthal’s ‘Vienna Letter’ of October 1922 imagined the Austrian capital as a ‘Porta Orentis’, an eastern gate that lay on the dividing line between Occident and Orient. As such, the article was admirably suited to *The Dial*’s culture as a magazine. Though the journal was written in English, it dealt with the situation of art and literature from different vantage-points within Europe. Along with the Vienna letters, ‘Paris Letters’, ‘London Letters’, ‘Dublin Letters’, and less regular dispatches from Italy and eastern Europe contributed to the image of a shifting European cultural panorama. Indeed, the October 1922 issue had a significant Venetian bent, with Gino Severini’s picture of *Commedia dell’ Arte* figures incorporated amongst the reviews and literary articles. The painting, coming from an Italy poised on the verge of Fascism, suggested a heightened consciousness of history and national symbolism. The *Commedia dell’ Arte* characters,

83 Ibid., p.159.
Gino Severini’s ‘Fresco’ as it appeared in the 1922 issue of *The Dial*. 
divorced from their usual context and placed against a ‘mythic’ Italian landscape that incorporated cypress groves and a Venetian stone lion, portray a politically conflicted country adrift from its historical moorings. Debates in *The Dial* in the 1920s, with their geopolitical concerns, were as much about locating and defining the European mind as they were about art.

Hofmannsthal’s letter is a case in point: ranging through psychoanalysis, anthropology and literary criticism, he is concerned to show Vienna as a mindset, an exercise in psychic geography. Here Hofmannsthal sees Vienna as a kind of ‘edge of Europe’, a gateway to a real or imagined Orient. Hence Vienna’s historic position as a ‘porta orientis’ (the last outpost against the Turkish advance, etc.) leads for Hofmannsthal into a parallel with the psycho-pioneering of Sigmund Freud:

> [Vienna] is the Porta Orientis… for that mysterious inner Orient, the realm of the unconscious. Dr Freud’s interpretations and hypotheses are the excursions…along the shores of this realm.

Freud is here imagined as a psychic Marco Polo exploring the ‘shores’ of this inner Orient. But Hofmannsthal also refers to a real – or at least a geographical, chartable – East in this piece. He begins the ‘Vienna Letter’ by writing of the life of one Karl Eugen Neumann, an inhabitant of Vienna who was, writes Hofmannsthal, ‘the greatest German Orientalist of his times’. Neumann had translated all the canonical Buddhist texts into German, visiting ‘the remotest monasteries to compare texts of the sacred books’. Hofmannsthal regrets that Neumann is not better known, before comparing him to another Viennese Orientalist, Rudolf Kassner, whose work on physiognomy produced a book called *Der Indische Gedanke*, a study of the Indian race. Neumann, Kassner, Freud – the real excursions into the remotest parts of the East undertaken by Neumann are he paralleled by Kassner’s ‘considerations of what might be called…the spirit of a people’ as he explores Eastern physiognomy, and finally both

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84 For the use of *Commedia dell’ Arte* in modernism, see Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell’ Arte and the Modern Imagination* (New York: Macmillan 1986).
86 Ibid., p.427.
are tied to Freud, whose Orient is the Unconscious and whose excursions take place within his Vienna consulting room.\(^\text{87}\)

Of course – and especially in the case of Kassner – these discussions have colonial undertones. Orientalism, wrote Edward Said ‘is…a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different…world’, and that furthermore, ‘Orientalism [has] a kind of intellectual authority over the Orient within western culture’.\(^\text{88}\) Yet Said also argues that ‘the Orient has helped to define Europe…as its contrasting image, idea, personality’. It is relevant in this context to remember that the Greek myth of ‘Europa’ constructed the figure as a Phoenician, a middle-eastern (oriental) princess who had come from outside of Europe. Abducted by Zeus in the form of a bull, Europa is brought to Crete across the ocean (‘From main dry land to main moist sea’), taking her place within Greek culture.\(^\text{89}\) Her movement from an Asiatic to a Hellenistic culture – Phoenicia to Crete – thus becomes a foundational movement for European identity. There is a fascination in the European consciousness with occidental-oriental dichotomies, by east-west borders and boundaries, and by the idea that there is a psychic-cultural divide between east and west integral to the construction of the European. This use of the East as a self-defining measure for European culture is crucial. Furthermore, this mythologizing may productively lead us to specific contexts.\(^\text{90}\)

The point of the preceding discussion of Hofmannsthal’s comments on Vienna has been to show that the strong sense of genius loci in his work can fruitfully be read as reflecting wider (political) anxieties over European civilisation, anxieties seen most fully in his Venetian work, Andreas (first published 1932). The image of Venice in modern European writing raises an awareness of a side of ‘Orientalism’ not central to Edward Said’s study; that

\(^{87}\) Ibid., p.430.
is, of the orient-within-Europe, and the anxiety around ‘European’ places that seem to be permeated by this Orient. The interests of Hofmannsthal in Vienna as Porta Orientis are anticipated in the anxieties that surround the depictions of Venice in the unfinished novel *Andreas*. Here the protagonist’s sojourn in the city acts as catalyst for a number of concerns, concerns which are connected to an ‘East’ lying behind Andreas’s experience of Venice.

The novel seems to be interested in the search for resolution in the face of psychic fracture:

Outcome of tour to Venice: he feels with horror that he can never return to the narrow life of Vienna, he has grown out of it. But the state of mind he has attained brings him more distress than joy, it seems to him a state in which nothing is conditioned, nothing made difficult and therefore nothing exists…Question: whether these fragments in the kaleidoscope could rearrange themselves.\(^{91}\)

The interest here in ‘state of mind’ might lead us to the understandable conclusion that this really is a book about ‘Unreal’, ‘Dream Cities’, that Hofmannsthal’s concern really is with a ‘Venice-of-the-mind’. The protagonist’s journey is ultimately a psychic, not a geographical one, and the ambiguity of Venice reflects Hofmannsthal’s own internal crisis. So far, so good; Tony Tanner describes this Venice as ‘notoriously and unarrestably double, constantly…yielding…contrary moods – fulfilment and loss; illumination and desolation’.\(^{92}\)

Furthermore, Tanner suggests that Hofmannsthal’s work represents an ‘auxiliarization’ of the political, where responsibilities are ‘occluded, awkward questions eluded or unasked’.\(^{93}\)

David H. Miles sees Hofmannsthal’s depictions of Venice as ‘a sort of narrative dream set in the novel, a fictional stage upon which Andreas’ dream-self can act out its shadowy existence’, a ‘dream-stage’ and repository for Andreas’s own ‘inner fantasies’.\(^{94}\)

Whilst the mysteries and subtleties of Hofmannsthal’s vision baffle and confuse, I suggest that, via Barthes’ model, his depictions of Venice may be seen not as ways of eluding the political but ultimately as ways of addressing historico-political anxieties. Here, the

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\(^{92}\) Tanner, p.211.

\(^{93}\) Ibid., p.217.

process of myth-decoding leads us to conclude neither that ‘Venice has a way of
depoliticising writers as no other city’, nor that the city is simply a ‘stage’ for inner psychic
struggles, but that Hofmannsthal’s text is crucially concerned with live political concerns.\(^95\)
Of central importance in this context is Andreas’s encounter with the character of the
Venetian Knight of Malta, an encounter which is also, I suggest, linked to concerns about
European identity. Hofmannsthal’s character sketch for the Knight describes him as follows:

> He moves in a time which is not quite the present, and in a place which is not
completely here. – For him, Venice is the fusion of the classical world and the Orient,
impossibility, in Venice, of relapsing into the trivial, the unmeaning.\(^96\)

Here Andreas’s encounter also seems to be an encounter with the city of Venice in its purest
form. Venice, like the Knight, exists in ‘a time which is not quite the present, and in a place
which is not completely here’; yet this place that is not here is not a light, airy fantasy, but
somewhere where the trivial is ‘impossible’. Rather than there being no meaning behind ‘the
dream of Venice’ there is an excess of meaning. What the encounter seems to ‘mean’ is an
experience of history. The Knight Sacramozo’s very presence as a ‘Knight of Malta’ confirms
this. The Knights, with their origin in the medieval Crusades as defenders of ‘European’
civilisation against Islam, speak of an ancient past that also raises crucial questions about
European identity. Furthermore, we learn that Sacramozo’s ancestor was the Doge ‘Morosin
Peleponnesiaco’, the conqueror of the Greek Peleponnese. An ancient past is being evoked
here: we learn that the Knight has a prominent collection of ‘antiques’, associating him with
the ‘fragments’ of civilisation that Hofmannsthal seems so keen to unify. But also implied is a
primordial confrontation – through the ‘crucible’ of Venice – of East and West.

Therefore what makes Venice so ‘un-trivial’ is this condensation (to refer back to the
question of mythology) of vast problems of European history/culture into the topos of the
image of Venice. What is true of Venice here is also true of the character of the Knight
himself, whom Hofmannsthal describes as having ‘several beings’ inside of him. In Andreas’s
trip to Venice and his meeting with the Knight, the writer attempts to address crucial

\(^{95}\) Tanner, p.217.
\(^{96}\) Andreas, p. 114.
questions over the cracks in European identity – questions which ultimately, in the scheme of
the book, are condensed into the problems of psychic unity. It is finally the incorporation of
the ‘oriental’ into the psyche of Andreas that leads to the greater knowledge and possible
‘unity’ that the book was to end with. Yet, as we have seen, such ‘greater knowledge’ causes
psychic crisis. Andreas’s ‘narrow’ Austrian conception of what is civilised is brought to
breaking point in the permeable ‘liminal space’ of Venice. This is similar to the way in which
Marlowe’s encounter with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) problematises the European
construction of civilisation through Marlowe’s realisation that ‘the horror’ is all around him,
and not located in some imperial fantasy of Africa. In Hofmannsthal’s context of the
decaying Habsburg empire, what is ‘civilised’ and ‘European’ is up for grabs. As we shall see
in the case of Thomas Mann, Europe’s slow, fractured creep towards World War One was to
be an underlying anxiety in much art of the time.

Venice’s ambiguity and status as meeting-point of East and West made the city an
ideal prism through which Europe’s fears could be examined. In Thomas Mann’s novella
*Death in Venice* (1912), Mann constructs a central character, Aschenbach, a German author
who is himself of partly eastern (Slavic) extraction, who becomes transfixed by the image of
beauty in a young Polish boy, and who finally dies of a cholera that has come from the East
(India, or the ‘sultry morasses of the Ganges delta’). All this takes place in the liminal space
of Venice. As with Hofmannsthal, I suggest that Mann’s text not only attempts to solve
psychological and aesthetic problems, but that the novella is, at a fundamental level,
examining modern anxieties concerning what it means to be European. The book begins with
the threat of war: ‘It was a spring afternoon in that year of grace 19_ when Europe sat upon
the anxious seat beneath a menace that hung over its head for months…’ Aschenbach’s
holiday to Venice, then, to a kind of limit of Europe – what could be termed an ‘edge of
Europe’ – occurs with the obvious backdrop of a threat to European unity, a clear indication
that a wider context is at play.

Before Aschenbach’s departure, first to Pola on the Dalmatian coast, and then to Venice, he enters a Munich cemetery where he notices a ‘mortuary chapel, a structure in Byzantine style,’ whose façade is ‘adorned with Greek crosses and tinted hieratic designs’. Such imagery already anticipates an eastward movement in the novella. Tanner has it that ‘Aschenbach is already ‘in’ Venice, even if he does not yet know it’, the Byzantine structures reflecting the city’s architecture. This actual setting dissolves into the first of Aschenbach’s dream-visions, where the writer imagines an even more oriental locale:

He beheld a landscape, a tropical marshland, beneath a reeking sky, steaming, monstrous, rank – a kind of primeval wilderness-world of islands, morasses and alluvial channels. Hairy palm-trunks rose near and far out of lush brakes of fern, out of bottoms of crass vegetation, fat, swollen, thick with incredible bloom. There were trees, mis-shapen as a dream, that dropped their naked roots straight through the air into the ground or into water that was stagnant and shadowy and glassy-green …. Among the knotted joints of a bamboo thicket the eyes of a crouching tiger gleamed…

The obvious interpretation of this passage would follow a Freudian lead; I am interested, however, in the geography of this writing. Here, the alluvial channels and the ‘wilderness-world of islands’ could refer to Venice itself. Yet as the vision continues, Aschenbach finds himself in a tropical jungle, a locale which the presence of the tiger identifies as Asian, probably Indian. As Tanner argues, ‘Venice [here] is an oriental city where the East more than meets the West – rather, penetrates, suffuses, contaminates and undermines it’. This ‘contamination’ is signified ultimately in Aschenbach’s sordid demise – caught by a cholera from India that has managed to penetrate Venice just as the ‘monstrous’ eastern jungle vision has worked its way into his mind.

But the other thing that Aschenbach ‘catches’ from the east is the urge to sensuous pleasure and rapturous abandon which corrupts his dutiful ‘European soul’. Mann echoes Nietzsche’s interest in the Dionysiac, seen in Death in Venice in Aschenbach’s vision of goat-men in their orgiastic rapture, his glutting himself on baskets of strawberries and his ultimate,
obsessive pursuit of the boy Tadzio. It is important to note that Dionysus is in origin an Asiatic god, in contrast to Aschenbach’s ordered, Apolline, European character (the text tells us that the writer ‘had…never been tempted to leave Europe’). Yet whereas in Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy it is the voice of the Dionysiac that gives art its true power, Mann understands the Dionysiac here as fundamentally dangerous, or even fatal. It is interesting to note that Mann (as the critic T.J. Reed has shown) originally envisaged the character of Aschenbach as a study in perfect balance, his attraction to Tadzio a Platonic pursuit of the Hellenistic ideal of beauty. Yet Mann’s own, real experience of a cholera epidemic in Venice, mirroring the events of the novella, seems to have driven him towards a more disturbing, ambivalent narrative. In this new narrative, Aschenbach is ‘uninitiated and corrupt’, his urge towards the Eastern Dionysus paralleled in his catching of the fatal Asiatic cholera.

What Venice, the East, and the cholera outbreak seem to have done for Mann was to bring the narrative into the realm of modernist identity-crisis. Mann’s classical scheme seems to break down in the face of the ambiguities of Venice. As with Andreas, the psychic crisis of the protagonist acts as a paradigm for questions over national, and European identity. Death in Venice tests a fragile German identity against the Dionysiac, Andreas examines a decaying Austria against the backdrop of a fragmented Venice, repository of history and meeting-point of East and West. But this sense of departure point for the Orient was real, not imagined; the industrial development of Venice in the early twentieth century had made it the major embarkation port for boats to Calcutta. To return to the point about mythology, it is crucial that Venice is not an airy fantasy divorced from the historico-political; on the contrary, it is the very excess of history that makes Venice such a problem for modernism. There is something in the nature of a crucible in Venice, a sort of pressure-cooker for examining the European.

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104 Ibid.
As this thesis close-reads the ‘Venetian’ visions of John Ruskin and Ezra Pound against specific contexts, it attempts to decode these writers’ own mythologies of Venice by viewing the texts (The Stones of Venice, The Cantos) against a rich web of contemporary cultural and political material. In relating Pound’s poetry to the cultural iconography of Venice in Fascism, or Ruskin’s work to Risorgimento Nationalism, I am not trying to over-simplify our readings of these texts. Indeed, as Barthes himself suggests, the mythologist or myth-decoder is in constant danger of reasserting the myth. Rather, this thesis attempts to enrich critical understanding and the reader’s reception of these works by allowing them to be seen within their respective historico-political continuums. As we have seen in the examples of Hofmannsthal, Mann and others, such readings do justice to the complexities of the political anxieties lying underneath the tip of the mythological iceberg. Ultimately then, this project proposes that the ‘ghost city’ of literary Venice be reexamined, its historicity reclaimed, and the texts that speak of it be re-read in the light of these historical complexities.
'ROMANTIC FABLES': THE STONES OF VENICE AND THE LEGGENDA NERA

The city of Venice had generated many myths before Ruskin arrived there in 1849 to research The Stones of Venice. Indeed, the so-called ‘Myth of Venice’ proliferated from the seventeenth century onwards, acting as a political yardstick with which to measure institutions and regimes. Venice’s famed liberty was praised as the perfect example of moderate Republicanism, fêted for ‘the excellence of its institutions and harmony of its rulers’.¹ The Myth became popular in Republican circles in France, Holland and England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.² The Myth stressed the balanced and rational quality of Venetian government. In the words of the seventeenth-century Piedmontese cleric Botero, Venice was ‘come vergine intatta’ (‘like an immaculate virgin’) – maintaining the example par excellence of a pure, just, and Christian state.³ Venice’s celebrated freedom was thought to be imbibed by Venetians from birth. Also lauded was the supposed clarity and impartiality of Venice’s judicial system, and the city’s sovereign independence. Venice’s resistance to Roman clerical interference made it plenty of friends in Protestant northern Europe, even among the Puritans of Cromwell’s Commonwealth.⁴

Yet there were also counter-myths that had sprung up around the city. Feeding off the positive ‘Myth of Venice’ they aimed, in a variety of ways, to denigrate Venice’s reputation. In this chapter I wish to examine in detail one of these counter-myths – the leggenda nera, or ‘black legend’ of Venice that attained popularity in the nineteenth century.

Far from applauding Venetian liberty, the historians and writers of the leggenda nera portrayed a Venice whose government was cruel, secretive and tyrannical. Based on a selective reading of archival sources, leggenda nera historiography purported to reveal the

²For a detailed examination of the adoption of the myth in European politics, see Mulier’s The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought, above.
³Quoted in Mulier, p.32.
⁴See Mulier, p.47 and following.
dark secrets of the ancient Republic, dwelling particularly on episodes of violence, torture and conspiracy. In this chapter, I will examine how these ideas were propagated in the early nineteenth century through literary works. I will begin by concentrating my attention on the plays of Byron, which provide many of the ‘classic’ elements of the Venice of the leggenda nera.

The chapter will go on to focus on Byron’s main source, the French historian Pierre Daru’s *Histoire de la République de Venise*, examining how Daru’s use of rhetoric and choice of emphasis highlights the depravity of his imagined Venice.

Finally, I will compare the imagery of Daru and Byron with Ruskin’s appraisal of the Venetian Republic in *The Stones of Venice*. I will highlight Ruskin’s resistance to the leggenda nera, and his emphasis on a detailed and material examination of Venice’s history through architecture. I will argue that Ruskin represents a radical break with previous romantic portrayals of Venice, such as those of Byron and Turner, and that his work in *The Stones of Venice* involves a spirited attack on the leggenda nera.

**Byron’s dark Venice and ‘the bondage of ten bald-heads’**

‘My Venice, like Turner’s, had been chiefly created for us by Byron’, Ruskin wrote in his autobiography, *Praeterita*. In the same work, the Ruskin of the 1880s goes on to dismiss his earlier engagement with the city altogether: ‘I regard [it] more and more as a vain temptation’ (XXXV, 295, 296). The linking of his own work on Venice with Byron and Turner is, of course, a badge of pride; he is in good company. But it is also a comment on the place of Venice in the imagination of the artist; both Byron and Turner serve up a version of Venice that is based on shimmering illusion. While Turner focused on the swathes of mist that create the visual effect of dissolution and vagueness, Byron’s Romantic Venice was a dark, murky and mysterious city with a pervading atmosphere of Gothic horror. The sixteen-year old Ruskin captured this feeling in (dubious) poetry on his first visit to the city: ‘I’ve tried St Mark’s by midnight moon and in Rialto walked about/ A place of terror and of gloom which
is very much talked about’. Ruskin, Turner, and Byron are linked in idolatry; they are subjected to the worship of a ‘vain temptation’, a gloomy or misty illusion.

Yet Ruskin’s engagement with the history and culture of Venice in the mid nineteenth century, represented supremely by his three-volume architectural treatise *The Stones of Venice*, provides a rather different sort of approach to that described in *Praeterita*. While the comments of the older Ruskin would suggest that his earlier relationship with Venice was just so much romance and mystery, *The Stones of Venice* challenges much of the Romantic cliché that had accumulated around the city. Indeed Ruskin’s work on Venice, on many levels, represents a discontinuity with nineteenth-century views of Venice. In particular, the Venice described by Byron and other Romantic-era writers is tested and challenged, and Ruskin launches a clear attack on the *leggenda nera*. Rather than swallowing whole the image of Venice created by Romantic writers, Ruskin engages in an argument with these writers and defines his presentation of Venetian history against common perceptions of the ancient Republic which had gained popularity through the influence of literary works and the popularity of the *leggenda*. Firstly, it will be important to examine the nature of these predominant early nineteenth-century views as they manifest themselves in literary and historical texts, beginning with an examination of the treatment of Venice by Byron.

Byron’s Venice is a dark and secretive city – the ‘place of terror and of gloom’ to which the juvenile Ruskin responded. This ‘dark’ Venice was a trope in currency for much of the nineteenth century. The main elements of this myth constituted the representation of republican government in Venice as secretive, cruel and tyrannical. Byron’s representation of Venice owes much to this legend, depending for its dramatic efficacy on the myth of Venice’s murky despotism. Byron may have been sympathetic to the cause of Italian liberation (at one time joining the *carbonari*) but in the case of Venice his portrayal of its history shows a dark, mysterious and unforgiving city. His two Venetian plays, *Marino Faliero* (1819) and *The Two Foscari* (1821), depend upon the image of Venetian government (particularly the

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6 Byron’s membership of the *carbonari* is described in Peter Quenell, *Byron in Italy* (London: Collins, 1941), p.177.
Council of Ten) as arbitrarily and maliciously cruel. What appears to have affected Byron in Venice is an appreciation of darkness, gloom, and ruin; he says in the preface to *Marino Faliero* that ‘the black veil which is painted over the place of Marino Faliero among the doges, and the Giant’s Staircase where he was crowned, and discrowned, and decapitated, struck forcibly upon my imagination’.  

Byron’s description of his discovery of the Faliero tomb in Venice is pure Gothic in the style of ‘Monk’ Lewis – as Byron, admiring another tomb, encounters an enigmatic priest who emerges from the shadows and murmurs mysteriously: ‘I can show you finer monuments than that’.  

The Venice that Byron weaves through his two plays that chronicle the lives of the Doges is one most firmly suited to the shadows, where lurk conspirators and ‘signors of the night’.

This air of secrecy clings particularly to the councils of Venice, the Forty and the Ten. In both *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari*, the Doges appear as ultimately powerless, at the mercy of a grave, silent, and cruel patrician class who tyrannise Venice. Betruccio Faliero, the Doge’s nephew, describes them as ‘secret as the grave to which they doom/ The guilty.’

The urban geography of Byron’s Venice is rife with prisons and instruments of torture to punish the hapless condemned. An air of death pervades the palaces and the bridges of the city. But this sinister appreciation of Venice was commonplace amongst European visitors to the city, who had a voyeuristic interest in the Venice ‘of terror and of gloom’. When Israel Bertruccio, one of the rebels who attempts a revolt against the Councils, swears that no imprisonment or torture can force him to name his co-conspirators, he ends up giving a sketch of the city familiar to travellers of the Grand Tour:

…there’s no torture in the mystic wells  
Which undermine your palace, nor in those  
Not less appalling cells, the ‘leaden roofs,’  
To force a single name from me of others….  
And I would pass the fearful ‘Bridge of Sighs,’  
Joyous that mine must be the last that e’er  
Between the murderers and the murder’d, washing

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8 Ibid., p.304.
9 Ibid., p.311.
The prison and the palace walls: 10

Byron is symptomatic of a delight in the ‘dark side’ of Venice to be found in many English-speaking writers of this period, who found in the leggenda nera version of the city an unsurpassed dramatic model of tyranny. The palaces and bridges of Venice are viewed as aesthetic objects which gain added attraction through their association with the dark terrors of the bygone Republic. In tourists who wrote up their travels, there was a tradition of disparaging Italy which (as Jeremy Black has shown) fitted the conventions of a ‘genre’. 11 A ‘rather satisfying savouring’ of Italy’s ruin, in the words of James Buzard, was commonplace in the era of the Grand Tour. 12 For example, the eighteenth-century traveller William Bennett wrote with apparent satisfaction of the ‘dark and tyrannical councils’ of Venice when describing his journey through Italy. 13

In Byron’s Marino Faliero, the government of Venice is described as a ‘fatal poison’ 14 which provokes the rebels under the command of Bertruccio and later the disenchan ted Doge, to plot its downfall. Both the government and the rebels in Marino Faliero are described in the language of darkness and secrecy. The patrician Lioni, who, earlier in the scene, has cast away the mask and cloak which he wears in public, describes the rebels as ‘angry spirits/And turbulent mutterers of stifled treason/Who lurk in narrow places, and walk out/ Muffled to whisper curses in the night’. 15 Bertram, of the rebel party, replies that ‘Rather shame and sorrow light/ On the accursed tyranny which rides/The very air in Venice’. 16 The overall picture of Venice is one of unchecked despotism on the one hand, and murky treason on the other.

If the cruelties of the Councils described in Marino Faliero seem unrivalled, they pale into insignificance compared to the scenario of The Two Foscari (1821), where the Doge’s

10Ibid., p.329.
13Quoted in Black, p.226.
14Ibid., p.377.
15Ibid., p.394
16Ibid.,p.395
own son, Jacopo Foscari is imprisoned in the gloom of a Venetian prison by order of the
government. Interestingly, Jacopo has something of Byron himself about him. He describes a
‘childish race’ across the canals, and displays an unqualified delight in the pleasures of
Venice. Just as there are two Foscaris, there appear in this play to be two Venices; the one
described by the younger Foscari as ‘earth, and sky, the blue of ocean,/ The brightness of our
city, and her domes,/ The mirth of her Piazza’ and the other, forming the latter portion of his
speech consisting of ‘these chambers of the unknown/ Who govern’.17 As I have earlier
suggested, the airy, Romantic Venice often finds its counterpart in a dark Gothic vision, often
within the same text. In The Two Foscari, the Venice of bright blue sea and air, and the
twinkling domes of San Marco, dissolve into a scene of dark and secret chambers where ‘the
unknown and the unnumbered’ are ‘destroyed in silence’. The dominant theme of this Venice
is, once again, secrecy: ‘men know as little/ Of the state’s real acts as the grave’s/ Unfathom’d
mysteries’, asserts one character (a senator) in the play.18 Later the Doge Foscari adds that
Venice ‘knows not herself,/ In all her mystery.’19 This is reminiscent of Ruskin’s appraisal of
a Venice ‘that stands, from first to last like a masked statue’ (I, 24) – impenetrable,
unknowable, and silent.

This impenetrable secrecy is aided in The Two Foscari by the methods of torture and
cruelty employed by the Council of Ten, personified in the play as a distant, remote body.
Their judgements are cold, inhuman, even diabolical in their cruelty, their duty, says Marina
Foscari, the wife of the condemned Jacopo,

To trample on all human feelings, all
Ties which bind man to man, to emulate
The fiends, who will one day requite them in
Variety of torturing.20

18Ibid. p.138
19Ibid. p.150
20The Two Foscari, p.141
In the play, Marina’s is the voice of morality, appealing to a notion of posterity whereby Venice’s reputation would be ‘dishonour’d’ by her cruelty. Venice as conceived by Marina—and by Byron—has become a kind of vortex of depravity populated by ‘merchants….Dalmation and Greek slaves….dumb citizens,/ And mask’d nobility….sibirri [secret police]/…..spies’. Its government busies itself about with ‘mysterious meetings’, ‘unknown dooms, and sudden executions’.

Indeed Venice as reconstituted by Byron is akin to the English Tory vision of revolutionary France, with the emphasis on conspiracies and infighting, show trials and mass executions. Describing the French Revolution in his memoirs, Sir Samuel Romilly describes ‘the cold instigators of….murders, who, while blood is streaming round them on every side, permit this carnage to go on, and reason about it’. French cruelties were also seen to be driven – as in the Venice of Byron’s poetry – by myriad secret conspiracies, and societies such as the illuminiati. As we can see, this vision, when applied to the extinct Venetian Republic, excuses the Revolutionary/Napoleonic aggression and military despotism which led to Venice’s annexation. If the Venetian Republic was this bad then – so the logic goes – it needed saving from itself.

In fact, the Venice pictured by Byron represented one of a variety of British responses to the Serenissima in the aftermath of 1797. As John Eglin has shown, the leggenda nera coexisted in the British consciousness with versions of Venice that looked back on its proud history and mourned its passing: ‘both laudatory and pejorative visions of the Republic [existed] in the awkward juxtaposition that had become a commonplace of treatments of the Venetian Republic.’ But the leggenda nera, especially for writers of a Gothic bent, proved a powerful literary device. Byron had taken advice from the sensationalist Gothic novelist

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21Ibid., p.158.
25‘Gothic’ in the Walpole-Radcliffe-‘Monk’ Lewis sense, not in the Ruskinian.
Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis on the production of *Marino Faliero* in Venice in 1817, as he records in his preface to the play.\textsuperscript{26} He also records the influence of Horace Walpole, another chronicler of a dark and secretive Italy, whom he describes as ‘the father of the first romance, and of the last tragedy in our language’.\textsuperscript{27} The taste for tales of sensationalism and secrecy fitted well with the dominant myths in circulation about Venice. Charlotte Dacre, whom Byron described in ‘English bards and Scotch Reviewers’ as ‘the lovely Rosa’ (Dacre went under the exotic pseudonym of Rosa Matilda) chose to set her tale of transgressional interracial sex, *Zofloya* (1806) in Venice.\textsuperscript{28} Venetians were, wrote Dacre, of a ‘deep and gloomy tincture’ and this was because of the nature of their government, ‘which in its character was jealous and suspicious, dooming sometimes to a public, sometimes to a private death, on mere surmise or apprehension of design against the state, and always by secret trial, its most distinguished members.’\textsuperscript{29} This power, it goes without saying, ‘was exercised by Il Consiglio di Dieci, or council of ten’.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, Venice acts as the backdrop to her protagonist Victoria’s descent into depravity and violence, which seems to be triggered by the infidelity of her Venetian mother. Venetians, wrote Dacre, were especially prone to cruelty: ‘Sanguinary and violent by nature, climate, habit, and education, the hatred of the Venetians once excited became implacable, and endured through life.’\textsuperscript{31} Venice is configured both as an oppressive place from which Dacre’s characters long to escape, and also as a catalyst for their own dark instincts. Counter-pointed with the cool olive-groves of the Tuscan countryside – to which Victoria’s brother Leonardo briefly escapes – Venice figures as a claustrophobic nightmare, a pressure-cooker for all kinds of evil desires.

As it is for Byron, Venice is a curse from which its inhabitants would do their best to escape. Best of all is not to breed; in the words of Byron’s Marina Foscari, ‘what best of

\textsuperscript{26}Marino Faliero, p.304.  
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., p.305.  
\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., p.6.
blessings/ Were barrenness in Venice!"³² Patriotism, in this context, becomes defunct; as Marina argues to Jacopo, concepts of loyalty and treason are no longer applicable, as Venice itself is the ultimate traitor. Jacopo, who still holds an idealistic view of the city’s qualities, replies that Marina cannot love Venice truly (shades of Proust) because she has never lost it: ‘[you] never saw/ Her beautiful towers in the receding distance’.³³ But this is illusion: for Marina the reality of Venice is,

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\begin{align*}
\text{The blood of myriads reeking up to heaven} \\
\text{The groans of slaves in chains, and men in dungeons,} \\
\text{Mothers, and wives, and sons, and sires, and subjects,} \\
\text{Held in the bondage of ten bald-heads;} \quad \text{³⁴}
\end{align*}
\]

This split seems to sum up Byron’s Venice, if not Byron himself – on the one hand, dreamy Romantic spires and towers; on the other, the Gothic sensationalism of dungeons, prisoners, and conspiracies under the tyranny of ‘ten bald-heads’. Byron sets up one Venice, personified by Jacopo – who seems to represent in some sense the poet’s own engagement with the city – only to dissolve it in presenting to us the ‘real’ Venice, itself mostly a product of the leggenda nera. The Venice which Ruskin would present thirty years later in The Stones of Venice would both be heavily influenced by, and challenge, this construction of the city.

But Byron’s was not the first imagining of Venice to highlight this ‘dark side’, nor was this approach confined to literary fiction and drama. Byron and other romantic authors derived much of their material from a number of early nineteenth-century historians. These historians of the leggenda nera (or ‘black legend’) had benefited from the fall of the Republic in 1797; using the opportunity of Venice’s demise, they presented their work as an exposé of the dark truths behind Venice’s secretive government. Chief among them was the French historian, Pierre Daru, whose work Byron had made use of in the writing of his ‘Venetian’ plays.

³²The Two Foscari, p.188
³³Ibid., p.171.
³⁴Ibid.,p.172.
Historians of the *leggenda nera*: Pierre Daru’s Venice

The achievement of Daniele Manin and the revolutionary government of 1848 was to turn free Venice into a beacon of revolutionary liberty. To do this meant the dissolution of the pernicious effect of the *leggenda nera*. This myth saw Venice as dark and cruel, its subjects servile and cunning. But the *leggenda*, happily for Manin, Tomasseo, et al, was already in trouble. It had been heavily criticised as inaccurate by the Italian historian Domenico Tiepolo, and had been singled out for ridicule at the major science conferences held in Venice in September 1847, the result of which was a massive gold-bound publication on the city’s history and geography: *Venezia e le sue Lagune*. A new optimistic and propagandistic version of Venetian history was in the air. In contrast to the picture of Venetian government presented by Daru and others, *Venezia e le sue Lagune* talks of a ‘pure’ governing class akin to that which would be described by Ruskin. The book talks of a Republic defined by ‘la libertà e la grandezza’, ‘liberty and greatness’, and stresses the importance of the ‘honesty’ of its government. Furthermore, the ancient Republic was not cruel, but characterised by moderation and religious piety. These moral qualities earned the Republic ‘il reverente amore del popolo’, ‘the reverent love of the people’. In this context, the re-evaluation of Venetian history becomes an important spur to real political change, stirring up national feeling and anti-Austrian sentiment. Manin and Tomasseo rode to power on a wave of revived Republican feeling – it truly seemed as if the years of subordination to foreign interpretations of the Serenissima were gone. This revived Venice would bear the torch of liberty, appealing to Republican sympathy in France (which had always been Manin’s plan, suspicious as he was of the monarchical families that carved up Italy) and the United States (which was the

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35 Tiepolo had written an in-depth exposé of Daru’s inaccuracies, entitled *Discorsi sulla Storia Veneta, cioè Rettificazioni di Alcuni Equivoci Rcontrati nella Storia di Venezia del Sig. Daru* (Udine: Fratelli Mattiuzzi 1828).
36 *Venezia e le sue Lagune* was produced by Count Giovanni Correr (Venice: Consiglio Communale 1847).
37 *Venezia e le sue Lagune*, Vol I., p.78.
38 Ibid., p.129, 268 and following.
39 Ibid., p.342.
first foreign power to recognise the 1848 administration). Venice’s time as a murky backwater – subject to the necrophiliac attentions of foreign poets and the sensationalist sensibilities of popular historians – seemed to be over.

But how had the leggenda nera gained such ground? The historian Filippo de Vivo has identified a ‘voyeurism’ in historical treatments of Venice after the fall of the Republic. The historians of the leggenda nera attracted attention by offering the unveiling of treasures ‘cachés aux archives, le mystère le mieux gardé de cette République mystérieuse’, ‘hidden in the archives, the best-kept mysteries of this mysterious Republic’. Such voyeurism thus rested on these historians’ self-presentation as revealers of secrets, of intrepid explorers of the hidden. They traded, in de Vivo’s words, on the ‘frisson’ of exposing the inner workings of a governmental system famed for its discretion. The appeal of discovering the dark secrets of a mysterious Republic meant that an anti-myth developed around Venice; considered for centuries as a model of Republican freedom, it now became ‘le stéréotype d’un gouvernement autoritaire et coercif’, ‘the stereotype of a coercive, authoritarian government’.

Other elements of the leggenda nera highlighted the supposed ‘weakness’ of the Venetian Republic. As in the plays of Byron, historians presented a Venice perpetually riven with internal conspiracies. This new historiography coincided with an interest in original manuscript sources, an ‘archive fever’ surrounding Venice in the early nineteenth century, with hordes of foreign historians descending on the city to ‘expose’ the dark deeds of the Doges. Historians of the leggenda nera (including such notable figures as Leopold von Ranke) were at pains to present their work as ‘new’ and ground-breaking. Fitting for their self-presentation as the revealers of dark secrets, their work depended on the ‘discovery’ of long-repressed manuscripts, pamphlets, and letters which were recovered from deep inside the archives of

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.,p.225.
Venice. Actually, as de Vivo points out, many of these manuscripts were not ‘secret’ at all but widely available, and had already been commented on by such seventeenth-century figures as James Harrington and Nicholas-Abraham Amelot de la Houssaie, the French ambassador to Venice in the 1670s.

However, I shall now examine the work of the most important of the historians of the leggenda nera, Pierre Daru, whose Histoire de la République de Venise (1819) is exemplary of the attitudes in circulation around the Serenissima’s ‘dark’ past. Daru was certainly not an unbiased observer. He had been Napoleon’s minister for war, charged with the responsibility of negotiating Venice’s surrender, and the Histoire can be viewed as a lengthy excuse for France’s invasion of the Republic in 1797 and its subsequent accession of the territory to Austria. ‘Le but de Daru est de dédouaner les armées françaises’, ‘Daru’s aim is to get the French armies off the hook’, writes Filippo de Vivo.\(^44\) Daru is heavily cited by both Byron and Ruskin (though Ruskin takes issue with his historiography, in ways this chapter will go on to explore), and his work was a kind of ‘keystone’ in historical research on Venice in the nineteenth century. Byron includes a lengthy excerpt from the Histoire as part of the postscript to The Two Foscari, and cites him as authoritative in his preface to Marino Faliero. Daru’s Venice is exceptional and isolated, a republic whose very existence is an enigma, situated in a lagoon ‘où il ne se trouve ni végétation, ni eau potable, ni matériaux, ni même l’espace pour bâtir’, ‘where there is found neither vegetation, nor drinking water, nor materials, nor even the space to build’.\(^45\) Daru does everything to establish Venice as unique, exotic and mysterious, Venetians as intrinsically ‘other’, a people of distant Asiatic origin.\(^46\) Venice, culturally and geographically, is configured as isolated, languid and passive.\(^47\) The ‘mysterious’ character of Venice’s government is therefore an aspect of its unique and

\(^{44}\)Ibid., p.226.
\(^{46}\)Ibid., pp.17-18.
\(^{47}\)Ibid., p.7
baffling existence; a state ‘remarquable par la singularité de son origine, de son site et de ses institutions’, ‘remarkable for the singularity of its origins, its situation and its institutions’. The reader of the work is drawn into complicity with Daru as the historian performs what seems to be an unprecedented exposé of this mysterious Republic. Venice’s singularity and impenetrable secrecy exist as carefully placed veils which Daru drapes over his text so that he can dramatically ‘reveal’ the true Venice with all its murky secrets. His Venice is full of ‘interior vices’ waiting to be revealed. Daru sets himself up as Venice’s demystifier, asking how a government reputed to be almost untouchable could dissolve in the twinkling of an eye. Daru is to provide the answer, which is to be found in the records of the Republic’s mysterious government. Here he allows himself a swipe at Venetian historians who vainly attempt to deny Venice’s position as what he calls ‘elective monarchy’. Venice may have been a republic in name, but was far from such in practice, argues Daru. Historians who argue otherwise are, he says, simply joining in ‘une dispute de mots: qui gouverne seul est un monarque’, ‘a quarrel over words: someone who governs alone is a monarch’. Furthermore, Daru paints a picture of a state riven with internal and external problems from day one. This is not Ruskin’s picture of a pure Venice corrupted by the poisonous humanism of the Renaissance, but a Venice rocked from its foundation by factionalism, oppressive government, and the evils that Daru sees emanating from the city’s commercial success. ‘Le commerce…n’est pas une école de modération,’ he writes. ‘Les succès inspirent l’avidité et la jalousie, et celles-ci l’esprit de domination.’, ‘Commerce…is not a school of moderation. Successes breed greed and envy, and these a spirit of domination’. This state of affairs, the historian argues, is a million miles from the ideals of republican liberty. The people of Venice

48 Ibid., p.5.
49 Ibid., p.7.
50 Ibid., p.49.
51 Ibid., p.51.
52 Ibid., p.118.
might believe themselves free, but such a belief is an illusion. For Daru, power lay firstly with the Doges, and then – as Venice grew older and their power waned – with the Councils.

If there is a year in which to date Venice’s fall into corruption, for Daru it is 1319 – a hundred years before Ruskin dates the beginning of the Republic’s decline. This was the year of the Grand Council being declared permanent and, for Daru, a further step towards despotism: ‘Dès ce jour fut consommé la sujétion de presque toute la population de Venise’, ‘From this day forwards the subjection of almost the entire population of Venice was sealed’. Again, Daru defines himself as against biased Venetian historians, and is keen to portray the Republic as essentially a despotic, aristocratic state. Venice’s failures, and its eventual fall, are attributed largely to this character of its government. And, once again, his portrayal of himself is as a man prepared to brave the dark underbelly of Venetian history to get to the truth, as opposed to Italian historians. When he discusses the rights of admission to the Grand Council, for example, he talks of ‘la circonspection des historiens vénitiens [qui] a laissé beaucoup de ténèbres sur les détails de ces évènements’, ‘the circumspection of Venetian historians which has left many shadows over the details of these events’. In this example, the obfuscation of the Venetian historians makes the matter more murky than it was in the first place – while Daru, by contrast, plumbs the depths holding aloft his light of truth. It is important for Daru, as an apologist for Napoleonic France, to portray the extinct Serene Republic in negative terms.

Much of the language he employs could be applied to the Jacobin Terror. The people of Venice lived in ‘une crainte continuelle’ (‘a perpetual fear’). The Venetian government ‘pénétrait dans l’intérieur des familles, dans le secret des cœurs’, ‘peered into the workings of families, into the secrets of hearts’. Such a portrait paralleled the counter-revolutionary myths in circulation within conservative circles – in England represented by figures like

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53Ibid., p.187.
54Ibid., p.519
55Ibid., p.513
56Ibid., p.523.
57Ibid.
Edmund Burke – where the Jacobin system represented the triumph of ‘systematic materialism’ against the natural order of things. As portrayed in the literature of the time, French Jacobinism was the recognised shorthand for oppressive despotism – Wordsworth wrote of the ‘ghastly visions…of despair/ And tyranny, and implements of death’.  

Daru’s psychological appraisal of the state of Venice is accompanied by an emphasis on executions and torture. When Byron said of the story of Marino Faliero that the gory details ‘struck forcibly upon my imagination’, it was Daru, with his description of the Doge Faliero’s severed head ‘rolling on the steps’ who had got there first. With his emphasis on these ‘terrible executions’, Daru’s Serenissima is a gory blood fest, the reality of which (he claims) has been hidden from the public by centuries of Venetian bias. Examples of the merciful side of Venetian justice are not Daru’s concern. His primary interest is in the hundreds and thousands ‘condamnés à la mort, à la prison, ou à l’exil’, ‘condemned to death, imprisonment or exile’. In the story of Marino Faliero, for example, Daru’s emphasis is on the disproportionate nature of the punishments meted out to the conspirators – the execution of the Doge and the execution and torture of his accomplices.

Sometimes Daru can lay it on too thickly; the successor to Faliero, Doge Gradenigo, is described as ascending to ‘le trône teint du sang de Marin Faliero’, ‘the throne tainted with the blood of Marino Faliero’.

Daru is keen to portray a Venice endemically cruel and capricious, which he compares unfavourably to its neighbours. In a late fourteenth-century skirmish between Venice and Genoa, Daru stresses the 4,000 Genoese prisoners who apparently perished in Venetian prisons. This is contrasted with Genoese practise which, according to Daru, was characterised by humane treatment of prisoners of war. In this particular conflict, claims Daru, most Venetian prisoners of war were returned by Genoa. This

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59 Ibid., p.643.
60 Ibid., p.643.
61 Vol II., p.5.
all ties in very neatly with Daru’s picture of a Venetian Republic buoyed by ‘unjust conquests’ and fuelled with a lust for ‘domination’. 62

Again, Daru’s stress is on the exceptionality of the Venetian Republic, its overreaching desire for power. Daru portrays it as isolated from the rest of Europe, shunned as a kind of rogue state. For Daru, such uniqueness explains both Venice’s success and the problems inherent in its government and empire. For Daru, Venice was a state with an unrivalled appetite for power provided with an equally unrivalled apparatus of government: effective and tyrannical. Daru pays tribute to an intelligent government aware of its own limitations – yet condemns it for its oppressive treatment of its subjects:

Ce qu’elle [Venetian government] avait principalement à craindre, c’étaient les crises qui naissent de l’ambition ou du mécontentement; pour les prévenir, elle avait adopté deux principes dont elle ne s’écarta jamais, la moderation et une mystérieuse sévérité.

What she principally feared were the crises which were born of ambition or malcontent; to prevent them, she adopted two principles which she never jettisoned – moderation, and a mysterious severity. 63

Venice’s success, in Daru’s paradigm, is due to the deliberate propagation of a sense of mystery around its government. Punishment in Venice, argues Daru, became arbitrary and unpredictable; on the surface, the Republic seemed uniquely benevolent and moderate. Yet when meting out justice, Daru’s Venice is disproportionately severe; hence the emphasis on torture and executions. Venice was successful and strong, but deprived its citizens of their basic rights, ‘les jouissances de l’amour-propre et la sécurité’, ‘the pleasures of love and stability’. 64 Such was the price of living in this rogue Mediterranean superpower which had the whole of northern Italy troubled and tormented. Venice’s success, Daru claims, lay in good part as a result of its tyrannical character. 65 And a good part of that was bound up in the favouring of a mysterious and arbitrary governmental system, a system which Daru takes it

62Ibid., p.77.
63Ibid., p.355.
64Ibid., p.356.
65Ibid., p.357.
upon himself to demystify. Such a system became an important way of controlling Venice’s subjects, providing the stability needed to further its campaigns of foreign domination:

Pour commander aux hommes, il faut s’environner de quelque chose de merveilleux qui saisisse leur imagination. A Venise ce merveilleux était le mystère: plus les coups de l’autorité étaient inattendus, inexplicables, plus ils produisaient d’effet.

To command men, you must surround them with something extraordinary to capture their imagination. In Venice, this was mystery: the more the interventions of government were unexpected and inexplicable, the more they produced the desired effect. 66

The Republic was watching you – a government that ‘n’ignorait rien et ne pardonnait jamais’, ‘ignored nothing and never forgave’. 67

The Venice of the Histoire de la République is a prime example of constructing alternative history. Daru is careful to emphasise particular events to create a dark Venice where action and thought were restricted and oppressed. Daru’s responsibility for causing the end of the Serenissima and his love for Napoleon are factors which would make it expedient to write a history of Venice that casts a shadow over the reputation of the city pre-1797. Yet in this picture of a state afflicted by a mysterious and sinister government, and in his depiction of an oppressed and terrorised populace, Daru provided the raw materials for a Venice ready-made for Romantic fiction, a Venice which was enthusiastically adopted by writers from Byron to Fenimore Cooper. 68 In this version of the leggenda nera, the conception of a dark despotism at the heart of medieval Venice created by Daru and others is used to construct a cursed and blighted city – a ‘sea Sodom’ – that provokes judgment from God. Many of these ideas are contained in the Doge’s final speech in Byron’s Marino Faliero, from which the following long extract comes:

When all the ills of conquer’d states shall cling thee,
Vice without splendour, sin without relief….
Smiles without mirth, and pastimes without pleasure,
Youth without honour, age without respect,
Meanness and weakness, and a sense of woe
‘Gainst which thou wilt not strive, and dar’st not murmur

66Ibid., p.404.
67Ibid.
68Whose book The Bravo again trades on the image of a ‘dark’ Venice.
Have made thee last and worst of peopled deserts,
Then, in the last gasp of thine agony,
Amidst thy many murders, think of mine!
Thou den of drunkards with the blood of princes!
Gehenna of the waters! thou sea Sodom!
Thus I devote thee to the infernal gods!
Thee and thy serpent seed!\(^{69}\)

In dramatic form, this is a version of the paradigm that Daru sketches for his readers in the *Histoire*. Firstly, Venice’s success as an empire leads to a dilution of its moral and cultural values, as the ‘ills of conquer’d states’ cling to it like a nasty illness. Secondly, its concern to exercise power and influence leads to a draining of all true joy and pleasure, as cultural cohesion disintegrates, sacrificed at the altar of might. Hence ‘vice without splendour, sin without relief’, ‘youth without honour, age without respect…a sense of woe’. Such a situation is surely a repackaging of Daru’s description of the effects of Venice’s authoritarian government on its subjects – the loss of comfort, of self esteem, of pride, of pleasure. The emphasis on the self-inflicted woes of Venice is Daru’s also – an increasingly cruel pseudo-aristocracy bringing judgment on itself.\(^{70}\)

This feeling is augmented by Byron’s use of biblical language to condemn Venice – it is a ‘Sodom’, a ‘Gehenna’. The connection between drunkenness and blood recalls Scriptural (especially Old Testament) descriptions of the judgment of God. One passage from Deuteronomy reads: ‘I [the Lord] will make mine arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh’.\(^{71}\) Another description, from Jeremiah, talks of ‘the day of the Lord GOD of hosts, a day of vengeance….the sword shall devour, and it shall be…made drunk with their blood’.\(^{72}\)

Readers of Ruskin will recognise the tone of Byron’s finale to his Venetian play. Yet Ruskin’s city is cursed, not because of its undemocratic government, but because of its failure to recognise its rightful God. Whereas Byron makes use of biblical imagery solely to ram home the same point that Daru is making – namely, that the medieval rulers of Venice were

\(^{69}\)Marino Faliero, pp.443-4.
\(^{70}\)For example, Vol. II of the *Histoire*, p.17.
\(^{71}\)Deuteronomy 32:42.
\(^{72}\)Jeremiah 46:10.
corrupt, cruel and arbitrarily malicious – Ruskin’s theological understanding of history will not allow him down such a route. It is the poison of Renaissance humanism, driving Venice to worship man rather than God, that is responsible for Venice’s fall.

This strikes at the heart of the difference between the city of Venice as constituted by Ruskin and that of the leggenda nera, represented by Byron and Daru. Both appraisals of Venice’s history see a kind of corruption or ‘fall’ occurring during the Republic’s development. For Byron and Daru, that corruption is located in the medieval Republic, and can be specifically attributed to the form of government which it adopts – an oligarchy, or pseudo-aristocracy. For Ruskin, with his conservative and theological emphases, such concepts were not necessarily tainted; thus Ruskin diverges from, and takes issue with, the leggenda nera tradition. Indeed, Ruskin rescues a pure, untainted vision of the ancient Republic at the same time as the revolutionary patriots were demanding that very Republic back. Ruskin’s analysis of the city in The Stones of Venice has long been viewed as a romantic ode to a crumbling ruin, a Wordsworthian paean to a place irrevocably fallen. Yet a crucial part of Ruskin’s view of Venice is his reappropriation of the positive side of the Venice myth, his appreciation of a culture and society marked out in its Gothic stones.

**Ruskin’s Argument with the Leggenda Nera**

‘And thus, Christianity and morality, courage, and intellect, and art all crumbling together in one wreck, we are hurried on to the fall of Italy, the revolution in France, and the condition of art in England (saved by her Protestantism from severer penalty) in the time of George II’(IX, 45). This was Ruskin’s view of the Renaissance, the time when human works were idolised before God’s, when morality self-destructed, leading to the dangerous secular humanism exemplified by the French Revolution. If Ruskin’s political opinions were ever in doubt on this issue, he puts them in as clear terms here as he can muster. Ruskin had loved Byron’s poetry as a boy, but Byron would have found Ruskin, with his pro-monarchical diatribes, strange company. Despite all he inherited from Byron, Ruskin differed from him in important
and significant ways – particularly with relation to Venice. Byron had written to Douglas Kinnaird in 1820 of *Marino Faliero*: ‘I sent Murray a tragedy – (written not for the Stage) read it of you can – It is full of Republicanism.’ Byron’s ‘version’ of the murky Venice of the *leggenda nera* forms part of a piece of political rhetoric where the Republic of Venice represents not republicanism – as might be expected – but authoritarian oppression. Venice as conceived by Daru, Byron, and others is not a true Republic but, as I have suggested, a pseudo-aristocracy where a ‘tyranny of ten bald-heads’ exerts a mysterious and arbitrary power over its mass of cowed citizens.

The implications of this myth are clear: Venice’s death at the hands of Napoleon was a progressive step, freeing the city from its oppression at the hands of an unjust tyranny. It is true that Byron saw the subsequent Austrian occupation of Venice as unjust, but this is beside the point – he swallows the *leggenda nera* line for the sake of the political points he makes about liberty and authority in his dramatic portrayal of the city. In this sense, whilst Daru creates a ‘dark Venice’ to justify the Napoleonic annexation and empire-building in Italy, the underlying political implications of Byron’s work are less specific. Byron’s ‘dark Venice’ is the model of an archetypal repressive regime against which libertarians set themselves – this perhaps explains why Byron was happy to criticise Hapsburg oppression whilst seeming to attack the memory of the Serenissima.

Ruskin’s politics – as I will show in the next chapter – were complex. It is safe to say, however, that they were the politics neither of Daru nor of Byron. This is important because, instead of seeing the death of the Serene Republic as a blessed deliverance of the people from aristocratic despotism, with his conservative, theological mind he viewed the French Revolution and all its works as the product of the worst and most dangerous kind of humanism. In *Praeterita*, Ruskin described himself as a ‘violent Tory of the old school’ (XXXV, 13); although, as we shall see, this does not mean that he ‘wrote off’ European Nationalism, the statement goes some way towards helping us to culturally position Ruskin.

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Instead of casting a dark shadow over the annals of the Venetian Republic, Ruskin wishes to rescue it from its treatment at the hands of Republican and pro-Napoleonic writers, and his retelling of its Fall differs significantly from received notions of Venetian history. Therefore, instead of taking Ruskin’s later comments about the similarity of ‘his Venice’ to Byron’s at face value, these words must be viewed in the light of a contextual evaluation of his objectives in *The Stones of Venice*.

Ruskin’s equation of ‘his Venice’ with Byron’s Romantic version must be read in the context of the later Ruskin’s marginalising of the entirety of his Venetian work. Perhaps there was, as Tony Tanner argues, a link in his mind between Venice and the young wife whom he took there, later the cause of so much pain: ‘[I intend]…passing in total silence [over] things which I have no pleasure in reviewing, and which the reader would find no help in the account of’ (*Praeterita*, XXXV, 11). Tanner comments: ‘At the very end….he effectively bracketed the whole [Venetian] affair out of his life, just as he literally wrote his actual wife out of his final accountings’.\(^{74}\) I take issue with Tanner’s emphasis on the erotic in his account of *The Stones of Venice*, but this important point remains – Ruskin as an older man is pushing to the edges those parts of his life he no longer wishes to remember. To compare his own Venice with the romantic, misty fantasies conjured up by Byron and Turner is shorthand for saying: it was all a dream, a fantasy I have snapped out of. The mist dissolves: it was shown to be a ‘vain temptation’.

Yet this belies the radical nature of Ruskin’s attack on the *leggenda nera*. It is plain to a reader of *The Stones of Venice* from the outset that Ruskin has an axe to grind. Ruskin wrote of the work in his diary in September 1851, ‘May God help me to finish it to His glory, and man’s good.’\(^{75}\) This moral, educative Ruskin is never so strongly exercised than when ‘correcting’ popular errors. His Venice – reclaimed from its stones –debates with and challenges the notions that were in circulation about the Serenissima at the time that he is writing:

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I may perhaps, in the outset, and in few words, enable the general reader to form a clearer idea of the importance of every existing expression of Venetian character through Venetian art, and of the breadth of interest which the true history of Venice embraces, than he is likely to have gleaned from the current fables of her mystery or magnificence. (IX,18, my italics.)

This passage from ‘The Quarry’, the first chapter of the first volume of The Stones of Venice – ‘quarry’, as Tony Tanner notices, having the satisfying double meaning of digging up the foundations and pursuing prey – sets up Ruskin’s stall in as unequivocal a way as possible. Ruskin’s ‘quarry’ here is the real Venice, suffering at the hands of popular myth. Ruskin is concerned at the beginning of his book to establish this challenge to the leggenda nera: he is breaking the spell, clearing the mist and recovering the ‘true’ Venice buried behind it all.

Notice the similarity with the approach of Daru, but in the opposite direction; whilst Daru’s ‘true Venice’ was found to be a murky, despotic state, Ruskin’s ‘true’ state will be pure and morally upright. Ruskin is concerned to question the formulation of Venice in the public imagination as a perfidious oligarchy, and places the emphasis not on forms of government but on moral character:

Venice is usually conceived as an oligarchy: She was so during a period less than the half of her existence, and that including the days of her decline; and it is one of the first questions needing severe examination, whether that decline was owing in anywise to the change of the form of her government, or altogether, as assuredly in great part, to changes in the character of the persons of whom it was composed. (IX, 18)

So Ruskin does not dispute the move to oligarchy. Yet he differs from Daru and the leggenda nera formulation in two crucial respects. Firstly, Ruskin sees the corruption of Venice as the result of the evils of individual hearts (‘changes in the character’), not as a knock-on effect of despotic government: ‘That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man’.76 Secondly, Ruskin’s Venice only becomes corrupt at the onset of the Renaissance, and not before. Daru’s Venice, even before the increase in power of the Councils, is a mysterious and shadowy place, full of whispered plottings and already suffering from many of the ills Daru equates with an essentially mercantile society.

76Mark 7:20.
In their edition of *The Stones of Venice*, Cook and Wedderburn provide a footnote which seemingly illuminates Ruskin’s relation to Daru: ‘*Histoire de la Republique de Venise*, par P. Daru, is the authority principally followed by Ruskin in his allusions to Venetian history’ (IX, 21). It is certainly true that Ruskin drew heavily on the work of Daru when he was compiling his book. But the statement is misleading in that it does not appreciate the nature and extent of Ruskin’s argument with Daru in his position as a chief proponent of the *leggenda nera*.

Ruskin is prepared, for example, to question many of the myths that had come to be associated with the tradition of the ‘dark’ Venice. On the episode of the Doge Marino Faliero, he says this in a footnote: ‘The conspiracy of Marino Faliero…to slay the nobles and proclaim himself Prince of Venice has been invested by the historians and by Byron’s Tragedy with more importance than really belongs to it’ (IX, 21). A double-blow: Ruskin targets both the historians of the *leggenda nera* tradition (like Daru) and Byron, whose macabre sensibilities were roused by this story. This despite his love for and debt to the man whose version of Venice dominated the public imagination in the early nineteenth century.

In contrast to the proponents of the *leggenda nera* – whom he will later call ‘partial historians’ – Ruskin *really looks*, examining in minute detail every corner of the stones which will record for him the history of the Venetian Republic. Tanner comments that, in contrast to Byron, ‘Ruskin seems to have literally crawled and climbed over the whole ruined body of the city’ (though Byron ‘crawled and climbed’ over other bodies).77 Furthermore, Ruskin uses this attention to physical detail to distinguish himself, to set himself apart from, previous writers on Venice. Ruskin persisted despite considerable physical discomfort and public embarrassment: ‘covered with dust and cobwebs, I attained as I did to every tomb of importance in Venice’ (IX, 50). He was evidently a strange sight, as Effie Ruskin records in 1851:

> John excites the liveliest astonishment to all and sundry in Venice and I do not think they have made up their minds yet whether he is very mad or very wise. Nothing interrupts him and whether the square is crowded or empty he is either seen with a black cloth over his head taking Daguerrotypes or climbing about the capitals covered

77 Tanner, p.68.
with dust, or else with cobwebs exactly as if he had just arrived from taking a voyage with the old woman on her broomstick.\textsuperscript{78}

Ruskin is so close to the stones that he becomes as a ‘stone’ himself – ‘covered with dust, or else with cobwebs’, he seems to merge into the fabric of the capitals, cornices, buttresses and tombstones which he is describing. Such a physical examination of Venice was unheard of, hence the ‘liveliest astonishment’ with which everyone in the city reacted to his method of working. More particularly, Ruskin uses this detailed, physical method of research to define ‘his’ (moral) Venice as against all the previous ‘Venices’ that have been chronicled.

In the medieval city which Ruskin constructs, ‘piety towards God and justice towards man [were] at least the nominal purpose of every act and institution’ (X, 337). In a Gothic harmony like the architecture Ruskin so admires, the medieval Republic the art critic formulates is an uncorrupted voluntary theocracy. For Ruskin, this pure kernel of Venice is to be found on the island of Torcello, where the Republic’s first settlements were built. In a celebrated passage, where Ruskin moves in almost one sentence of unbroken prose from this desolate island of ruins to an affirmation of the majesty of God, he also questions and tests current populist versions of Venice:

…let him [the observer of Venice] not seek to estimate the wealth of her arsenals or number of her armies, nor look upon the pageantry of her palaces, nor enter into the secrets of her councils; but let him ascend the highest tier of the stern ledges that sweep round the altar of Torcello, and then, looking as the pilot did of old along the marble ribs of the goodly temple-ship, let him re-people its veined deck with the shadows of its dead mariners and strive to feel in himself the strength of heart that was kindled within them…(X, 38, my italics)

Ruskin desires the reader to move out of Venice’s secret council chambers and experience the city in the purity of its beginning. This rhetorical move is also a move away from the dark Venice of the leggenda nera towards the pure uncorrupted state that Ruskin postulates to replace it. Enough, Ruskin seems to shout, of this peering into the annals to uncover supposedly murky Venetian secrets, come with me to Torcello – feel the sea breeze on your

face, find the real Venice. This ‘real Venice’ is a city where worship of the true God was at the centre of all state functions, where:

….rose that ancient hymn, in the power of their gathered voices:
THE SEA IS HIS, AND HE MADE IT,
AND HIS HANDS PREPARED THE DRY LAND. (X, 38)

Ruskin ends this piece of ecstatic rhythmical prose with a quotation from Psalm 95, which is read at the culmination of the Church of England’s Morning Prayer service. Ruskin read it every day. Ruskin associates the early Venetian Christianity with the Reformed convictions of Anglican liturgy.

It is easy to fail to appreciate the radical break with the leggenda nera tradition that Ruskin performs in this work. For historians of the likes of Daru, Venice is from the beginning an alien and inhospitable place, doomed to its own exceptional and fated history. Not so with the Venice of Ruskin. Instead, he creates a Venice which, far from being alien, cold, and secretive, is exemplary in its holding of the demands of religion and justice in balance. Ruskin’s formulation explicitly takes issue with the history of Daru; in place of the cruel, secretive aristocracy which is the historian’s focus, Ruskin provides a model ‘Venetianness’ based around pure religion and justice. At times there is a very obvious clash of swords. For example, when discussing the character of Doge Michele Morosini in the third volume – one of Daru’s ‘villains’ – Ruskin is at pains to show that his research has involved tracing Morosini’s descendants, whose testimony Ruskin quotes to the detriment of Daru’s history. 79 Ruskin, referring to his own correspondence with Count Carlo Morosini, writes that: ‘His answer appears to me altogether conclusive as to the utter fallacy of the reports of Daru’ (XI, 84, my italics). Furthermore, Ruskin provides the entire letter from Count Morosini in his appendix, from which I quote:

It is our unhappy destiny that, during the glory of the Venetian Republic, no one took the care to leave us a faithful and conscientious history….I must tell you that the history of Daru is not looked upon with esteem by well-informed men; and…he seems to have no other object in view than to obscure the glory of all actions. (XI, 337)

For Ruskin to affirm this view places doubt on the whole conception of Venice in the public consciousness. The *leggenda nera* is shown to be about obscuring the truth, depicted as unconscientious and unfaithful. Daru is discredited as having unworthy motives; his history is an exercise in unbalanced reportage, unfairly blackening Venice’s name.

This is an overlooked and important part of Ruskin’s whole aim in *The Stones of Venice*. For many years, the focus from Ruskin commentators approaching this text has been on fantasy, myth, and displaced desire. Yet Ruskin’s clear and stated wish is that his writing challenge fantastical conceptions of Venice by providing the ‘true history’ inscribed in its stones. Like Darwin, another Victorian who spent a lot of his time clambering about among rocks, his desire is that the *material* record should speak for itself – hence the challenge mounted to the ‘histories’ of Daru and Byron. This involves a struggle for Ruskin, as part of him still finds it hard to jettison the romantic visions of his youth – witness the phantasmagorical vision of the city at the beginning of *The Stones of Venice*. Described as ‘a ghost upon the sands of the sea, so weak – so quiet, – so bereft of all but her loveliness’ (IX, 17), the fantastical Venice pictured here must dissolve as Ruskin engages with solid materiality. There is an evident tension in Ruskin’s writing as he battles with the ‘magical’ Venice within him, a Venice which sometimes re-emerges in flights of iambic prose shot through with ecstatic alliteration.

Ruskin’s dismissal (in Volume I of *The Stones*) of the Byronic version of the Faliero story has already been discussed. In Volume II, he engages with Byron’s Venice at greater length and with what must have been some difficulty for an admirer of the poet. What is essential for Ruskin is to clear away the clutter that has accumulated around ancient Venice as a result of the historians and writers of the *leggenda nera* tradition: ‘The Venice of modern fiction and drama is a thing of yesterday, a mere efflorescence of decay, a stage dream which the first ray of daylight must dissipate into dust’ (X, 8). Like Prospero’s masque in *The Tempest*, this ‘stage dream’ must melt into thin air. Contrary to the ‘thing of yesterday’, Ruskin’s Venice is a thing of now; once again, Ruskin is establishing his divergence from the
popular accounts of Venice that proliferated in the early nineteenth-century and showing his readers that he is on the cutting edge. His book both demolishes popular myths about Venice and re-establishes a new myth: medieval Venice as a worshipful, just, and pure Christian state. This demolition of populist versions of Venetian history involves a wholesale questioning of the core of Byron’s dark Venice:

No prisoner, whose name is worth remembering, or whose sorrow deserved sympathy, ever crossed that “Bridge of Sighs”, which is the centre of the Byronic ideal of Venice… the statue which Byron makes Faliero address as of one of his great ancestors was erected to a soldier of fortune a hundred and fifty years after Faliero’s death; and the most conspicuous parts of the city have been so entirely altered in the course of the last three centuries that if Henry Dandolo or Francis Foscari could be summoned from their tombs…..the mighty Doges would not know in what part of the world they stood. (X, 8-9)

Ruskin’s attack is focused on the romantic centrepieces of Byronic Venice – the Bridge of Sighs, the Rialto, the Faliero legend. It is strong and persuasive, and seems to strike at the heart of every naïve Grand Tourist gawping awestruck at the monuments to a past Venice that was never anything but a ‘Byronic ideal’. The destruction of this ideal is essential for Ruskin’s argument. It is important for Ruskin to present his Venice as material, detailed, and above all, accurate.

To this end, Ruskin is naturally scathing about the popular assumptions about Venetian cruelty to prisoners. One popular misconception centred around the piombi, the lead prisons in the Ducal Palace, which are mentioned in Romantic writers like Byron and Charlotte Dacre. Actually, says Ruskin, the prisons in the Ducal Palace were much larger and more comfortable than the popular view would have it:

I wish the reader especially to notice that a separate tower or range of apartments was built for this purpose, in order to clear the government of the accusations so commonly made against them, by ignorant or partial historians, of wanton cruelty to prisoners. The stories commonly told respecting the “piombi” are utterly false. Instead of being, as usually reported, small furnaces under the leads of the palace, they were comfortable rooms with good flat roofs of larch, and carefully ventilated. (X, 343).

The cramped torture-chambers of the leggenda nera have transmuted into a ‘range of apartments’, ‘comfortable rooms with good flat roofs of larch’, ‘carefully ventilated’. The key here is that Ruskin defines himself against the ‘ignorant or partial historians’ responsible for a
‘Byronic’ version of Venetian history with the emphasis on torture and cruel imprisonment – the essence of the *leggenda nera*. Not only was medieval Venice in no way ‘wantonly cruel’, argues Ruskin, but was often the apotheosis of this popular view: noble, just and merciful.

Ruskin even takes the trouble, in his appendix to the third volume, to quote from a letter by Giustiniani, the Venetian ambassador to the court of Henry VIII (a letter unearthed by Ruskin’s friend, the archivist Rawdon Brown) to demonstrate ‘the dignity which…remained in the character and thoughts of the Venetian noble’ (XI, 264). If, contrary to popular conception, even the aristocracy of the Renaissance were worthy of the title ‘noble’, then a wholesale revision of assumptions about Venice must be undertaken. Such a view, for Ruskin, is based on real history: ‘One fresh draught of such history is worth more than a thousand volumes of….suppositions’ (XI, 265). Contrary to the mass of contemporary historians and the fictive creators of the ‘dark’ Venice, Ruskin sees medieval Venice through the words of Doge Mocenigo – ‘first justice, and then the interests of the state’. To Ruskin, the Venice of the middle ages is a state where, by and large, justice is administered correctly – pushed out are the tales of dark cruelty, torture, false imprisonment, and murky secrets. When Ruskin’s detailed eye alights, in Volume II, on the allegorical figures of Justice inscribed on the thirty-sixth capital of the Ducal Palace, it triggers a spirited defence of the character of fifteenth-century Venetians:

The reader will observe that this capital is of peculiar interest in its relation to the much disputed question of the character of the later government of Venice. It is the assertion by that government of its belief that Justice only could be the foundation of its stability……Most modern historians would call it….nothing more than a cloak for consummate violence and guilt….But in the main, I believe the expression of feeling to be genuine. I do not believe, of the majority of the leading Venetians of this period……that they were deliberately and everlastingly hypocrites. I see no hypocrisy in their countenances. (X, 427)

Banished from Ruskin’s critical Venice are all the old stereotypes and preconceptions around a secretive and hypocritical nobility. Bearing in mind that Ruskin is talking here about fifteenth-century Venetians – the very century in which Ruskin dates the beginning of the city’s fall – then this is an even more radical attack on the *leggenda nera* than might appear at
first glance. Ruskin goes on to argue that even when the Venice of this era could be accused of injustice, it was largely a result of the malign influence of Roman Catholicism and he ends by suggesting that contemporary Irish juries could learn a lot from the Council of Ten. Popular ideas about Venetian government are based on myth: ‘if we examine, with critical accuracy, the evidence on which our present impressions of Venetian government are founded, we shall discover…that two-thirds of the traditions of its cruelties are romantic fables’ (X, 428). Strong words – but Ruskin is engaged here in consistently demolishing the leggenda nera in order to ‘rescue’ old Venice for his project. Alexander Bradley is right in arguing that Ruskin’s Italy is part of a new conception of the country in the English consciousness: ‘Ruskin can be seen as initiating a [new] stage in the English literary conception of Italy, reacting…against the earlier romantic excesses in favour of a more thorough scholarship and greater historical understanding’. To this end, Ruskin not only attempts a balanced history, referring to but not depending on the historians of the leggenda, but also at every stage demonstrates his own credentials by detailing the precise and material nature of his own examination of Venice’s stones.

Ruskin knew that this approach would be painful – both to himself and to his readers. On the origins of Venice he says this: ‘The reader may perhaps have felt some pain in the contrast between this faithful view of the site of the Venetian Throne, and the romantic conception of it we ordinarily form’ (X,14). In stripping away the pretences of romantic Venice, a certain amount of pain and confusion was bound to ensue. Ruskin knew this better than anyone; indeed, there is almost a visible conflict between the Ruskin who discovered Venice through the prism of Byron’s poetry and the detailed materialist chronicling with merciless ‘accuracy’ every one of the city’s buildings. The sentence just quoted above, for example, comes shortly after this piece of dreamlike prose, describing the approach to Venice before the coming of the railway:

….the strange rising of its walls and towers out of the midst, as it seemed out of the deep sea, for it was impossible that the mind or the eye could at once comprehend the shallowness of the vast street of water which stretched away in leagues of rippling

lustre to the north and south, or trace the narrow line of islets bounding it to the east. (X, 4)

Ruskin affirms the romantic conception that ‘the only way’ to approach Venice is by water, and preferably, as he makes clear, in ‘his gondola….into the open lagoon from the canal of Mestre’ (X, 4). Furthermore, this approach produces the effect of a dreamlike spirit-Venice (or Venus) rising out of the sea – an image Ezra Pound will make use of in the Cantos. Its walls and towers are ‘strange’, they seem to be organic forms, given birth to by the sea. The sea itself, a ‘vast street’ stretches away in ‘leagues of rippling lustre to the north and south’. The Adriatic encircling Venice becomes a mass of rippling surface glaze, dissolving into mere colour and shape. However much Ruskin presents his case for the real Venice, there is always a displaced ‘Unreal’ one waiting in the wings.

This Venice was one that stayed with Ruskin. Writing from the city on the 19th July 1869, he writes to his mother: ‘it is very like a dream, again, to me, this Venice – the fair sea and sky and listless motion, and being able to stop almost at any instant and walk into a place where there are Titians – or Bellinis – or Tintorets – one after another…..all precious’.81 The same elements seem to recur in this vision of the later Ruskin – the sea, the sky, the ‘listless motion’ of the waves. And again, Ruskin presents it like a dream – or could it be that the later Ruskin sees it return (‘it is very like a dream, again’) to its dream-essence after the years of configuring it as a place rooted in solid, historical materiality? Hard to tell. What is clear is that there is an obvious conflict between the two Venices described by Ruskin. Despite his obvious emphasis in The Stones of Venice on combating the leggenda nera and the romantic cliché of Venice, there is a part of Ruskin that is in danger of reverting to this myth himself. He cannot help succumbing to the power of Venice’s beauty. The question is whether his achievement is any the less because of this conflict.

And, bearing in mind the tendency of writers on Ruskin (and writers on Venice) to focus on this ‘dream-like’ city, should the material, historical Venice (the one which Ruskin proposes in place of the leggenda nera) be marginalised in favour of the fantasy? Ruskin,

81Bodleian Library, Western Manuscripts, Transcripts of Ruskin Papers, MSS. Eng Lett. c.37, p.114.
writing to Charles Babbage in 1850 (whilst *The Stones of Venice* was in production) described the first principle of taste ‘as….that which teaches us to distinguish learning from imagination. Imagination is in one word dreaming when one is awake – and there is every degree of it from dreaming to prophecy……healthy imagination being a waking dream used to proper advantage by the other intellectual powers – and Inspiration being the highest condition of the same faculty’. If what is ‘healthy’ in imagination is the use of dream in conjunction with the ‘other intellectual powers’, then perhaps Ruskin’s Venice can be seen an attempted negotiation between the Venice of the ‘Dream’ and the ‘learnt’ Venice of the historical record. Ruskin’s attempts to provide a material Venice to counter the murky Venice of the *leggenda nera* are always in conflict with a rootless dream of Venice, exemplified by the dissolving of the material city (and this was partly the case also with Byron) into sea, air, and mist – blue and white ‘listless’ shapes. Yet there is a need for the critic, as for Ruskin, to resist the pull of this dematerialised Venice. Ruskin’s Venice writes itself into the European consciousness in a context where traditional views of the city led to the predominance of murky fables and romantic misconceptions. In the context of 1848 and the Risorgimento, Ruskin’s rescuing of Venice could be read as a challenge to the complacent hegemony of foreign rule in Italy, positing, as it does, an alternative to the popular concept of the dark and despotic Venetian state.

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82 Bodleian Library, Western Manuscripts, Transcripts of Ruskin Papers, MSS. Eng Lett. c.33, p.28.
‘VIVA SAN MARCO’: VENICE, RUSKIN AND NATIONALISM

This chapter will attempt to place Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* in the context of the rise of revolutionary Nationalism, in particular the 1848 Venice revolution led by Daniele Manin. I will show that Ruskin’s early architectural work, *The Poetry of Architecture* (1837-38), with its topographical concerns, can be seen as related to Nationalist thinking. By examining comparisons and contrasts with other kinds of ‘Nationalist aesthetics’ (in particular Michelet’s work), this chapter will consider the impact of nineteenth-century Nationalism on the contours of Ruskin’s thought. In particular, the ‘new’ political identity of Italy and Venice will be shown to crucially inform the development of *The Stones of Venice*.

The chapter will go on to examine the text of *The Stones*, and will understand it as containing the tension of the ‘moment of 1848’. Although Ruskin arrived in Venice to start work on the project a few months after the surrender of the 1848 revolutionaries, critical opinion has tended to marginalise the importance of this event on the production of Ruskin’s book. This chapter examines the impact of the aftermath of the revolt on the development of Ruskin’s imagining of the city. Using the letters of Ruskin and his then wife Effie and contemporary historico-political material alongside the text, the chapter looks at Ruskin’s reaction to the Austrian occupation and his views on the revolutionary anti-Austrians in Venice. In the light of this material, a new reading of the work is attempted that places Ruskin’s ‘version’ of Venice in the context of revolutionary Italian re-imaginings of the city current during the period. In doing so, a politically more complex Ruskin is posited with regard to his engagement with Italy. Rather than seeing the critic as essentially a reactionary monarchist in his attitudes to contemporary Italy, the chapter will suggest that Ruskin’s experience of Austrian rule in Venice complicated his attitude to Republicanism and the Risorgimento struggle. The chapter will then go on to place Ruskin in the context of various Anglo-American responses to Venice in the period. Comparing his work with Charles
Dickens and William Dean Howells, I will suggest that Ruskin’s work conforms neither to the ‘dreamy’ Venice propagated by Dickens nor to Howells’s journalistic realism. In conclusion, the chapter shows how Ruskin’s later involvement with restoration projects in Venice was seen (by figures like Count Zorzi) as part of a Risorgimento Nationalist cultural renewal. In wider terms, the chapter posits a framework for understanding Victorian travel and tourism and attitudes to Italy; one that can absorb nuanced and conflicted attitudes to national identities and to the role of the ‘other’ in the nineteenth-century traveller’s gaze.

**Nationalism in *The Poetry of Architecture***

The similarities between Ruskin’s early work and contemporary Nationalist aesthetics can be seen clearly in his series of topographically focused meditations on the architecture of different nations. *The Poetry of Architecture*, written as a series of essays in 1837 and 1838, uses examples from Britain, France, Switzerland and Italy to shape a treatise on the relationship between building styles and national sentiment. A close analysis of *The Poetry of Architecture* will help us to see the development of an ‘aesthetic Nationalism’ in Ruskin which prefigures the specific concerns of *The Stones of Venice*. In Ruskin’s early theory, the ‘architecture of nations’ can be seen to have ‘strong similarity to, and connection with, the prevailing turn of mind by which the nation who first employed it is distinguished’ (I, 5). In other words, nations have distinctive ‘minds’ that in the ‘unity of feeling’ give rise to identifiable architectural styles. Ruskin deplores that,

> the science [of national architecture]… is at a miserably low ebb in England. And what is the consequence? We have Corinthian columns placed beside pilasters of no order at all, surmounted by monstrosified pepper-boxes, Gothic in form and Grecian in detail in a building nominally and peculiarly “National”; we have Swiss cottages falsely and calumniously so entitled, dropped in the brick-fields around the metropolis, and we have…square-windowed, flat-roofed gentleman’s seats of the lath and plaster, mock-magnificent, Regent’s Park description, rising in the woody promontories of Derwent water. (I, 6)

What horrifies Ruskin here is the inability in England to grasp ‘the science’ of ‘right’ national architecture. What is produced when this science falls to a ‘miserably low ebb’ are
monstrosities: the abomination of hybrid Greek-Gothic buildings, inauthentic Swiss cottages unnaturally ‘dropped’ into the suburbs, mock-classical mansions inappropriately sprouting out of the countryside. Ruskin sees this architecture as bastardised and ‘unnatural’; a kind of dilution and compromise of national purity. What is so horrible to Ruskin about these buildings is that they do not belong here, and are deemed inappropriate to the ‘unity’ of the British landscape. In other words Ruskin is positing here a kind of aesthetic Nationalism that assumes a harmony and continuousness in English architecture. Ruskin’s ‘comradeship’\(^1\) of architecture assumes deep, unified, national roots in opposition to foreign imports and bastardised mixtures. Notice Ruskin’s use of the phrase ‘peculiarly and nominally “National”’; the words imply that these Greco-Gothic styles are national only in name, and compromise rather than bolster national purity, or what Ruskin calls the ‘unity of feeling, the basis of all grace, the essence of all beauty’ (I, 8, my italics).

By contrast, ‘proper’ English cottages have a ‘finished neatness’ and are ‘pretty and appropriate’, whilst French gîtes possess an ‘air of nonchalance…a look of neglected beauty, and obliterated ornament’ (13). These differences are products of national character: whilst England ‘is a country of perpetually increasing prosperity and active enterprise’, ‘in France there prevail two opposite feelings, both in the extreme; that of the old pedigreed population, which preserves unlimitedly; and that of the modern revolutionists, which destroys unmercifully’ (14-15). Thus, in opposition to the ‘neatness’ in architecture emanating from the prosperous, active and disciplined English soul, French buildings have ‘partly the appearance of having been preserved with infinite care from an indefinite age and partly exhibit the evidence of recent ill-treatment and disfiguration’ (15).

Hence this national ‘feeling’ is evident in buildings that are typical of national character: in France, a dilapidated beauty and sublimity, in England an ordered neatness. Furthermore, these national characteristics are marked and defined by recent history, and two revolutions; it is, surely, the England of the Industrial Revolution appealed to in its

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\(^1\) To use Benedict Anderson’s phrase. See *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso 2006, 1\(^{st}\) edition 1983), p.3.
increasing prosperity and active enterprise’, and a France still marked by 1789 that ‘destroys unmercifully’. This use of history is also characteristic of the nascent Nationalisms of the nineteenth century, and is to be found in the historico-geographical concerns of figures such as Ranke, Michelet, Tocqueville and Burckhardt. The crises out of which the nineteenth century emerged forced a rethinking of history in which Burckhardt, Michelet, Tocqueville and Ruskin address themselves to a remoulding and reconsideration of European culture upon national lines. Ruskin’s concern in The Poetry of Architecture is to draw up the boundaries and borders of an aesthetic national consciousness.

Denis Cosgrove calls this Ruskin’s ‘imaginative mapping’, and suggests that Ruskin draws ‘upon a long European heritage of cosmographical and geographical images’ represented most clearly in the medieval mappa mundi. Whilst the medieval map imagines the realms outside of its chartable territory, Ruskin’s mapping, with its ‘strains of Romantic Nationalism’, imagines links between history, nationality and theology evident in the poetry of architecture. In the French buildings, Ruskin argues that ‘while the eye is pitying the actual humility of the present building, the mind is admiring the imagined pride of the past’ (17). Here, Ruskin’s architectural criticism parallels the project of Nationalism. Both imagine links and communities within unrecoverable pasts.

The French historian Jules Michelet’s interest in history similarly led him towards a ‘commerce with the dead’ that took on an increasingly Nationalistic hue. For Michelet, as Ceri Crossley has argued, Nationalism ‘came to replace religion as the centre of feelings of belonging and community’. The ideology of French Nationalism, Michelet found, embodied both the tropes of renewal and unity which had been the province of the Church. National history, in Crossley’s words, ‘came to possess its own spirituality and function as the source

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3 Ibid., p.87.
5 Ibid., p.196.
of moral life’. Like Ruskin, Michelet reacted to specific historical events. After the trauma of the Franco-Prussian War, Michelet imagined the French loss of Alsace and Lorraine as the amputation of a limb. France was ‘a national body whose circulation throughout is so rapid and complete that no separation of its parts can take place’.7

French national unity was also ‘organic’ and related to the natural world.8 Furthermore, using Pauline imagery, Michelet describes France as being reborn, having ‘put aside the old Adam’.9 But the nation is reborn not through the future, but through its past, which performs the task of unifying the country: ‘The great memories of the past, the grand traditions held in common…have drawn more closely and strongly our ties’.10 As might be expected, Michelet, like Ruskin, saw deep and fundamental differences between nations. Germans were too ‘mechanical’, Italy had no true unity.11 France, with its mysterious ‘fusion’ of Roman, Celtic and Germanic elements, was the pinnacle of perfect nationhood.

Ruskin, though no less a believer in the fundamental essences of nations, sees different qualities at work in the European countries. When Ruskin begins to describe Italy, he talks of a country ‘glorious in its death’, opposed to ‘prosperous in its prime’ England, and France ‘frivolous in its age’ (18). ‘Glorious’—in the sense that Proust, a great admirer of Ruskin, would later try to capture—because ‘no real beauty can be obtained without a touch of sadness’. Italy is thus ‘one wide sepulchre’, and ‘her present life…like a shadow or a memory’ (19). Yet this dormant, shadowy, crumbling country is for Ruskin the cause of great ecstasies of imagination:

Every part of the landscape is in unison; the same glory of mourning is thrown over the whole; the deep blue of the heavens is mingled with that of the everlasting hills, melted away into the silence of the sapphire sea; the pale cities, temple and tower, lie gleaming along the champaign; but how calmly…they are voiceless as the city of ashes. (19-20)

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6 Ibid., p.187.
7 Jules Michelet, France Before Europe (London: Smith, Elder & Co 1871), p.98. This corporal imagery anticipates the rhetoric of Fascist Nationalisms. Mussolini, for example, would describe Italy as a ‘body’ being healed by Fascism.
8 Ibid., p.97.
9 Ibid., p.109.
10 Ibid., p.90.
11 Ibid., p.60.
Whilst Italy is in ‘mourning’ – a ‘city of ashes’, ‘voiceless’ – it is also glorious, ‘gleaming’, and clothed in ‘deep’ colours. It is a ‘mixture of grandeur and desolation’. But, in The Poetry of Architecture, it is a ‘grandeur’ that only seems possible through ruin. It is the ‘beauty of [Italy’s] remains’ that captivates; ‘in Italy…everything ought to point to the past’ (28, 114).

Ruskin’s concerns were shared with many Victorian travel writers, who were predisposed to view the South as ‘in decline’ and visited it with biblical prophesies of destruction in their minds. Yet the language of Ruskin, with its view of the ‘dreamy sleep of Italy’s desolation…her sweet silence of melancholy’ (28) also shares the tropes of European Nationalisms which began to see themselves as ‘awakening from sleep’. Nineteenth-century Nationalism in Europe, whether Greek, Italian or German, was marked by doubleness, as it both reclaimed the past while using the rhetoric of future rebirth. It is in this sense that Ruskin’s language seems to inadvertently mirror the figurations of Nationalist politics, providing an image of ‘dreamy sleep’ whilst pointing to the ‘dignity’ and glory of the Italian past.

Ruskin is also more sympathetic to the Italian character than might be expected. The Italian is ‘full of imagination and emotion’, and his character – ‘sweet and smiling in its operations, deep and silent in its emotions’ (95, 114) – is intrinsically linked to history. Thus the Italian villa ‘must be imbued with its national feelings…we must have high feeling, beauty of form, and depth of effect, or the thing will be a barbarism’ (95). The best of Italian architecture is associated with an ‘entire simplicity’ – one of Ruskin’s chief examples is Petrarch’s villa at Arquà – that ‘carries our thoughts back to the ancient system of Italian life’ (108, 114).

The irony is that for Ruskin every sign of present decay leads him back to an imagined glorious past; this very image of returning is one that is central to the rhetoric of nascent Nationalism. Whilst this was far from his mind, the thoughts displayed in The Poetry of Architecture demonstrate a topographically-tuned consciousness that seems to parallel the

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13 Anderson, p.195.
Ruskin’s impression of a typical Italian village as detailed in *The Poetry of Architecture* (1837-8).
language of political Nationalism. The idea of buildings and landscapes being imbued with an innate national (and political) ‘feeling’ – Ruskin says of ‘woody country’ for example that ‘the whole character of the scene is calculated to excite conservative feeling’ (69) – is mirrored in the wider context of European Nationalist sentiment. Mazzini, for example, believed that ‘God had divided humanity into distinct groups,… intermediary between the individual…and the vastness of humanity’.\(^\text{14}\) Nationalism was ‘an attitude, a feeling, an emotion’ that could be triggered by race, geography or architecture.\(^\text{15}\) Nationalism also created strange and unexpected links; the narratives of the Tory Walter Scott, for example, provided inspiration for French Nationalist thinkers like Augustin Thierry, which later fed into the cultural context of the Italian Risorgimento. In Thierry’s reading of Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, a story of Anglo-Saxons and Normans in post-Conquest England, he praised the Scottish writer’s sensitivity to ‘the different races of men who fused to gradually form the great nations of Europe’, and saw in Ivanhoe a return to European ‘ethnoracial’ origin points with primal divisions between people groups.\(^\text{16}\) The European Nationalist reading of Ivanhoe saw it as a ‘story of blood and land, of antecedence and memory’.\(^\text{17}\) Such strange connections are best explained, in Alberto Banti’s terms, by seeing Nationalisms not as operating in a ‘complete space’ but as a ‘discursive continuum’ in which historiographic narratives like those of Scott operate.\(^\text{18}\) If we apply this paradigm to Ruskin, we see that much of his rhetoric – with a firm belief in the intrinsic nationality of architecture and landscape, and the clear division of peoples – can be seen as attached to this Nationalist continuum.

This theme, developed in *The Poetry of Architecture*, is clearly seen also in Ruskin’s discussion in ‘The Nature of Gothic’ chapter of the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*:

I have never yet seen any [map] pictorial enough to enable the spectator to imagine the kind of contrast in physical character which exists between Northern and Southern

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., p.2.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., p.38.
\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., p.39.
countries…we do not enough conceive for ourselves that variegated mosaic of the world’s surface which a bird sees in its migration, that difference between the district of the gentian and of the olive which the stork and the swallow see far off, as they lean upon the sirocco wind. Let us, for a moment, try to raise ourselves…above the level of their flight, and imagine the Mediterranean lying beneath us like an irregular lake, and all its ancient promontories sleeping in the sun: here and there an angry spot of thunder, a grey stain of storm…but for the most part a great peacefulness of light, Syria and Greece, Italy and Spain, laid like peaces of golden pavement into the sea-blue, chased, as we stoop nearer to them, with…beaten work of mountain chains, and glowing softly with terraced gardens, and flowers heavy with frankincense, mixed among masses of laurel, and orange, and plumy palm…Then let us pass further towards the north, until we see the orient colours change gradually into a vast belt of grainy green, where the pastures of Switzerland, and poplar valleys of France, and dark forests of the Danube and Carpathians stretch from the mouths of the Loire to those of the Volga, seen through clefts in grey swirls of rain-cloud and flaky veils of the mist of the brooks, spreading low along the pasture lands: and then, farther north still, to see the earth heave into mighty masses of leaden rock and heathy moor, bordering with a broad waste of gloomy purple…and splintering into irregular and grisly islands amidst the northern seas, beaten by storm and chilled by ice-drift… (X, 185-7)

What this passage demonstrates is the intensely topographical and national quality of Ruskin’s thought. Not only are the colours of Southern Europe different, but the character is too: Italy, Spain, Greece and ‘Syria’ ‘sleep’ in the sun, their flowers are ‘heavy’ and the whole atmosphere is one of ‘peacefulness’. In contrast the landscape of the north is ‘gloomy’ ‘leaden’, splintered and ‘grisly’. This heightened sensitivity to national character caused Ruskin to sometimes bemoan his own land’s attributes. Effie Ruskin records that in 1848 Ruskin ‘did nothing but abuse every place [in Scotland] one after another’, that his great love was ‘for the continent’ and that he ‘allows [England] to be beautiful in its way but grumbles about the want of hills’. Even in ‘The Nature of Gothic’ there is something of ‘melancholy’ in these northern lands – Ruskin was rehearsing, in this flight of imaginative prose, his argument for the ‘rightness’ of the ‘rude, savage’ character of Gothic architecture for the culture of northern Europe (and Britain), and Venice’s central place as axis mundi. But such prose also has Nationalist implications, for in this passage countries are divided by landscape as well as culture, the ridges and mountains of Europe keeping nations complete in their distinctive orbits.


\[20\] This idea is Denis Cosgrove’s. Cosgrove, p.23.
Ruskin and the Aftermath of 1848

Tony Tanner has argued that ‘Few readers of The Stones of Venice…would realise that it was written immediately after and in the very manifest wake of the longest and initially most successful of the republican risings of 1848’. I shall argue, to the contrary, that The Stones of Venice should be seen as forged out of the context of the aftermath of the revolution of ’48. Ruskin’s descriptions of Venice certainly appear to have been received in this context when they appeared in Britain in the 1850s. The Builder magazine of December 1851, for example applauds Ruskin’s work and proclaims that ‘History, poetry and art, have given associations to Venice which cannon-balls cannot destroy’ (my italics), laments that the ‘ancient beauty’ of Venice will fade, ‘arrangements having been made by the Austrians to effect [its] destruction’ and recalls a recent visit to Venice where soldiers ‘with fixed bayonets’ were stationed in the Fenice. This atmosphere of violent tension, conflict and desecration caused by the military occupation of Venice weaves its way into the undercurrents of Ruskin’s prose in the text of The Stones.

Ruskin has also been seen as a consistently anti-Republican and conservative writer. Tim Hilton, for example, describes the Ruskin of 1849 as ‘[taking] the Austrian side’ in Italian politics and being ‘vehemently’ anti-revolutionary. However, evidence suggests that a more complicated and sophisticated reaction to Italian revolutionary Nationalism can be inferred from Ruskin’s writings. By examining this evidence in detail, we will be able to recover new contexts for a reception of Ruskin’s view of Italy, and particularly the phantasmagoric ‘ghost upon the sands of the sea’ – the city of Venice.

Certainly by the time of Praeterita (Ruskin’s autobiography) the critic fondly remembers Mazzini and is enormously proud of the Italian Nationalist’s admiration for his work (XXXV, 44). ‘I love Mazzini’, he wrote in a letter of May 1864 (Letters, XXXVI, 473).

And in 1850, Ruskin went to see the rabble-rousing renegade Nationalist monk Gavazzi preach in London (Letters, XXXVI, I, p. 109). Such actions suggest a picture of Ruskin more in tune with the pro-Italian sentiments at large in London, where Mazzini and Garibaldi were feted and a ‘Venice and Rome Emancipation Fund’ collected money for the Nationalist cause.²⁴ Poets like Charles Swinburne, Walter Savage Landor and Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (whose verse Ruskin admired) drew attention to Italy’s plight. Landor’s 1853 verse, ‘To Mazzini’, imagined an Italy where the grass ‘shall spring agen’ and ‘The Gods, who frown on Italy, will smile/ As in old times, and men once more be men’.²⁵ Robert Browning’s ‘The Italian in England’ of 1845 was narrated by a fugitive from Lombardy, where ‘Austria, hounding far and wide/ Her blood-hounds thro’ the country-side,/ Breathed hot and instant on my trace’. The run-away revolutionary meets a peasant girl in the Italian countryside who, with her ‘calm simplicity of grace’ is an embodiment of ‘Italy’s own attitude’. But the poem has a violent, radical edge, as the fugitive imagines strangling Metternich until the ‘blood [runs] thro’ these two hands’, and the last verse ends with a call to action: ‘So much for idle wishing – how/ It steals the time! To business now!’²⁶

Robert and Elisabeth Barrett Browning – with their emphasis on an ‘Italy enchained’²⁷ – were engaged positively in the politics of Italian independence. Living in Florence, the two poets resisted the standard reaction of panic to the rise of revolutionary Nationalism. Robert Browning wrote in October 1847:

Of one matter, which looks formidable in the English papers, you need have very little fear indeed. One would suppose to read some of these accounts…that we were in open insurrection with the horrors of mobs, riots, noisiness and dangers: while there is not a symptom of anything of the kind – indeed there is no mob in this admirably civilised country…we certainly find it very delightful to be in Italy just at this time, when it is so thoroughly alive [my italics] – and our pleasure will not be greatly diminished if all these rumours operate as they are said to do in keeping away the floods of travellers.²⁸

To Browning, then, there is a frisson of ‘delight’ from staying in Italy during the revolutionary upheavals. Not only does Browning contradict the reports coming in that Italy was in a state of ‘open insurrection with the horrors of mobs’, instead claiming it to be ‘admireably civilised’; he also sees the political activity in a positive light, because Italy is ‘thoroughly alive’. Rather than the dead ‘sepulchre’ of ruins and monuments, the possibility of a ‘new Italy’ is being suggested here – and one, furthermore, free from the ‘floods’ of tourists that normally characterise it. The possibility of political change, radical instability, and the overthrowing of governments provide the Brownings not with the impetus to leave, but with a heightened, more intense experience of the country. This politically aware, intense, authentic experience furthermore delineates and marks them apart from other ‘tourists’, making their kind of travelling unique and bold. Browning writes in April 1848:

The cowardly English are leaving the place – infinitely to the satisfaction of the less mouse-hearted who stay, not being frightened at their own shadows…All the excitement and busy sense of life does Ba [Elizabeth Barrett] good.29

By contrast, Ruskin’s more complicated reaction to Italian independence may be seen to have developed gradually, and is at times contradictory. His 1845 tour of Italy – chronicled in a series of letters to his parents – seems to have been important in the development of an intricate response to the growth of Italian Nationalism. As he moves through southern France, Ruskin expresses his admiration for the King of Sardinia and his distaste for the cause of Italian liberation: ‘heaven bless him – and confound the republicans’.30 However, an appreciation of the damage foreign occupation was doing to Italian art treasures opens his eyes to the political and cultural suffering of what Elisabeth Barrett Browning had called an ‘Italy enchained’. In Tuscany he describes how half of the church facades in Lucca ‘have been destroyed by the Godless, soulless, devil hearted and…brute brained barbarians of French’ (though, of course, this may demonstrate more anti-French prejudice than pro-Italian

29 Ibid., p.101.
sympathy). Yet by the time he moves into Austrian-occupied northern Italy, he feels the need to write to his father ‘to explain what I meant … that I was getting more republican’ (my italics), and that he was ‘getting sadly shaken in my love of despotism … the Austrians here are a very millstone about the neck.’ This by no means suggests that Ruskin was always benignly inclined towards the Italian population, described to his father as ‘a nation of malignant idiots’, though he considered Venetians ‘[f]ar superior to the rest’. If Ruskin regularly succumbed to racial prejudice against Italians, he also believed that ‘they were not made to live under either emperors or kings’. Yet it is unclear what kind of republic – if indeed he imagined a republic – Ruskin envisaged for Italy.

It is in Venice that he sees the most extreme damage done by Austrian rule. Indeed the ‘fearful dilapidation’ is so upsetting to Ruskin that he cannot sketch without tears in his eyes – ‘Tyre was nothing to this’. There is also some sympathy for the Venetian people – imagined as an ‘exhausted and cruelty hardened brute’ suffering under the Austrian yoke.

This reading of Ruskin’s engagement with Italy, with its complex appreciation of politics and consciousness of modernity places the writer as part of a ‘new wave’ of Victorian thinking on the peninsula. This ‘new wave’ parts company with the romantic conceptions of the country formed by poets like Byron, and Gothic novelists such as Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole. Alexander Bradley describes such writers as ‘reacting…against the earlier romantic excesses in favour of a more thorough scholarship and greater historical understanding’. This ‘new’ literary Italy is more subtle in its appreciation of history and politics, and distances itself from romantic cliché.

Ruskin’s increasingly nuanced sense of Italy was far from the solidly cautious and conservative ideals of his Tory, Scottish Presbyterian mother and father. During John and his then wife Effie Ruskin’s stay in Venice in 1849, Ruskin’s father John James worries about

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31 Italy, p.51.
32 Ibid., p.186.
33 Ibid., p.194, 208.
34 Ibid., p.129.
36 Ibid., p.234.
Effie rowing in foreign waters, and is concerned that ‘the Ladies walk in St Marks Place without their Bonnets’. 38 Such fretting was typical of conservative fears about the louche life of the continent; in the same letter Ruskin senior writes that he cannot ‘entirely approve of having House…abroad yet. It sounds Byronish’. What was chief among John James’s concerns was that his son would be distracted from the research for *The Stones of Venice*:

> I trust the crowd of Tourists, Officers & artists that you will be in all the winter will not…interrupt your work & think you will really be enabled to deliver your Message fully & to give the world the story which Venice & Verona tell to your privileged Ear & Eye – It would be lamentable indeed to have the thoughts lost, the mind distracted & the hand hindered by the mere frivolities of a place…Pardon my anxieties – I will not call them fears for I have more & more trust in your firmness. 39

Given Ruskin’s intense preoccupation with research the whole time he was in Venice, John James’s ‘anxieties’ were of course unfounded. However, the picture of Venice as a ‘crowd of Tourists, Officers & artists’ provides a neat summation of British fears about Italy – the combination of vain pleasure seeking and political instability that made it both an attractive and frightening prospect.

Indeed, as the letters of John and Effie Ruskin testify, Venice in 1849-50 was a place of political tension – a tension that lends urgency and power to Ruskin’s engagement with Venetian history and architecture in *The Stones of Venice*. The Ruskins arrived for John to start work on *The Stones* in November 1849, only three months after the surrender of the short-lived reborn Venetian republic. The republic of Venice, faced with the armies of Napoleon, had voted itself out of existence in 1797. After a brief period under French control, it returned to the Habsangs and stayed Austrian until 22 March 1848, when Daniele Manin and his band of revolutionaries took over the Arsenal and drove out the occupying armies. Manin’s republic of St. Mark held out for a year and a half before starvation and disease forced its surrender to the Austrian army.

When the Ruskins appeared in the city, therefore, they arrived in a Venice very much marked by the events of the revolution and its aftermath. If they had entertained hopes of detaching themselves from the political instability that still marked Venetian society, they

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were quickly disappointed. The oppressed people of Venice continued to keep up a defiantly anti-Habsburg stance, and it was impossible for visitors to the city to remain unaffected by the situation. Even Effie Ruskin’s music lessons were politically charged, with her Italian music teacher expressing that,

he is sure I will play music in Heaven some day because I am Buonissima signora but he is in horror when I come to play with my black dress tied with orange – the Austrian colours. He once hinted that it ought to be burned.  

Effie had arrived in Italy adopting the pose of a convinced republican. In Milan, she wrote that ‘I am a thorough Italian here & hate oppression’. Yet when she got to Venice, the situation was more complex and she had no wish to shun the high society balls hosted by the Austrian officers based in the city. Socialising brought with it a new set of problems; along with their Austrian friends, the Ruskins also enjoyed the company of many of the established Venetian families. But the Ruskins found, to their consternation, that ‘here a Ball is a political measure’.  

Effie’s letters often show a confused attitude to the Austrian occupation and the revolution of 1848. For example, describing her friend the Austrian officer Paulizza, she writes on June 6 1850,

he is no common character, although you will not think this a proof of it when I tell you that it was he who directed all the bombs against Venice, but I suppose he cried about it every day but was obliged to obey.  

However, a year later, she details how Paulizza ‘did something against Venice very wonderful with Balloons’. The ‘something very wonderful’ was Paulizza’s involvement with the Austrian exploding bomb balloons, which wreaked havoc on Venice’s civilian population. Paulizza’s close friendship with Effie (he seems to have been romantically infatuated with her) brought with it social and political problems of which Effie at times seems naively unaware.

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41 Ibid., p.54.
42 Ibid., p.129.
43 Ibid., p.105.
44 Ibid., p.133.
The Ruskins’ engagement with the culture of the city – in terms of their personal contacts and friends – could not be divorced from the political tensions that hung in the Venetian air. Society in Venice was polarised around entrenched Italian-Austrian mutual suspicion. Venice’s main square, San Marco, was famously served by two cafes – one of which, Quadri’s, catered for Austrians; the other, the more celebrated Florians, served Italian customers. Society events – often organised by top Austrian generals – were marked by a sort of voluntary apartheid on the part of the Venetians. After a visit to the Ruskins’ friend, the historian Rawdon Brown, Effie writes that he ‘knows and visits with all the best Society, but he says there will be no visiting this winter as the Italian families won’t come back’. When the Ruskins meet the Austrian general Radetzy, based at Verona, he insists with determined stubbornness on hosting social events despite the Italian veto on any Austrian-organised parties. He tells them that ‘he should give dinners…and if no one came his Officers should eat them. He should also give Balls and if the Italian ladies would not come his Officers should waltz together’.  

But the political situation in Venice affected more than just the logistics of hosting high society balls. John and Effie were constantly shocked by the levels of mutual antipathy in the Austrian and Italian parties – an antipathy which often erupted into violence. Effie Ruskin blithely laughs off Paulizza’s remark that he ‘should not be averse’ to sending ‘a few [cannon]balls’ into a family of Venetian patriots who visited the Ruskins in the summer of 1851. Yet it was more difficult for the Ruskins to be light-hearted about the actual outbreaks of violence which punctuated the couple’s stay in the city. On the 15 December 1849, Effie writes to her mother that her mind had ‘been filled with horror’ at the details of ‘a dreadful event’ that had occurred the previous day in Venice. An Italian who had been working at the Arsenal for 26 years had been sacked by the Austrian authorities, who promised they would find him new employment. But as time passed, ‘his family and himself were reduced to extreme distress and then to absolute starvation notwithstanding his many demands for

46 Ibid., p.154.
employment’. The man arrived again at the Arsenal to ask for work, but the Commandant took against his tone, telling him that ‘unless he used more temperate language he should have [no work]’. The Venetian then stabbed the Commandant and another Austrian officer, before killing himself. ‘It is all very dreadful and I fear very Italian,’ Effie writes.47 On another occasion, Effie records that an Austrian soldier ‘was stilettoed in the night by an Italian from jealousy as he saw the soldier walking with his sweetheart’. The unfortunate man ‘died instantly’.48

Certainly there continued to be acts of violent and non-violent resistance to the Austrians after the revolution of 1848, matched by what was often an authoritarian heavy-handedness in the Habsburg government. The lists of offences in this period recorded in the acts of government in the Venetian archives include (post 1857): ‘per intervento nel cimitero per onorare il…anniversario della morte di Manin’, ‘entering the cemetery to honour the…anniversary of Manin’s death’, ‘Offesa alla Maestà Sovrana’, ‘Offences against his Sovereign Majesty’ or ‘ai membri della Casa Imperiale’, ‘against members of the Imperial House’ and ‘possesso di oggetti incendiari e di scritti e stampati sovversi’, ‘possession of incendiary objects and of subversive writings and prints’. Examples of graffiti meticulously recorded by the Austrian police are: ‘più bella Venezia dìverra/ quando il suo Leone si destero’, ‘How beautiful Venice will become/ When her lion awakes’, and scrawled on the walls of the church of the Santi Apostoli, ‘Papa, papa; all inferno/ le patate/ Un requiem eternam per l’Austria!’ ‘Papa, papa, to hell/ with the potatoes./ An eternal requiem for Austria!’ ‘Potatoes’ was Italian slang parlance for ‘Austrians’49.

Ruskin himself certainly disliked Habsburg pomp and the machinations of the Austrian imperial bureaucracy. On his way out of the Austrian-occupied Veneto in 1845, he writes with concern to his father ‘because I can’t tell whether you or Prince Metternich have

47 Ibid., pp.87-88.
48 Ibid., p.133.
49 Correr Library, Venice, Manoscritti Provenienze Diverse, Atti del Governo, MSS P.D. C.2361/VIII.
Ruskin’s anxieties are very much evident here in this letter to his father; sometimes it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the critic is more concerned about Venice’s stones than its people. However, there is genuine resistance to the heavy-handed Austrian military presence and its oppressive grip on Venice. When Ruskin actually glimpses the emperor from his window, he writes with contempt: ‘The emperor…and Radetzky went about together looking just like a great white baboon and a small brown monkey; a barrel organ would have made the thing complete’. 52 Effie Ruskin’s attitude appears on the whole more sympathetic to the Austrians, and she is helped by her knowledge of German, a language Ruskin describes in his letters as ‘that very disagreeable dialect’. By contrast Ruskin and his father found the ‘Lingua Toscana’ of Italian ‘inviting & beautiful’ and ‘refreshing to linger over its loveliness – its softness’. 53

Effie seems to have tolerated Ruskin’s hostile attitude to Austria on their Venetian trips:

He was so sulky at the whole thing [the emperor’s visit] and always is at every thing of the kind that it is rather amusing to hear his remarks, for I don’t mind his growling at all; it doesn’t do any body any harm. 54
By Ruskin’s own admission, the conservatism of Austrian society made him more ‘radical’
and sympathetic to Nationalist republicanism than he would have been in a different
environment:

I must mind and not get too sympathising with the Radicals – Effie says, with some justice – that I am a great conservative in France, because there everybody is radical and a great radical in Austria, because there everybody is conservative. I suppose that one reason why I am so fond of fish…is that they always swim with their heads against the stream. I find it for me, the healthiest position.  

It is certainly the case that Ruskin’s rage is provoked by what he sees as the degrading of Venice’s cultural monuments by the trappings of Austrian militarism. The near-sacred resonance of cultural artefacts in Ruskin’s mind seems to reinforce a religious/prophetic rhetoric of desecration as Ruskin witnesses the military colonisation of Venice’s beautiful architecture by the Austrian armies. Here the reader is witness to a persuasive rhetoric of outrage – no doubt fuelled by Ruskin’s own practical frustrations at being unable to resume his great project, The Stones. He writes to his father:

I get very angry every time I pass the guns in St Mark’s place, or the pontoons opposite it; and very much provoked – and indeed it is sufficiently tiresome… Wherever you go – where once there were quiet little gardens among ruins of island churches, there is now a Sentinel and a powder magazine – and there is no piece of unbroken character to be found anywhere. There is not a single shore…which has not in some part of it the look of fortification – or violent dismantling or renewing, for military purposes of some kind or another: and there is hardly an old convent window out of which you will not see a Croat’s face peeping.

It seems that this rhetoric of outrage is given further impetus by the fact that many of the buildings Ruskin wishes to gain access to are religious. In the extract quoted above, the ‘Sentinel and powder magazine’ have colonised the quiet, meditative space reserved for the ‘quiet little gardens’ and the ‘ruins of island churches’. Similarly, the ‘old convent window’ has now ‘a Croat’s face peeping’ out. Again, this confrontation with a military presence (Croatian soldiers formed a large part of the Austrian army) is jarring in this religious space. Despite his hostility to the Roman church – he writes, for instance, to his father that ‘one cannot act with the Austrians because they are everywhere maintaining Roman Catholicism’–

55 Letters from Venice, p.60.
56 Letters from Venice, pp.60-61.
Ruskin, as we have seen, viewed the religion of Byzantine and early medieval Venice as representing a purer kind of spirituality.\(^{57}\)

**Nationalism and *The Stones of Venice***

The atmosphere of post-revolutionary Venice under Austrian occupation was not only evoked by Ruskin in his letters and diaries, it also informs the text of *The Stones of Venice*. The following descriptive passage, the pre-amble to Ruskin’s chapter on St. Mark’s in the second volume of the *Stones*, and one of the key moments in the book, seems shot through with the anxiety of the ‘moment of 1848’:

> Round the whole square in front of the church there is almost a continuous line of cafes, where the idle Venetians of the middle classes lounge, and read empty journals; in its centre the Austrian bands play during the time of vespers, their martial music jarring with the organ notes – the march drowning the Miserere, and the sullen crowd thickening round them – a crowd, which if it had its will, would stiletto every soldier that pipes to it. (X, 84)

Particularly arresting here is the description of the ‘sullen crowd’ thickening around the Austrian band, the possibility of violence about to burst out into the square. Similarly, the Austrian martial music clashes and competes with the sacred space of the cathedral and the ‘organ notes’ of vespers; the spiritual music is ‘drowned’ in the military march. Whilst the Venetian masses, pictured here as ‘sullen’ and ‘idle’, do not receive Ruskin’s sympathy, it is clear that the Austrian music, with its ‘jarring’ tones, is perpetrating a kind of ‘violation of holy ground’ in his mind. Given the attitude of Ruskin to the Austrian occupation that is evident from other parts of his writings, this passage seems further proof that he saw the military forces – with their music that ‘jars’ and ‘drowns’ out the spiritual – as what might be termed an ‘abomination of desolation standing where it ought not’. The phrase is from St. Mark’s gospel and seems apposite for Ruskin’s biblically-tuned brain; the critic seems to have

\(^{57}\) Ibid., p240.
seen Venice as a kind of cultural ‘Holy Land’ whose dilapidation produced in him extremes of emotion.  

By contrast, Ruskin pictures the Venetian middle classes, lounging with their ‘empty journals’, as embodying a vapid mental and physical inertia. This was not the case during Venice’s revolution of 1848. Marx had famously and dismissively termed the French upheavals of that year ‘bourgeois revolutions’ in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, and many of the protagonists of Venice’s uprising, including Daniele Manin himself, were middle class professionals. Ruskin seems to discount them out of hand, his attention moving towards the massed working-class crowd. As Effie Ruskin’s letters testify, Ruskin probably feared a real threat when he described this crowd ‘thickening around’ the band, ready to ‘stiletto’ the soldiers.

As well as the hostility towards Austria displayed by the Venetian populace, Ruskin expresses his own personal concerns with the Austrian occupation in *The Stones of Venice*. His attempts to record in detail the architectural fabric of the city are often hampered by the paraphernalia of Habsburg rule. In the second volume of his work, for example, a detailed examination of a capital on the exterior of the Ducal Palace is hampered ‘because the pillar is encumbered by the railing which surrounds the two guns set before the Austrian guard-house’ (X, 422). Ruskin had encountered these problems before whilst touring Italy in 1845. In a letter from Venice to his father on 10 September of that year, he records his frustration at not being able to properly examine the Ducal Palace:

> The area [around the palace] is already <surrounded> on one side barred by iron railings of this pattern [Ruskin then draws them] the heads being painted orange yellow, the rest *black*, austrian colours.

Ruskin’s politics were complex. The evidence, however, refutes any idea of a simple pro-Austrian stance. In another letter written from Venice in 1845 he talks of the Austrian colours of black and yellow being like a dreaded ‘distillation of coffins and jaundice’. It is true that

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58 For more on Victorian travel and ‘holy lands’, see PEMBLE, The Mediterranean Passion.
59 *Ruskin in Italy*, p.199.
60 Ibid., p.200.
in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* he briefly exoneration the occupation on the basis that he never did ‘witness an instance of oppression on the part of the Government’ (XI, 254), but in the same passage he goes on to criticise Austria’s treatment of the city, ending with a lament for the fate of the cultural treasures of the Italian peninsula: ‘it is strange…to see Italy, with all her precious works of art, made a continual battle-field’ (XI, 255). This destruction had severely affected him on the 1845 visit. Judging from one 1845 letter, it was in part the dilapidation caused by Austrian rule that brought him back to the city for the visits that produced *The Stones of Venice*: ‘I have seen the extent of the present evil & made up my mind to it. How much of Venice may remain when I come back is another affair.’

This context is a cause of much of the urgency which affects *The Stones of Venice*. If Ruskin could write, as he did to W.L. Brown in 1849, that in Venice he was ‘altogether petrified, and have no heart nor eyes for anything but stone’ (XXXVI, I, p.104), it was surely what he calls the ‘sorrow’ of the present situation that fired the energy he directs into his descriptions of the buildings of Venice.

The revolutions of 1848 had already turned his thoughts towards the development of Gothic architecture. The revolts had prevented him travelling to Switzerland and resuming his work on *Modern Painters*. Instead, restrictions on travel had ‘driven’ him ‘into Normandy’ (letter to John James Ruskin, 15th February 1852, XXXVI, I, p.132) and from there to the *Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, where he would develop his theory of Gothic architecture. And in Venice too he was to be driven further and further into the detail of his work by contemporary events and his consciousness of national sentiment.

In the chapter on St. Mark’s, Ruskin begins not in Venice, but in an English cathedral town:

Let us go together up the more retired street, at the end of which we can see the pinnacle of one of the towers [of the cathedral] and then through the low grey gateway, with its battlemented top and small latticed window in the centre, into the inner private-looking road…where nothing goes in but the carts of the tradesmen who supply the bishop and the chapter, and where there are little shaven grass-plots, fenced in by neat rails, before old-fashioned groups of somewhat diminutive and excessively trim houses… (X, 78)

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61 Ibid., p.219.
Immediately here, Ruskin brings out what he had called in *The Poetry of Architecture* the ‘finished neatness’, the ‘pretty’, ‘appropriate’ feeling of English architecture. The town is evoked as a place of polite formality, as Ruskin cautions his reader and imaginary tourist to ‘[take] care not to tread on the grass’ whilst approaching the cathedral. He had contrasted such English privacy and formalism unfavourably with Italian culture in a letter to his father from Venice in 1852, where he had found that ‘there is one point of the Italian character which is very pleasing…: the entire freedom with which they throw open their pleasure grounds to any one who likes to use them’ (letter of 6th June 1852, XXXVI, I, p.140). Ruskin means to draw contrasts, to define lines between nations and their aesthetics:

Think for a little while of that [English] scene, and the meaning of all its small formalisms, mixed with its serene sublimity. Estimate its secluded, continuous, drowsy felicities, and its evidence of the sense and steady performance of such kind of duties as can be regulated by the cathedral clock…And then let us quickly recollect that we are in Venice, and land at the extremity of the Calle Lunga San Moisè, which may be considered as there answering to the secluded street that led us to our English cathedral gateway. (X, 80)

Ruskin does what no tourist guide can do in reality, leaping in one instantaneous bound between geographical spaces to consider the English and Venetian scenes simultaneously:

We find ourselves in a paved alley, some seven feet wide where it is widest, full of people, and resonant with cries of itinerant salesmen, – a shriek in their beginning, and dying away into a kind of brazen ringing… (80)

Although this appears at first to be an indictment of the Venetian scene compared to the pleasant English town – with Venice’s raucous clatter, ‘dense’ shops, ‘inextricable confusion’ of ‘rugged balconies’ – there is also a sense of excitement. There is a ‘life’ in the crowds and confined spaces absent from the sleepy English scene. Above all this is a change from stasis to movement, from somnolence to confusion.

Ruskin is sensitive and responsive to the human, contemporary life of Venice. This is most evident in his comments about the Bocca di Piazza at the corner of St. Mark’s Square, where,
...the Venetian character is nearly destroyed, first by the frightful facade of San Moisè and then by the modernising of the shops as they near the piazza, and the mingling with the lower Venetian populace of lounging groups of English and Austrians. (82)

Ruskin wishes to move quickly past this crowd to get to the architectural splendour of the cathedral of St. Mark’s itself: ‘We will push fast through them into the shadow of the pillars…and then we forget them all’ (my italics). Ruskin’s actions here – pushing past, forgetting – suggest that, rather than being oblivious to the contemporary context, he is reacting strongly to the messy and politically complex situation of contemporary Venice.

As with the later description in the ‘St. Mark’s’ chapter of the massed Venetian crowd and the Austrian military band, it is not that Ruskin blithely ignores the realities of present-day Venice; rather, those realities are a partially suppressed energy which is increasingly diverted towards the stones, as ‘petrified’ Ruskin ‘pushes fast through’ human complexity to get there:

And then we forget them all; for between those pillars there opens a great light, and in the midst of it, as we advance slowly, the vast tower of St. Mark seems to lift itself visibly forth from the level field of chequered stones… (82)

Indeed, the great, lyrical descriptions of St. Mark’s itself could be said to contain the politically violent, disturbing atmosphere of the square:

The countless arches prolong themselves into ranged symmetry, as if the rugged and irregular houses that pressed together above the dark alley had been struck back into sudden obedience and lovely order, and all their rude casements and broken walls had been transformed into arches charged with goodly sculpture, and fluted shafts of delicate stone. (82)

Notice the militaristic timbre of this imagery – the houses ‘struck back into sudden obedience’, the ‘lovely order’. This tone continues as he describes St. Mark’s:

And well may they fall back, for beyond those troops of ordered arches there rises a vision out of the earth, and all the great square seems to have opened from it in a kind of awe…a multitude of pillars and white domes…a confusion of delight, amidst which the breasts of the Greek horses are seen blazing in their breadth of golden strength, and the St. Mark’s lion, lifted on a blue field covered with stars, until at last, as if in ecstasy, the crests of the arches break into a marble foam, and toss themselves far into the blue sky in flashes and wreaths of sculpted spray. (82-3)
The military language is still present here in the ‘troops of ordered arches’. Given that St. Mark’s square was full of real, Austrian troops, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this context is working its way unconsciously into Ruskin’s description of the cathedral. The last words quoted here, with their ecstatic tone, are often seen as sexual, and it is easy to see why. However, the images of power and military strength present a different set of questions. For, within the parameters of the text, the description of St. Mark’s seems to bring the reader into a moment of historical Venetian glory, revived in the living present: ‘the Greek horses are seen blazing in their breadth of golden strength, and the St. Mark’s lion, lifted on a blue field covered with stars’.

The language which Ruskin uses here to describe this ancient building was much in currency in Venice’s revolutionary period to express the revived political hopes of the contemporary city. A contemporary poem described how Venice, ‘Gema dall’ Adria il Veneto/…è stanco/ Dalle Austriache ritorte, il suo… Leone invoca, che rugghia sui mari’, ‘Jewel of the Adriatic/ …is tired/ Of twisted Austria. She invokes/ Her…Lion, who bellow across the seas’. 62 Indeed, the revived Lion of St. Mark was ubiquitous in revolutionary iconography of the 1848-9 period, jumping off buildings, attacking Austrian soldiers, or simply standing proud and rampant on the Republic’s flag. It would continue to feature prominently in the imagery of Risorgimento and later Fascist Nationalisms in the Veneto region. In one later nineteenth-century sculpture a lion stands attentive at the feet of Garibaldi and in another is framed by a pair of cannonballs.

The image of the revived ‘Republic of St. Mark’ also caught the imagination of the public in Britain. Although many commentators, like Ruskin, were ambivalent about Italian Nationalism, the Venetian Revolution caused particular excitement. The conservative leadership of the Times decided that they ‘would not entirely condemn’ the ‘passions’ of the Italian revolutionaries, and seemed pleased that ‘the Venetians have…proclaimed once more the ancient Republic of St. Mark, and Venice is herself once more’. 63 If there were anxieties

63 The Times, March 31st, April 4th, 1848.
This Risorgimento-era sculpture commemorates the 1848 resistance. The lion of St. Mark, the symbol of Venice, is surrounded by cannonballs commemorating the shelling of the city by the Austrian forces.
about the rise of revolutionary Nationalism, they were largely tied to fears of ‘mob’ insurrection at home, and the ever present Irish question:

Venice [aspired] to…the memory of the Republic that had been enthroned on the Adriatic. At such a time Ireland dreamed that she too had a separate history, and had a right to a distinct nationality,…fancied that she had had a Past which she could recall and recollections she ought to revive. Forgetting that her every element of greatness, her laws, her language, even the leaders of her political movement were of English origin and kin, she railed against English tyranny.64

Although criticism of insurrection was usually The Times’ stock-in-trade, Daniele Manin’s revolutionary Venice was largely exempt from negative reporting. Venice, wrote the paper, ‘of all the Italian States has shown in the past year a Spirit worthy of its name’.65 The ‘glorious defence’ of the Venetian Republic, furthermore, ‘has added another page of imperishable splendour to her history, and has shown the world that the ancient spirit of Italy has not departed for ever’.66 The Times was not the only conservative periodical to join the fray; even the sedate Gentleman’s Magazine described the onset of the revolt with evident excitement, describing how ‘the revolution triumphed [and] the provisional government…proclaimed the Republic, which was hailed by the Venetians with the cry of “Viva San Marco,” the former war cry of their ancestors’. 67

When the provisional government of Venice finally fell, The Times had this to say:

The heroic defence of the Venetians, the good use they made of their liberty, and the manner of their yielding, when it would have been madness to prolong the struggle against an overwhelming force, cannot but excite a strong sympathy and interest throughout Europe. From February 1848, till the present hour, there has been no popular movement conducted with so much dignity and maintained with such unswerving decision as that of Venice. The recent defence of the Queen of the Adriatic may add another page to a history in which many gallant deeds of war are chronicled to the admiration of posterity. We know of no example in history of a State – for Venice isolated amongst her lagunes is a State – which after so long a period of prostration … has risen from its torpor with such good effect. Venice and its inhabitants had almost become a by-word in Italy for softness and effeminacy. The Venetians were tacitly assumed to be the men that BECKFORD in his travels described some half a century ago. But never did a people vindicate their claim to be enrolled among the virile population of Europe with a more determined spirit.68

64 Ibid., April 30th, 1848.
65 Ibid., February 8th 1849.
66 Ibid., July 27th 1849.
68 The Times, 1st September, 1849.
William Beckford had visited Venice in 1780, in the last years of the old Republic; he declared Venetian society to be all ‘cards and stupidity’, lamented the ‘vile stench’ and scorned an all-female orchestra. It is as if, in The Times’ view, this new ‘virile’ population were reclaiming their ancient history, turning back the clock to the time of the height of Venice’s power, and overturning all the stereotypes a reader of Beckford might have imbued.

Dream or Life? Two Nineteenth-Century Responses to Venice

As we have seen, conservative anxieties about Nationalist self-expression and sympathy for Italy mingled uneasily in British responses to the Venice uprising of 1848. We can explore this background further by adding two other texts for consideration: one British and one American. I begin by examining the ‘dreamy’ Venice described by Charles Dickens before going on to look at the more journalistic approach undertaken by the American writer William Dean Howells. In Pictures from Italy (1846), Dickens is deliberate in his avoidance of Italian history and politics. Nonetheless there is a certain tension in his skirting around political subjects:

I make but little reference to that stock of information [the history of Italy]. Neither will there be found…any grave examination into the government or misgovernment of any portion of the country. No visitor of that beautiful land can fail to have a strong conviction on the subject, but as I chose when residing there, a Foreigner, to abstain from the discussion of any such questions, with any order of Italians, so I would rather not enter on the inquiry now.

The tension is evident in his assertion that no visitor to Italy ‘can fail to have a strong conviction’: what is Dickens’s conviction, and why won’t he tell us, we wonder? The status of ‘Foreigner’ seems to be one that Dickens reaches for to exempt him from expressing a judgment. Yet this strange vacuum around the political doesn’t prevent Dickens from describing great poverty when it attracts his eye. In Genoa, he writes of ‘the unaccountable

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filth…the disorderly jumbling of dirty houses, one upon the roof of another; the passages
more squalid and more close than any in…old Paris’ and the ‘disheartening dirt, discomfort,
and decay’ that everywhere ‘confounds’ him.71

Ultimately, this confusion seems to lead *Pictures from Italy* towards the familiar trope
of the dream. Whilst the status of the observed Italy – with its dirt, confusion and political
implications – continues to disturb and ‘confound’ Dickens, the ‘imagined’ Italy increasingly
takes on the quality of a pleasing fantasy. In other words, confrontation with ‘real’ Italy seems
to lead towards a breakdown in Dickens’ travel narrative, replaced with an increasing reliance
on the ‘half-formed dreams’ of the imagination:

At one moment, I was standing again, before the brown old rugged churches of
Modena. As I recognised the curious pillars with grim monsters for their bases, I
seemed to see them, standing by themselves in the quiet square at Padua, where there
was the staid old University, and the figures, demurely gowned, grouped here and
there in the open space about it. Then I was standing in the outskirts of that pleasant
city, admiring the unusual neatness of the dwelling-houses, gardens and orchards, as I
had seen them a few hours before. In their stead arose, immediately, the two towers of
Bologna: and the most obstinate of all these objects, fall to hold its ground…before
the monstrous moated castle of Ferrara, which, like an illustration to a wild romance,
came back again in the red sunrise…In short I had that incoherent but delightful
jumble in my brain, which travellers are apt to have.72

Dickens’s writing here may be fruitfully compared to the ‘Orientalist’ paradigm which
Edward Said has described. Said details the process by which nineteenth-century writers of
the ‘modern Orient’ like Nerval, Hugo and Goethe found themselves disorientated by real
societies which challenged dream constructions. These writers were then ‘[sent] back to the
imagination as a place preferable’, undergoing an ‘upsetting demystification of images’ in
their confrontation with the real Orient.73 Later, Said describes the Orientalist myth or dream
as ‘[displacing] life’, presenting ‘already assembled images, as a scarecrow is assembled from
bric-a-brac’.74 In this paradigm, then, a pre-existing template of ‘dream’ image exists to be
deployed by the Oriental traveller, while the ‘real’ geographical space causes disturbance.

71 Ibid., p. 320.
72 Ibid., p.362.
74 Ibid., p.312.
Dickens’s descriptions of Italy are related to this. In presenting a succession of Italian places as ‘dream’, Dickens avoids the unpleasant confrontation with the ‘actual’ space – witnessed in the ‘filth’ of Genoa. Significantly, Genoa provided Dickens’s first experience of Italy – as port of arrival – and from then on, the ‘dream’ trope becomes ever more prominent. The reality of Italy here is erased, replaced by the ‘incoherent but delightful jumble’ – a jumble incoherent in its patchwork of images, ‘delightful’ in its refusal to be rooted in reality.

Nowhere is this surrendering or submission to the dreamscape more evident than in Dickens’s chapter on Venice, a section that occurs shortly after the above-quoted ‘jumble’ passage. The chapter is written, not as a travel narrative, but entirely as the record of a fantasy. Dickens achieves this with a repetitive use of adjectives such as ‘dreamy’, ‘unreal’ and ‘ghostly’. The first sight of Venice, approaching by boat, is as ‘a cluster of tapers, twinkling and shining out of the water as the boat approached them by a dreamy kind of track’ – Venice here as trick-of-the-light, as will o’ the wisp. Venice’s streets are ‘phantom’ and the city itself is ‘ghostly’. Like Ruskin, Dickens is absorbed by St. Mark’s, calling it ‘a place of…surpassing beauty and…grandeur’. But in contrast to the meticulous reading of the church as cultural relic that Ruskin provides, Dickens soon reverts to a quasi-Orientalist fantasy. St. Mark’s brings to Dickens’s mind the ‘wild luxuriant fancies of the East’, and the church is ‘unreal, fantastic, solemn, inconceivable throughout’. This type of description ultimately denies the object its realness, reverting to tropes which figure the building as unreal, and, interestingly, ‘inconceivable’. Its ‘inconceivability’ thus places St. Mark’s – and Venice – beyond the reach of the traveller, allowing it to exist only in the realm of dream. The ‘real’ Venice is lost. Needless to say, any hint of the contemporary condition of Venice – the Austrian occupation and the undercurrents of revolutionary Nationalism – is buried far below the surface.

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75 Ibid., p.363.
76 Ibid., p.364, 365.
Dickens is also unlike Ruskin in his apparent capitulation to the myths of the leggenda nera. He visits the ‘dismal, awful, horrible stone cells’ of the Ducal prison and seems to find frisson in the idea that:

I had my foot upon the spot where, at the same dread hour, the…prisoner was strangled; and struck my hand upon the guilty door…through which the lumpish sack was carried out into a boat, and rowed away, and drowned where it was death to cast a net.\textsuperscript{77}

Such ghoulish speculation would have appealed to Dickens’s writerly imagination, of course. Yet it also demonstrates a willingness to assent to a popular fiction, or ‘dream’ of Venice. Everything in Dickens’s picture of Venice is presented through the prism of ‘I dreamt’, or ‘I fancied’; nothing is solid, everything melts into air. Dickens ends his chapter by writing:

Thus it floated me away, until I awoke in the old market-place at Verona. I have, many and many a time, thought since of this strange Dream upon the water: half-wondering if it lie there yet, and if its name be VENICE.\textsuperscript{78}

This final capitulation to the ‘strange Dream’ of Venice – where everything about Venice, even its name, are put to question – bears great similarities to the Orientalist ‘day-dream’ of colonialist fiction. As Said showed, such tropes attempted both to erase the actual, complex ‘Orient’ with dream-imagery, and to impose instead a pre-existing assemblage of clichés and myths – what Said calls ‘the notion of an Orient’. Dickens’s final descriptions of Venice do the same. They provide a vacuum for the image of Venice by leaving all to question under the rubric of the ‘Dream’, but also vaguely nodding towards some pre-established notions such as Venice’s ‘exoticism’, ‘mystery’ and ‘despotism’.

By contrast, the American writer William Dean Howells’s Venetian Life (1866) attempted to bypass popular myths and clichés and present Venice as it actually was, in its ‘every-day life’. Howells, who had been the U.S. consul in Venice, wrote that ‘I could not…dwell three years in the place without yearning to know it differently from those writers who have described it in romances, poems, and hurried books of travel’.\textsuperscript{79} Did Howells partly have Dickens in mind when he described the ‘hurried books of travel’? Possibly. Whilst

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p.369.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} William Dean Howells, Venetian Life (London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1891, 1\textsuperscript{st} edtn. 1866), p.10.
Dickens moves in and out of a clichéd Venice like an apparition, Howells is consistent in his desire to be distinguished from popular romantic writers. Like Ruskin, he distances himself from the *leggenda nera*, questioning,

That reputation for vindictive and gloomy cruelty alien historians have given to a government which endured so many centuries in the willing obedience of its subjects...At all events, I find it hard to understand why, if the Republic was an oligarchy utterly selfish and despotic, it was left to all classes of Venetians so much regret and sorrow for its fall.\(^8^0\)

Although Howells later criticised Ruskin’s architectural theories (particularly his belief in the absolute primacy of Gothic), the American author footnotes Ruskin’s work on the *leggenda nera*, and praises him for saying ‘in a few words, much better than I have said in many, the same thing of sentimental errors about Venice’.\(^8^1\) Howells, like Ruskin, pours scorn on popular fantasies about the ‘cruel machinery of the Serenest Republic’ and attacks the Byronic cult of the Bridge of Sighs.\(^8^2\) In Howell’s book, this contextual re-evaluation of Venetian history is a preamble to his description of the political tension in the contemporary city. Howells was in Venice at the tail-end of the Austrian occupation, and his book was published in 1866, just before the ceding of Austrian Venetia to the Kingdom of Italy.

Although Howells claims to speak ‘advisedly’, without wanting to ‘exaggerate’ the detrimental effects of Hapsburg rule, describing it as ‘improper...so long as the Austrians remain in Venice, to criticise their rule’\(^8^3\), he nevertheless appears to veil thinly an antipathy towards the occupation:

The causes of this change [in Venice’s fortunes] lie...chiefly (the Venetians would be apt to tell you wholly) in the implacable anger, the inconsolable discontent with which the people regard their present condition.\(^8^4\)

Indeed, Howells writes that he found the ‘political state’ of Venice ‘so disagreeable...to the stranger forced to live there’ that not to talk of the tensions caused by the

\(^8^0\) Ibid., pp.11-12.  
\(^8^1\) Ibid., p.14.  
\(^8^2\) Ibid., p.13.  
\(^8^3\) Ibid., p.19.  
\(^8^4\) Ibid., p.18.
occupation would be misleading.\textsuperscript{85} The Venice of the 1860s, even more so than when John and Effie Ruskin visited in 1849-52, was implacably divided between Austrian and Italian parties. ‘Neutrality is solitude’, writes Howells, and ‘to be seen in the company of officers is enmity to Venetian freedom, and in the case of Italians it is treason to country and to race’.\textsuperscript{86}

Howells did not see any intrinsic reason why Italians and Austrians should be so divided, assessing the situation as ‘purely political’. Furthermore, Howells perceived that there existed in Venice ‘a political machinery by which [hatred] is kept in a state of perpetual tension’. Howells’s attentive eye also notices the activities of revolutionary Nationalists, describing for example the:

Comitato Veneto…a body of Venetians residing within the province and abroad…who work in every way to promote union with the dominions of Victor Emmanuel…It takes care that on all patriotic anniversaries…salutes shall be fired in Venice, and a proper number of red, white, and green lights displayed.\textsuperscript{87}

As well as describing these obviously political activities Howells also, like the Ruskins, notices keenly the underlying tensions that affected Venetian society. He observes that ‘public demonstration[s] of content such as going to the opera, or to the Piazza while the Austrian band plays’ were severely discouraged by patriotic Venetians.\textsuperscript{88} Again like Ruskin, the acute division caused by the presence of the Austrian military band does not escape his attention:

The selections are usually from Italian operas, and the attraction is the hardest of all others for the music-loving Italian to resist. But he does resist it. There are some noble ladies who have not entered the Piazza, while the band was playing there, since the fall of the Republic of 1849.\textsuperscript{89}

Howells has a more naturally observational eye for human character than Ruskin, and with detailed sympathy he describes the various groups to be encountered in Venice, organised around the politically segregated café society. There are the young dandy Italians, ‘all well-dressed handsome men, with beards carefully cut, brilliant hats and boots, and conspicuously

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., p.20.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., p.21.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p.22-3.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p.24.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. 28.
clean linen’. These are the types who lounge around Florian’s, to be distinguished from the ‘order less wealthy’ that frequent the Caffè Specchi. Then, in the Caffè Suttil there are the ‘Italian codini, or old fowies, in politics: gray old fellows, who caress their sticks with…constant zeal’. Of course, Howells also notices the Austrian officers at the Caffè Quadri: ‘very comely, intelligent-looking people, with the most good-natured faces. They came and went restlessly, sitting down and knocking their steel scabbards against the tables’.  

Despite the attractive appearance of these Austrian officers, the military nature of the occupation was an ever-present reality. When Howells describes visiting the islands of the Venetian lagoon ‘with the bell-towers of demolished cloisters shadowly showing above their trees’, he notices how they have ‘been fortified by the Austrians, whose sentinel paces the once peaceful shores, and challenges all passers-by with his sharp “Hat! Wer da!” and warns them not to approach too closely’. As with Ruskin’s writing, the description here is of a peaceful, ancient, religious scene spoilt by the encroachment of militarism.

Howells often betrays a sympathy to the Italian republican cause and a sadness over the conditions of the occupation, writing that there is ‘that…in Italian fibre which I believe fits the nation for democratic institutions better than any other’ (my italics). In another passage, damning Italian stereotypes, he states that ‘as long as Garibaldi lives, I shall not let myself believe that a race which could produce a man so signally truthful and single-hearted is a race of liars and cheats’. Howells believed in Venetians, and found them ‘a people of indomitable perseverance’. Any negative traits were the result of ‘long ages of alien and domestic oppression’. He even allows himself to dream a little of the Serenissima: ‘I love Republics too well to lament the fall of Venice…And yet, Pax tibi, Marce!’ Howells, in 1866, concludes his book wishing a great future for Venice:

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90 Ibid., pp.74-76.  
91 Ibid., pp.219-20.  
92 Ibid., Vol.II., p.218.  
93 Ibid. I, p.31.  
94 Ibid., II, p.190.  
95 Ibid., p.237.
It remains for me to express a faith and hope in them for the future, founded upon their present political feeling, which...is no doubt with the great majority a high and true feeling of patriotism...The Venetians desire now, and first of all things, Liberty, knowing that in slavery men can learn no virtues, and I think them fit, with all their errors and defects, to be free now, because men are never fit to be slaves.96

‘Our Book’: Late Ruskin, Venice and the Risorgimento

Where might Ruskin be placed in this spectrum of nineteenth-century Anglo-American attitudes to Venice? As we have seen, his earlier work, including *The Stones of Venice* absorbed, if not a sympathy for, then at least a sensitivity to, the political and cultural project of Nationalism. In November 1866, he wrote to Lily Armstrong, affirming that ‘it is nice that Venice is free from the Austrians, but Venice and all Italy, are still enslaved to an emperor they know not of....For as our true monarch is not Victoria but Victor-Mammon – so theirs is Victor – ah – not Emmanuel – but Belial’.97 Such a comment does not, in my view, imply hostility to the Risorgimento project, but is rather an indicator of the profoundly religious bent of Ruskin’s mind as he surveyed a Europe set loose from its Christian moorings. Indeed, Ruskin’s engagement with Venice in the post-*Stones* period betrayed a continued interest in the city and a hope that it might be ‘saved’, as he actively involved himself in the cultural repositioning of Venice after the unification.

Ruskin’s campaign in the 1870s against what he saw as the misjudged restoration work on St. Mark’s led to his most active involvement in the culture of Venice of his entire career. His relationship with the Venetian aristocrat Count Piero Alvise Zorzi and his membership of the Società Veneta caused him to exclaim: ‘I am yours! I am at last a Venetian!’98 As early as 1869, whilst staying in Verona, Ruskin had written to his cousin Joan Severn in hope of his ‘future...Italian reformation’ – a plan to involve himself in carefully planned preservation of buildings and well-chosen social projects (he envisaged the same for Switzerland). Ruskin’s 1869 stay in the Veneto saw him begin in positive frame of

96 Ibid., p.238.
mind about Venice, remarking that the city ‘is far less injured than I feared and…I have far more pleasure in it than I expected’, and imagining the stone lions of St. Mark, with their sharp teeth and claws, getting up and walking about.\textsuperscript{99}

By the time of his 1876-7 visit, he was further entrenched in Venetian cultural projects, meeting frequently with Zorzi and other Venetian architects. To Joan Severn he wrote that he had ‘been making…other people happy…the people about me here [in Venice] are glad to have me with them, and I am quite persuaded that if life is spared to me, I shall be of great use this coming year, to many’. The book that Ruskin was helping Zorzi write,\textit{Osservazioni Intorno ai Restauri Interni ed Estauri della Basilica di San Marco}, a ‘defence of St Marks’, was in the British critic’s view ‘the best thing I ever saw written on architecture but by myself: and it is more furious than me!’\textsuperscript{100} Not only did Zorzi’s attack on the heavy-handed restoration suffered by St. Mark’s recommend him to Ruskin, but it seems the book was making larger waves in Venice and Italy. On the 12\textsuperscript{th} of May 1877 Ruskin writes to Joan Severn: ‘[there is much] fuss and laudation of our book (Count Z and mine) here in Venice – I believe it…Copies being sent to all members of the government by the most influential people’.\textsuperscript{101}

\textit{Osservazioni Intorno} was furnished by Zorzi with an elaborate preface dedicated to Ruskin, highlighting the critic’s membership of the ‘Società Veneta di Storia Patria’ – the Venetian society for the history of the state. Such societies became instrumental in propagating patriotism, both in the 1848-9 period and during the post-unification years, the Nationalist movement in Venice harnessing art, culture and history to the cause. The secretary of Venice’s Institute of Sciences, Arts and Letters wrote in 1848 for example that ‘Le nuove condizioni politiche della Venezia e dell’ Italia chiamano il nostro Istituto a nuovi e migliori

\textsuperscript{99} Letters to Joan Severn 1869, Ruskin Library, Lancaster, Ruskin Letters L34.
\textsuperscript{100} Letter to Joan Severn, 1 January 1877, Ruskin Library, Lancaster, Ruskin Letters L41. This letter is also included in \textit{Christmas Story: John Ruskin’s Venetian Letters of 1876-7}, ed. Van Akin Burd (Newark: University of Delaware Press 1990), p.217.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
destini’, ‘the new political conditions of Venice and Italy call our Institute to a newer and better destiny’. In his 1877 preface, Zorzi further laments that Ruskin’s works,

are not well-known here, for the reason that you can easily find a translator for foolish pseudo-historic romances like Cooper’s The Bravo of Venice, or the thousands of foreign cheap pulp books that ruin the good sense of Italian youth and give the ignorant a terrible notion of their ancient country; but not for the works which illustrate and detail that political, military, literary and artistic glory which today is mocked as an academic subject, but which will make the heart leap with joy, and will fan the flames of a stronger and wiser posterity.103

Notice here the attack on the populist fictions deriving from the dissemination of the leggenda nera – Fenimore Cooper’s The Bravo (1831) was typical of the genre, depicting a city where a dark oppressive tyranny lurked behind Venice’s beautiful façade. By contrast, Ruskin is here pressed into the service of Risorgimento pride, a revived glory deriving from a close, detailed reading of Italian history. For Zorzi, Ruskin may have been ‘English by birth’, but he was ‘Venetian at heart’, ‘grandioso nelle sue idee come un patrizio antico, intelligente nell’estetica come un genio italiano del secolo d’oro dell’arte’, ‘grandiose in his ideas like an ancient patrician, aesthetically sensitive like an Italian genius of the great centuries of art’.104

Ruskin’s ‘noble battle’ against the ‘static, mechanic’ modern age becomes, in Zorzi’s refashioning, a patriotic struggle for Venetian and Italian pride.105

Ruskin responds with almost as much enthusiasm. In his letter, appended to Osservazioni in ‘rough English’ (and also provided in an Italian translation by Zorzi), Ruskin writes that he has no words to ‘tell you with what thankfulness of heart I see a Venetian noble at last rising to defend the beauty of his native city, and the divinity of her monuments’:

102 Letter from Giuseppe Antonelli to Giuseppe Cappelletti, Correr Library Venice, Manoscritti Cicogna, MS Cicogna 3361 II. 70.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., p.8.
In this effort of yours…I recognize indeed the revival of the spirit of the Past; the spirit of reverence for the great Dead, – of love for the places which their fame illumined, and their virtue hallowed, and of care for all the things which once they had care for…In this I indeed acknowledge the heart of the Venetian noble, – what emotion so strongly moved the lords of ancient Venice, as their reverence for the Dead.\textsuperscript{106}

Recognisable in this trademark piece of ecstatic prose is what Benedict Anderson has identified as Nationalism’s ‘ventriloquistic’ tendency with respect to the dead.\textsuperscript{107} As we have seen in the case of Michelet, ‘commerce with the dead’ is an essential feature of the Nationalistic rhetoric of the mid nineteenth-century. In this sense, despite what Ruskin describes as his ‘rough English’, Ruskin and Zorzi are collaborating in a Nationalist dialogue to revive and speak for a Venice that has gone. This dialogue aims not only at a putative future Venice that might be ‘renewed’, but backwards at an unrecoverable Venetian history. The Janus-face of Nationalism – which would later be seen in the rhetoric of Fascism – here finds itself paralleled in the cultural ‘revival’ projects of Ruskin, in the topographical nostalgia of his intensely historical mind.

Despite Ruskin’s changeable political attitudes, it is reasonable to surmise that he genuinely meant this piece of Venetian patriotism. He concludes the letter:

\[\text{[Venice] has taught me all that I have rightly learned of the arts which are my joy: and of all the happy and ardent days…it was granted to me to spend in this Holy land of Italy, none were so precious as those which I used to pass in the bright recess of your Piazzetta.}\textsuperscript{108}

The idea of Italy as ‘holy Land’ was not uncommon for Victorian travelers, of course. In John Pemble’s words, ‘the Mediterranean [offered] oblivion from weariness, fever, fret and the consciousness of mortality’.\textsuperscript{109} Yet Ruskin’s paeans to Venice during the time of his collaboration with Zorzi are more than just Anglo-Saxon dreams of the blessed repose of the South. The two engage in a live dialogue that is intrinsically linked to the process of a coming to Nationalist self-awareness in Italy, part of the post-unification process of ‘making Italians’.

\textsuperscript{106}Ibid., pp.11-12.
\textsuperscript{107}Anderson, p.198.
\textsuperscript{108}Osservazioni, p.12.
\textsuperscript{109}Pemble, p.149.
The architectural discussions of Zorzi, Ruskin and others in Venice addressed themselves to central questions of Italian identity and its relationship to the past. For Zorzi, St. Mark’s was not just a church, but a building that bore ‘all the imprint of the Venetian genius and its glory’:

San Marco è forse il più nobile e vero compendio vivo di Storia Italiana…È in San Marco che rivela la fede de’ nostro avi altrice d’opere magnanime, e il senno politico, e l’eroico valore nelle battaglie e la vastità dei commercii, e le sublime istorie di navigatori ardimentosi, ed i martiri della Patria dalla crociata d’Enrico Dandolo fino all’epopea del quarantaotto.

St. Mark’s is perhaps the most noble, true living synthesis of Italian history…It is in St. Mark’s that the faith of our forebears, their magnanimous works, their political genius, the heroic valour of their battles and the vastness of their commercial enterprises, the sublime stories of their courageous navigators, and the martyrs of the nation, from the crusade of Enrico Dandolo up to the era of ’48, are revealed.110

Instead of eulogising a beautiful but dead building, Zorzi uses St. Mark’s as a synthesis or repository of patriotic history, containing artistic genius, political cunning and military might. Furthermore – although Ruskin may not have explicitly praised the spirit of the 1848 revolution – Zorzi sees the ‘noble’ architecture of St. Mark’s as containing the same Nationalist spirit. Given this gloss, Ruskin’s and Zorzi’s architectural project becomes clearly embedded in the context of Risorgimento Nationalism. In Zorzi’s account, the book was received as a boost to long-submerged Venetian pride, causing a cultural and political buzz:

‘Journalists, friends and acquaintances stopped to congratulate me in the street or wrote their felicitations…[people] wept for delight…European papers took it up, and ministers and art critics praised my work.’111

Furthermore, Zorzi’s presentation of Ruskin to the outside world is also filtered through patriotic sentiment. In his English memoir of Ruskin, published in 1906, Zorzi describes himself and Ruskin sitting and talking late into the night ‘about ancient Venice’. 112 Zorzi’s Ruskin is a devoted honorary Venetian who, when Zorzi is tempted to be downhearted, rallies him with the battle cry of the ancient Republic: ‘In the name of Saint

110 Osservazioni, pp.158-59.
112 Ibid., p.367.
Mark forward, my young friend. Viva San Marco! Zorzi imbues Ruskin with an almost Messianic presence. Writing about Ruskin’s departure from Venice in 1877, Zorzi described him,

[rising] to leave…with tears in his eyes, he shook hands with us all and wished us every happiness: while we stood around him sadly, because we were saying farewell to one who seemed to have been our friend all our lives. Of the small memorial stone that marks Ruskin’s involvement with Venice, placed on the Zattere, Zorzi says that ‘such a stone was not enough’:

The city ought to vote a majestic monument with a statue and an inscription whereby the passing generation shall record for generations to come the benefits Ruskin had conferred on Venice by his writings.

Such eulogising places Ruskin’s influence right at the heart of the shaping of Venetian identity in the decades following unification. Ruskin’s collaboration with Zorzi came at a time when architectural history could readily be appropriated into the political rhetoric of national independence. Translations of Ruskin into Italian had begun to appear from 1860 (significantly, the first piece of the critic’s writing to be translated was a letter to The Times discussing Italian independence) and, as Emma Sdegno has observed, his aesthetic theories became imbedded in Italian culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As Mario Della Costa has argued, ‘Il monumento veniva riconosciuto come simbolo di independenza, ed il suo recupero assumeva significato di riscatto politico…e di risveglio sociale ed economico’, ‘The [national] monument was rediscovered as a symbol of independence, and its recovery assumed the significance of a political [revival]…and of a social and economic renaissance’. Ruskin’s vision of nature, society and politics in organic harmony was adopted by his Italian disciples to bolster Italy’s newly-acquired sense of nationhood. These disciples included Zorzi, Giacomo Boni and Angelo Alessandri. To

113 Ibid., p.372.
114 Ibid., p.374.
115 Ibid., p.379.
Giacomo Boni, Ruskin was the ‘Maestro’ who had led him to a ‘spirituale’ (‘spiritual’) reappraisal of Italian history. Boni would later become an enthusiast for Fascism, in 1923 praising Mussolini as the Platonic ‘mente disciplinata’, ‘ordered mind’ who could ‘armoizzare i voci della moltitudine’, ‘harmonise the voices of the multitude’. Later that year, Boni attended a Fascist rally at the Arch of Julius Caesar in Rome, where two fusci littoriali (lictor’s rods) were placed at the base of the monument and Boni made a speech praising Caesar as the embodiment of law and discipline.

Rather than propagating an entirely aestheticised dream – detached from the political and cultural life of the nineteenth-century city – Ruskin’s work therefore becomes a living influence on moulding the city’s very contemporary identity. Despite Ruskin’s conflicted feelings about Venice – he calls it ‘horrible modern Venice’ in one letter – his adoption by the modern city suggests that Ruskin’s ‘Venetian’ work can be read as much within the political prism of nineteenth-century Italy as within the broader context of Victorian cultural criticism. His consciousness of the cultural roots of Nationalism, seen from The Poetry of Architecture through into The Stones of Venice, place him within a ‘Nationalist continuum’ of thought in a Europe addressing itself to reshaping and re-thinking its national cultures.

Yet this reshaping was also a return to a kind of primal origin point; for Ruskin, a vanishing Christendom, the traces of a culture he was desperately trying to preserve in Venice and elsewhere. For Ruskin, more than for Zorzi, it was the ‘Soul of Europe’ that needed to be revived – through cultural, political and religious means. Ruskin’s last ‘Venetian’ work, St. Mark’s Rest, was a bizarre travel book whose snobbery imagined the putative reader as a ‘wretched little cast-iron gaspipe of a cockney’ (XXXIV, 279), and attacked the popularity of Murray’s guides. St. Mark’s Rest (like The Stones of Venice) saw the buildings of Venice as signifiers of powerful religious truths. The column of St. Theodore, with its sculpture of the

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119 Ibid., II, p.528.
120 Ibid, p.560.
121 Letter to Joan Severn, 24 May 1877, Ruskin Library, Lancaster L41.
122 ‘Ruskin in Venice’, p.368.
saint slaying a dragon, ‘represents the power of the Spirit of God in all noble and useful animal life, conquering what is venomous, useless or in decay’ (XXXIV, 226). It seems that for Ruskin there were two potential directions for the Europe that he detailed and analysed; one that was ‘venomous, useless and in decay’, the spirit of an idolatrous age; and another, vanishing certainly, but not yet extinct, to be seen in the ‘noble’ monuments of Venice. Ruskin’s battle for the ‘Soul of Europe’, of which his work on Venice is one part, can be linked to a broader European political and cultural coming-to-consciousness, in which the lessons of history were pressed into the service of contemporary Nationalisms. Therefore, although to talk of a ‘Nationalist Ruskin’ may be a simplification, the parallels between Nationalist movements and Ruskin’s European cultural project are striking. The field of comparative history and literature places his Venetian works within a continuum of nineteenth-century politics centring on cultural, spiritual national renewal.
FASCIST VENICE: CULTURE, POLITICS, RHETORIC

‘My stone seat was the Dogana’s curb’¹, wrote Ezra Pound in 1917, evoking an earlier visit to Venice and providing an iconic image of the impoverished young artist. Venice became part of the poet’s own myth-making, a central event in his psychological and artistic positioning of himself. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which political rhetoric informed perceptions of Venice in the twentieth century, with a particular focus on Fascist approaches to the city. At the same time, I discuss Pound’s ‘discovery’ of Venice as a poetic subject.

The chapter highlights the way Fascist rhetoric dealt with the tensions inherent in Venice’s self-positioning. As city of art and of commerce, as ancient cultural artefact and as brave new utopia moving boldly towards the future, Venice was described in a variety of ways by Fascist commentators. The analysis to follow places these within the wider framework of the conflicts between regional and national identities within the Mussolini regime, and argues that Pound’s engagement with Venice can be placed in the context of political debates about the position of the city in modern Italy.

I argue that the primary way in which Venice is described is as a harmony of old and new, a thread linking past and future. I also explore the ways in which conflict arose within the Fascist context as a result of the tensions inherent in this approach, suggesting that Venice, being both the subject of attacks for its decadent ‘passéism’ and a locus for industrial and military development, held a unique place in the Fascist consciousness. Yet at the same time this chapter grounds these perceptions of Venetian ‘uniqueness’ in the struggles between parochialism and Nationalism in Mussolini’s Italy, and the shifting, shadowy nature of ‘italianità’ (‘Italian-ness’). In this chapter, I focus on architectural debates. Examining the ways in which new buildings were justified and architecture discussed in the period provides an analysis of Fascist Venice’s negotiation of modernism and antiquity that complements the first half of the thesis.

This chapter stresses that the political and the cultural cannot be separated when it comes to the question of modern Venice. At base level, I am arguing that ‘literary’ approaches to the city – whether Pound’s early litany of praise or Marinetti’s torrent of invective – must be read alongside political discussions of Venice’s meaning and worth. This chapter can be no more than an introduction to such an approach.

**Forging the New Venice**

In 1926, four years after the start of Mussolini’s premiership, Count Pietro Orsi was made podestà of Venice. In a ceremony on Christmas Eve of that year reported in a local journal, Orsi made a speech thanking the city and the Fascist government for the honour. To applause, Orsi told the assembled Venetians that he would ‘assicurare il bene e la prosperità di Venezia’, ‘ensure the health and prosperity of Venice’. He went on to describe the ‘balance’ that modern Venice had to achieve; a city poised between old and new, Venice was both a ‘sogno d’arte’ (‘dream of art’) and a vision of frenetic industry. Development in the city, according to Orsi, had to remain true to Venice’s historical essence whilst ensuring that the public services provided by the Fascist administration would ‘corrisponda alle esigenze moderne della vita’, ‘correspond to the needs of modern life’. Orsi modestly deflected attention from his own achievements, and placed the focus firmly on the city: ‘ciò che mi ha fatto piu piacere in questi giorni, nelle manifestazioni che ho sentito e nelle lettere che mi sono state scritte, si è di constatare in tutti una ferma fiducia nei rinnovati destini di Venezia’, ‘that which has given me most pleasure in these days, in the demonstrations I have heard and in the letters which I have received, is that I find in them all a firm loyalty to the renewed destinies of Venice’.

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For Orsi, a historian of some note in early twentieth-century Italy, Venice’s long-standing position as the major naval power in the Mediterranean made it the ‘degna figlia di Roma…per secoli la continuatrice di quell’ pensiero imperiale che oggi riuscita gli entusiasmi di tutti gli italiani’, ‘worthy daughter of Rome…for centuries the inheritor of that imperial ideal which now excites the enthusiasm of all Italians’. In other words, Venice inherited the compliment to the classical ideals of Rome; her beauty, and imperial power made her a ‘worthy’ model for modern Italians, and if Rome provided the ultimate example, Venice could also act as a supplementary reference point for the Fascist regime. To more applause, Orsi concluded that he was sure Venice would take its place in the new Italy, and, to a standing ovation, Orsi finished his speech by promising the citizens of Venice his most fervent and tenacious efforts for the cause of Venice and Italy.

What place did Venice have in the new Italy? A plaque, hidden away around the corner from the Marciana library at the edge of St. Mark’s Square closest to the sea front, commemorates Venice’s incorporation in 1866 to the newly united Italy. There are many such plaques in Venice and the Veneto; as part of the Risorgimento effort to shape cultural memory, they attempted to knit together the consciousness of Italians in telling a collective story. The engraved words pay tribute to Venice’s long-suffering faithfulness to the ‘patria’, remembering the troubled years of Napoleonic and Habsburg rule. But what patria? For centuries Venice had held, in Wordsworth’s words, ‘the gorgeous East in fee’. Venice was a maritime empire that held a seasoned distrust of the politics of mainland Italy. Venice’s incorporation into Italy was to come at a price – the playing up of a national unity that downplayed Venice’s imperial past. In the historian Mario Infelise’s words, ‘Venezia faticò a divenire punto di riferimento significativo vitale’, ‘Venice had to work hard to become a

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4 He had written on Cavour and unification, and also published a survey of a hundred years of Italian history from the Napoleonic era to the fin de siècle.
5 Ibid., p.524.
6 Ibid.
significant and vital point of reference’. Venice still suffered from the negative myths about secretive cruelties embodied in the leggenda nera tradition. Furthermore, Venice was too much a city subjected to foreign interpretations; an idea that proliferated in the nineteenth century was of the true city obscured, ‘affondo in una marea di scritti’, ‘buried under a flood of writings’. 

Yet ‘the problem of Venice’ was the problem of Italy in microcosm. The oft-quoted remark attributed sometimes to Massimo D’Azeglio and sometimes to Cavour (‘We have made Italy, now we must make Italians’), captures the dilemma of the period. In the time between unification and the ascent of Fascism, the common points of reference for these new Italians often went back only as far as the nineteenth-century patriotic struggle. Figures like Garibaldi, Mazzini, Cavour (and in Venice the leaders of the 1848 revolution, Daniele Manin and Niccolò Tommaso), were ubiquitous in iconography. They appeared as statues, stamps, and paintings, and as names on re-christened streets and piazzas – a situation that Ezra Pound lamented in his Guide to Kulchur, at the height of his commitment to the Mussolini regime:

Glory mislaid in Italy itself because Cavour and his melodramatic confine – took the spotlight, and there has been so ever since. Only a breather between 1870 and the New Era. During that breather Italy lived on its immediate past. Every town had its (usually incompetent) monument to Garibaldi, Mazzini, Vittorio Emanuele and most of ‘em at least a plaque to Cavour. Venice to Daniele Manin.[sic]

The ‘New Era’ that Pound refers to is the beginning of the Fascist regime (dated from Mussolini’s March on Rome in 1922). Pound’s suggestion, in this passage from his Guide to Kulchur is that, under Fascism, a different approach to Italian history was being engineered. No longer would Italy live on its ‘immediate’ past, but would look to other points of reference. In the Guide, this point of reference is chiefly the Italian Quattrocento, with its sculpture, painting and architecture.

Whilst popular conceptions of Fascism emphasise its use of classico-imperial imagery (the Italian term is romanità, or ‘Roman-ness’), recent scholarship has examined the regime’s

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9 Ibid., p.968.
revival of medieval and Renaissance Italian themes. In Mussolini’s concept of *italianità* (‘Italian-ness’), a variety of different reference points were used. The architectural historian D. Medina Lasansky has shown, for example, how the Fascist concept of the *medioevo* favoured the Gothic forms of medieval and early Renaissance architecture over the baroque.\(^{11}\)

Whilst the Roman model was useful, at other times and in other contexts the Fascist project made use of a number of different ‘tropes’ of Italianness – emphasising the purity of Quattrocento painting for example, or highlighting the civic pride created by medieval city states. It is in this context that Venice (which was not of course founded as a Roman settlement) could ‘find its place’ in the Italian cultural memory. Venice was both (as Ruskin, Pound and other English-speaking visitors had discovered) a treasure-trove of artistic excellence and a city with a grand imperial past. Both were used in the formation of a Fascist iconography of Venice.

**Venice at the Turn of the Century**

Ezra Pound first visited Venice in 1898 with his great-aunt, so would have seen the original campanile in St. Mark’s Square before it fell and the replica built in its place (with its mantra of ‘com’era, dov’era’, ‘how it was, where it was’ which Marinetti had so despised).\(^{12}\)

Pound’s daughter Mary de Rachewiltz remembers Pound being ‘proud’ of having seen the tower before it collapsed.\(^{13}\) The interval between Pound’s first two visits to the city brought not only the fall of the campanile (1902) but also the death of Ruskin (1900). Yet the Venice of Pound’s early experience was still one that would have been recognizable to the writer of *The Stones of Venice*: the city was ‘very much the Venice of Ruskin….and Henry James, a

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city seen through the eyes of sympathetic foreigners’. 14 Pound’s longest and best-documented early visit was his stay of several months in 1908, which produced his first published poetry collection, A Lume Spento. During this period, Pound stayed in San Trovaso, walking everywhere (gondolas being too expensive), and eating baked sweet potatoes and minestra d’orzo (barley soup). 15 During this time, the imagery of Pound’s verse seems to concentrate on the Venetian elements of sun, stone and water. In ‘San Vio’, Pound writes of the waves’ ‘lusty harmony/ A thundered thorough bass’ and in ‘Alma Sol Veneziae’, Pound pictures himself as Venetian sun-worshipper: ‘O Sun venezian, / Thou that run through all my veins/ Hast bid the life-blood run’. 16

Turn-of-the-century Venice, though in some respects sleepy and provincial, was raising its profile through events such as the newly-created art Biennale, which during this period (as Marla Stone comments) kept its ‘Venetian character’ through ‘the use of exclusively Venetian residents and artists as organisers’. 17 Venice had also received a jolt in 1909 from the Futurist invective of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, whose curse on the ‘passéist’ city acted as a spur to Venice’s self-image – Marinetti appealing to Venice’s proud maritime past. There was enough excitement in the Venetian air in 1913 for Pound to write to his future wife Dorothy Shakespear that: ‘The country is looking up – what with Marinetti & the war with Tripoli etc. Venice seemed yesterday like one large Carlton Hotel.’ 18 The ‘war with Tripoli’ referred to the Italo-Turkish war that lasted from September 1911 to October 1912, in which Italy had seized Libya from the Ottomans. This sense of Italy ‘looking up’ – and this revival being linked to political/imperialistic renewal – is perhaps one of the first signs of the drives in Pound which would lead to his support for Italian Fascism. This was not the only indicator of

15 See Mary de Rachewiltz’s forward to ‘Some Poems from the “San Trovaso” notebook’, in A Lume Spento and other Early Poems (New York: New Directions: 1965), pp.111-114.
the stirrings of Pound’s political consciousness with regard to Italy. In the following year
Pound would honour the radical poet Wilfred Scawen Blunt for ‘upholding Mazzini’. 19

The idea of Venice as a live, ‘vital’ city was already taking shape in Pound’s mind by 1912.
Whilst in southern France writing the notes later collected as *A Walking Tour*, Pound
describes Venice as a ‘living complex’, a growing organism with its own ‘passion’ and
‘mood’. 20 This feeling of live energy contained in the city would, I suggest, later be developed
into a politically charged image coloured by the Fascist context. In *A Walking Tour*, Pound’s
developing sense of place is a shifting chain of associations and transmutations. 21 The French
cathedral town of Périgueux can evoke Venice and the ‘domes of Byzant & pattern of the
East’; a church in Le Puy takes Pound to ‘northern Italy or [the] Mosque in Cordova’. 22

For the most part, during his 1913 Venice visit, Pound was happy to enjoy the
promenades and sunshine: ‘On the whole mi piace Venezia’. 23 However, his letters to
Dorothy Shakespear also display some of the prejudices of the nineteenth-century Anglo-
American traveller, and at this stage, like Ruskin and others, Pound found the Italian people to
be ‘deplorable….in many respects’. 24 Whilst in Venice he listened to the fanatically
Protestant sermons of the Rev. Alexander Robertson, the Church of Scotland’s minister,
writing with apparent surprise on one occasion that Robertson had ‘preached this morning
without damning the pope’. 25 Robertson was to feature in Canto LXXVI, written (as part of
the *Pisan Cantos*) in captivity in the 1940s:

> “Dawnt let ’em git you” burred the bearded Dottore
  when was the Scottch Kirrrk in Venice
  to warn one against Babylonian intrigue (465-476)

p.244. Pound had got this wrong: the anti-imperialist Blunt was famous for his interventions in the
cause of radical Egyptian and Irish Nationalism, not Italian.
21 For more on this, see Peter Nicholls’s ‘Pound’s Places’, in *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region
and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press 2000), pp.159-177.
22 *A Walking Tour*, p.19, p.73.
23 *Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear: Their Letters*, p.217.
24 Ibid., p.219.
25 Ibid., p.220.
Robertson had a biased approach to Venetian history, seeing the old republic – as had Ruskin and others – as a kind of proto-Protestant state. He admired the late Renaissance reforming Venetian scholar Paolo Sarpi, whom he referred to in his sermons, as Pound recalled in the *Guide to Kulchur*:

I…remember the RRivrinnd CCavallliiere DDDottoRRRRe AlexaNNdeRRRR RRRrrroberrrrtson with a scotch accent as thhickk as three tweeds and a tartan. And evveryrry Sunday, under the shadow of the old Campanile, and while the new was building, he poured out his admiration of Paolo Sarrrrrpi and told the unwary travelllor how the banditti were in pay of the ppoppope.26

Sarpi, who wrote various anti-papal treatises and admired the Anglican prayer book, was a symbol for Robertson of Venice’s long-suffering resistance to papal power. As we saw in Chapter One, Robertson became an outspoken supporter of Mussolini, believing the Duce to have secured a renewed sense of evangelical faith for Italy. In this context, Pound’s later nods to Robertson may have political implications.

There are other signs of the development of Pound’s intellectual and political ideals in the early Venetian period. Pound writes to Dorothy of having attended a concert at the Fenice that delights his ‘sense of history’: ‘I shouldn’t have been in the least surprised to see Browning or Verdi looking down’.27 Pound’s historical consciousness was not however confined to Venice’s recent past and the ghosts of Verdi and Browning. There were signs that Pound’s developing notion of the ‘Quattrocento’ – which was to become so important as the later counterpoint to the world of *usura*, usury – was being honed by his experience of Venice. Pound sent a postcard to Dorothy of the interior of the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli. He wrote: ‘I enclose a portrait sketch of you and a reminder of the precise meaning of the term “Quattro cento”. I’ve got the bases of the columns in larger reproduction.”28 His eye for detail alights here on the column bases carved by Pietro Lombardo. Later, in the *Cantos*, the church of the Miracoli was to feature as the ‘jewel box’ (*Canto* LXXVI, 474) for Pound, a static point of perfect beauty in a confused and turbulent world. Pound’s emphasis

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26 *Guide to Kulchur*, p.259.
27 Letter to Dorothy Shakespear, 8 May 1913, p.224.
28 Letter to Dorothy Shakespear, 9 May, p.226.
on precision and detail here also suggest the later use of Pietro Lombardo in *Canto XLV* in 1937 – described as an artist who ‘came not by usura’ (XLV, 229).

Pound’s emphasis on the creative vitality of Venice past and present differed from the turn-of-the-century decadentist visions exemplified by figures like Marcel Proust. These writings, in Alvise Zorzi’s words, highlighted the ‘sensazioni di morte che derivano dall’inarrestabile decadenza dell’antica regina dei mari’, ‘sensations of death which derived from the unstoppable decadence of this ancient queen of the seas’.  

Such was the Venice attacked by the Futurists – F.T. Marinetti saw Venice as fatally poisoned by foreign influence, a deathly place of coffins and undertakers. ‘Noi ripudiamo l’antica Venezia estenuata e sfatta da voluttà secolari’, ‘We renounce the old Venice, enfeebled and undone by worldly luxury’, he had written in April 1910, and two months later pelted the inhabitants of Venice with 800,000 leaflets containing the Futurist anti-Venetian manifesto.

For Marinetti, Venetians had forgotten their ‘Italianness’, and the city had been essentially emasculated by years of foreign dominance. Venice is conceived of by Marinetti – as had long been the case in the European imagination – as feminine. But Marinetti’s vision of the city is not as *La Serenissima* or the ‘Queen of the Adriatic’. Rather, the Futurist writer conceives her as a diseased prostitute, offering her body to the lowest offer: ‘voi volete prostrarvi davanti tutti i forestieri, e siete di una servilità ripugnante’, ‘you want to prostrate yourself before all foreigners. Your servility is repulsive!’

Venice also figures in terms of illness and mutilation: the city is ‘putrefying’, a ‘magnificent sore’ (‘piaga magnifica’), or wound, waiting to be ‘cured’ and ‘healed’ by the Futurist project. Venice’s ‘past-loving’ decadentism is seen in these works as essentially unhygienic; a ‘cloaca maxima of passéism’, its canals are ‘reeking’, its palaces ‘leprous’ and its moonshine ‘venal’. Images of

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33 Ibid.
wounding, waste and venereal disease vie for position in an unpleasant overloading of
metaphor on the part of Marinetti. By contrast, the Futurist utopia that will replace Venice is
one of clinical lighting and straight lines of metal: ‘l’imponente geometria dei ponti metallici’,
‘the imposing geometry of metal bridges’ and the ‘regno della divina Luce Elettrica’, ‘reign
of holy Electric Light’. 34

For Marinetti, Venice is a place both of illness and sex, which he conflates in his
polemical imagery. Venetians are,

I ceri custodi del più grande bordello della Storia, gl’infermieri del più triste ospedale
del mondo, dove languono anime mortalmente corrotte dalla lue del sentimentalismo.

The seedy custodians of the greatest bordello in history, nurses in the saddest hospital
in the world, where mortally corrupted souls languish in the pestilence of sentimentiality.35

Venice is here both the ‘bordello’ and the prostitute, the hospital and the patient. ‘Pimp’ and
whore, the city is described as ‘an old procuress’, offering up her own body to be violated.
This view of Venice is inextricably linked to its place as foreigner’s fantasy, for in Marinetti’s
invective its ‘Italianness’ has deserted it and the city is controlled by ‘deplorable’ outsiders
who wish to preserve every stone in aspic:

Non urlate contro la pretesa brutezza della locomotive dei tramvai degli automobile e
delle biciclette in cui noi troviamo le prime line della grande estetica futurista.
Potranno sempre servire à schiacciare qualche lurido e grottesco professore nordico
dal capelluccio tirolese.

Don’t howl against the so-called ugliness of locomotives, trams, automobiles, and
bicycles, in which we see the first outlines of the great Futurist aesthetic. They can
always serve to upset [or run over] some horrible grotesque Nordic professor in his
Tyrolean hat.36

This understanding of Venice lies at the root of Marinetti’s misinterpretation of Ruskin,
whom he depicts in the later ‘Futurist Speech to the English’ (1910) as an infantile regressive:

‘Col suo sogno morbosa di vita agreste e primitive…col suo odio della macchina, del vapore e
dell’ elettricità, quel maniaco di semplicità antica somiglia a un uomo che…volesse ancora
dormire nella culla’, ‘With his morbid dream of primitive rustic life… with his hatred for the

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 32/ p.64.
machine, steam and electricity, that maniac of antique simplicity is like a man… who still wants to sleep in his cradle.”

Although no-one would dispute Ruskin’s position as critic of industrialisation – the railway link to Venice and the introduction of gas lamps caused him to react with horror\(^{38}\) – Marinetti mistakenly assumes he is also an advocate for reconstructing Venice piece-by-piece as it was in its medieval heyday. It is not true, for example, that ‘Ruskin avrebbe certamente applaudito quei passatisti che hanno voluto ricostruire l’assurdo campanile di San Marco’, ‘Ruskin would certainly have applauded those passéist Venetians who wanted to rebuild the absurd Bell Tower of San Marco’.

Ruskin’s opinions were clear; he hated naïve restoration, and often seemed to long for Venice to crumble into dust: ‘St. Mark’s Place will again be….a green field, and the front of the Ducal Palace and the marble shafts of St. Mark’s will be rooted in wild violets and wreathed with vines. She will be beautiful again’.\(^{40}\) But to Marinetti, Ruskin is just the Anglo-Saxon version of his ‘grotesque Nordic professor’. For the Futurist writer, a city with a proud history had ceased to exist on its own terms; it had been fantasised and colonised by outsiders. This understanding of Venice is key to understanding these polemical tracts – Marinetti is not simply consigning Venice to the rubble of history, but wishes to recover an essential, dynamic core that he sees as having been forgotten.

Whilst he attacks their city as it stands, Marinetti also wishes to enlist Venetians as a kind of prototype of the dynamic Italian. Whilst contemporary Venetians are described by Marinetti as ‘camerieri d’albergo, ciceroni, lenoni…fabbricanti di vecchi quadri, pittori plagiaristi’, ‘waiters in hotels, ciceroni, pimps….fakers of old photos [paintings], [picture plagiarists]’, the Venetians of the past were ‘invincibili guerrieri e artisti geniali, navigatori audaci, ingegnosi industriali e commercianti instancabili’, ‘invincible warriors and gifted

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\(^{39}\) ‘Discorso Futurista agli Inglesi’, p.244/ ‘Futurist Speech to the English’, p.73.

artists, audacious navigators, ingenious industrialists, and tireless merchants’. 41 All of this sounds intriguingly like a return to the familiar Ruskinian paradigm – contemporary Venice is fake and phony, whilst the Venice of the past was different. Then Venetians were genuine, industrious, brave. If, Marinetti seems to argue, we could return to the core of medieval Venice – with ‘invincible warriors’ like Enrico Dandolo, ‘audacious navigators’ like Marco Polo, ‘tireless merchants’ as all Venice once had the reputation of being – then we could ‘do something’ with Venice. Then, and only then, argues Marinetti, would Venetians be ‘Italians’: ‘e…questa parola, nella lingua della storia, vuol dire: costruttori dell’ avvenire’, ‘and…in the language of history this word means: builders of the future’.42

If Marinetti’s Venetian manifestos were simply demolitionist, they might be regarded as symbolic of a Futurist anomaly, the product of a time when Italian politics bluntly refused its own history. Yet, whilst the polemic of Futurism expresses what Cinzia Blum describes as a ‘frustration about Italian provincialism and backwardness’43 (which could be an accurate description of turn-of-the-century Venice) Marinetti appeals to another Venice beyond the city of the present. This Venice is historic as well as symbolic, peopled with great Doges, nobles and sailors – as was the medieval state that Ruskin idolised. Marinetti’s ‘demolitionist’ tendencies can only rest on the premise that there was once ‘a great Venice’. ‘Yet once you were’ (‘voi foste un tempo’), Marinetti proclaims ‘once you were invincible warriors’.

Venice, Architecture, Fascism: Modernism and Organic Form

The Fascist use of Venetian iconography had a similar concern to negotiate between past and future versions of Venice. Fascism was a diverse movement, accommodating different strands; there was, particularly during early Fascism, a distinct lack of consensus amongst leading politicians over what a new ‘Italian’ culture would look like. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat has

42 Ibid.
argued, Fascist commentators would often describe *italianità* as equilibrium, a balance of diverse ‘Italian’ ideals: ‘the country was at once spiritual and temporal, classical and Romantic, traditional and modern’. In the case of Venice, these tensions sometimes caused heated debates within the local Fascist hierarchy.

The architect Duilio Torres, for example, argued strongly against the tendency to conserve at any cost. In an article written for the local journal *Ateneo Veneto* in 1933, Torres argued that Venice needed to accommodate a radically new architecture ‘without apology’ that was stripped-down and simple – ‘nude’, to use Torres’s term. Yet Torres claimed to respect the past, and argued for a case-by-case analysis of how to negotiate modern and ancient buildings. Torres pointed to areas like the Rialto, where the buildings had grown up organically over time, as an example of how new architectural forms could be accommodated into the ancient. Venetians, he argued, needed to ‘comprendere profondamente il significato del motto eterno: “e l’antico fu nuovo e il nuovo antico”’, ‘profoundly understand the significance of the eternal saying: “that the old be new and the new old”’. Furthermore, the new architecture of Fascism had the advantage of being ‘Nationalistic’ – Nationalistic on both an Italian and Venetian level. In the case of Venice, the revolutionary architecture of the Fascist regime, Torres claimed, was an appropriate reflection of the city’s proud origins:

Venezia! Riandiamo con larga visione alle sue origini ed al suo sviluppo, attenti alla rotazione del prisma degli stili fissati dalle varie epoche…Emersa dalle acque con vergini isole e concentratasi la vita nel nucleo Rialtino, si popolò gradatamente di pescatori, di marinai, di guerrieri, di legislatori e di artefici insigni. Edificatasi mano a mano di case, di chiese, di basiliche e di palazzi, gradatamente sistemò i naturali contorni delle sue isole, dando forma ai canali, alle strade, alle piazze, in conformità alle necessità di vita ed al volere della sua gente…

Venice! We must return with grand vision to its birth and growth, attentive to the circular prism of styles drawn from different eras…. Surfacing from the water with its virgin islands, its life centring on the Rialto nucleus, gradually it was populated with fishermen, sailors, warriors, legislators and distinguished craftsmen. Brick by brick its houses, churches, basilicas, palaces were built by hand, arranged to follow the natural

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p.171.
contours of its islands, giving shape to canals, streets, squares, according to the needs of life and to the desire of its people...\textsuperscript{48}

Torres’s appeal to the people of Venice to return to their great past – as sailors, warriors, craftsmen – is reminiscent of Marinetti, particularly in the exclamation-marked clarion call: ‘Venezia!’. Yet there is also something akin to Ruskin’s vision in his evocation of this early city rising from the water-islands. Just as the Victorian critic saw something pure and true in the kernel of island Venice – the wildness of Torcello, described in the second volume of \textit{The Stones of Venice} – so Torres looks back to the founding of the city-state as justification for his ‘organic’ vision of Venetian architecture.

This highlights a problem for the Fascist approach to Venice. For how could anything new be written about a city that had already been defined so many times, and by so many different people? Torres looks to the construction of new buildings on the Lido and at Porto Marghera as evidence that a new city was alive and well – vibrant, modernist and Italian. Such construction was evidence of a ‘new Venetian era’\textsuperscript{49}, enabled by the Mussolini regime. In it was all the vitality of the ‘anima latina, allo spirito risorgente dalla nostra indistruttibile origine’, ‘Latin soul, the resurgent spirit of our indestructible origins’.\textsuperscript{50} The vital industry and forward-looking development seen at the Lido and at Marghera were proof to Torres that Italians ‘non derivano da una razza ma bensi da una stirpe, stirpe possente, generatrice feconda di tutte le nobiltà’, ‘do not derive from a race but rather from a stock – a powerful stock, the fertile originator of all that is noble’.\textsuperscript{51}

Torres walks a tightrope; although his aesthetic is Futurist in its preference for the modern and the industrial (and in true Futurist style, he believed modernist architecture to be an expression of revolution\textsuperscript{52}), he also nods towards the conservationists in arguing for the importance of protecting the city’s ‘ambience’: ‘L’abbandano della valutazione dell’ambiente è il piu grosso degli errori che un realizzatore possa compiere’, ‘Abandoning the value of

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p.173.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p.179.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p.181.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p.171.
ambience is the greatest error that a developer can commit’. Torres weaves Venice’s history into his argument, just as he sees that history woven into the city’s architecture. Yet at the same time, his heart is with the new: the future of the industrial port at Marghera will be a ‘spettacolo superbo’, ‘superb spectacle’, he writes, where a ‘nuova città’, ‘new city’ will rise.

Others accorded with this utopian urban dream. Alberto Magrini, writing in 1932, saw the modernistic development of Venice as being perfectly in keeping with its original ‘Veneto-Byzantine’ architecture. For Magrini, the spirit of these architectural beginnings was kept alive not by returning to the architecture of the past, but by retaining an ‘evolutionary’ and innovative approach to building, for which he used the word venezianità (‘Venetian-ness’). Instincts towards conservation had to be kept in check; they did not, Magrini argued, serve Venice’s interests well. Indeed conservationists, he wrote, with their obsession for saving the Byzantine capital or the Gothic arch, had become ‘i più temibili nemici della…Venezia’, ‘the most terrible enemies of…Venice’. Furthermore, Magrini claimed that ‘nessuna città, affermo, più di Venezia, è preparata ad accogliere l’architettura moderna nei suoi concetti fondamentali e universali’, ‘no city is more prepared to welcome modern architecture in its fundamental and universal concepts than Venice’. In its organic, ‘bold’ architecture, the city as Magrini saw it was a perfect staging ground for the cultural projects of Fascism. Magrini ended his comments by stating that ‘nuove vie sono aperte o stanno per aprirsi a si apriranno per opera della fede dell’ardimento della virtù’, ‘new roads are open or ready to be opened by works of faith, boldness and virtue’. Venetians needed to respond by remaining mindful ‘dei futuri dell’era fascista’, ‘of the futures of the Fascist Era’.

There were also voices of caution. The lawyer Rafaello Levi, a prominent figure in Venetian Fascism, was keen to ensure that all new building in the city was subject to vigorous

53 Ibid., p.179.
54 Ibid., p.180.
56 Ibid., p.254.
57 Ibid., p.257.
scrutiny, and that new architectural projects were judged fairly with a number of competitors. Responding to Magrini’s comments in the same journal, Levi urged that: ‘ogni novità sia prudentemente discussa, ogni progetto reso pubblico, ogni costruzione progettata sia posta in concorso, e tutti…possano vedere, discutere, confrontare’, ‘every innovation should be carefully discussed, each project made public, each planned construction should be open to competition, that all…can see, discuss, compare’.58 Like Magrini and Torres, Levi emphasised the organic, natural forms of Venice’s architecture (something Ruskin, Pound and other literary figures would do in their texts). Indeed, whilst voicing his disagreement with Ruskinian aesthetics, Levi saw Venice as ‘il più eloquente esempio’, ‘the most eloquent example’ of a city following natural forms.59 But whilst architects like Magrini and Torres had stressed Venice’s organic growth to justify new building projects, Levi highlighted the uniqueness of the Venetian environment as a city-scape to be preserved: ‘La bellezza è data dall’ambiente, dall’aria, dall’acqua oltre che dei monumenti illustri che si inquadrano in questa cornice’, ‘The beauty [of Venice] comes to us from the environment, from the air and water as well as from the illustrious monuments that frame this setting’.60 Both restoration and new building work had therefore to be conducted with the utmost care: ‘ogni distruzione o rinnovazione che non si fatta con la maggiore cautela, contribuiscono al disgregamento di questa armonia’, ‘any demolition or renovation that is not done with the greatest caution contributes to the disintegration of this harmony’.61 Levi saw a certain amount of conservation as being right and necessary, and did not equate it with the tacky fakery which some had attacked it for being, writing that, ‘il problema della imitazione o addirittura della copiatura e ben diverso, e non va confuso con quello della conservazione’, ‘the problem of imitation or even copying is very different, and not to be confused with that of conservation’.62 Levi’s voice provided a note of hesitancy, a cautious holding-back from the futurist drive to modernise.

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58 Ibid., p.259.
59 Ibid., p.260.
60 Ibid., p.257.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
Architectural practice in the period was variable. From the nostalgic to the ultra-modern, a number of different building styles were represented in Venice during the Fascist ‘Era’. On the one hand, the early years of the regime produced retrospective houses such as Dall’Olivo’s Casa Salviati – identified by Ezra Pound as the spot where the young poet was tempted to throw the drafts of ‘A Lume Spento’ into the canal (‘between Salviati and the house that was of Don Carlos’, LXXVI, 474). Salviati was built between 1924 and 1926, and belonged to a family of glass-manufacturers. The façade, writes Deborah Howard, is ‘in conscious imitation of an earlier style’ (the early Renaissance), though the walls are studded with ‘incongruous’ Art Nouveau style mosaics advertising the family business. Yet, as Howard points out, this is the last truly nostalgic building of the Fascist period. Other constructions were more likely to try – as these architectural debates suggest – to harmonise the ancient with a more modernist sensibility. An example of this kind of architecture is the Fire Station on the Rio di Ca’ Foscari, designed by Brenno del Giudice and begun in 1932.

Although the building contained elements that were indeed ‘uncompromisingly modern’ – with plain, almost severe rectangular windows and simple, unadorned arches – its modernism is ‘harmonised’ into its old Venetian surroundings by touches such as the piano nobile balustrade. Similarly, del Giudice’s Casa del Farmacista, on the Lido, is characterised by the simplification and modernization of an original curvy baroque design, ‘well-suited to the elegant seaside atmosphere’. Other Venetian buildings of the Fascist years were starkly classicist in form. The multi-storey car park in Piazzale Roma, built under the direction of Eugenio Miozzi between 1931 and 1933, stood like a great, white gleaming beast at the entrance to the historic city of Venice. Its appearance seems designed to make a statement about the Venice of the 1930s: modern, impressive, uncompromising. Alongside other projects such as the ‘aggressively functional’ Palazzo del Casinò on the Lido, also partly

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64 Ibid., p.284.
65 Ibid.
designed by Miozzi, the car terminal with its ‘plain, functional geometric forms’ was there to remind visitors that the city looked to the future as well as to the past.

But all Venetian Fascism had to hold in tension the demands of past and future. In the words of an editorial comment in *Le Tre Venezia* – a local Fascist journal – the Fascist norm was to ‘marciare audacemente verso il futuro rispettando le glorie del passato’, ‘march boldly towards the future fully respecting the glories of the past’. This motto, the journal claimed in 1932, had been ‘fully applied to Venetian development’. The magazine continued:

La verità è che Venezia, pur attraverso un lungo periodo di decadenza, di stasi, di difficoltà economiche….ha mantenuto l’incanto delle sue lagune e le fondamentali virtù del suo popolo…
Era logico che il Fascismo risollevasse questi elementi formidabili per la rinascita.

The truth is that Venice, even through its long period of decadence, of stagnation, of economic trouble…has maintained the enchantment of its lagoons and the fundamental virtues of its people…

It was logical that Fascism revived these formidable qualities for its rebirth.

Whilst the writer agrees with Marinetti and others in seeing that there has been a long era of ‘decadence’ in Venice, the city is praised for the ‘enchantment of its lagoons’ (notice how difficult it is to banish the language of magic and fantasy when talking about Venice).

Furthermore, this ‘enchantment’ – along with the ‘fundamental virtues’ of the Venetian people – is being used by the Fascist project to implement the ‘rebirth’ of the new Venice. These enchanting and fundamental qualities are clearly part of Venice’s past, yet Fascism uses them in the creation of its renewed city.

This concept of ‘rebirth’ is key to understanding Fascist approaches to the Venetian self-image in this period. Fascist commentators talked of witnessing a sea-change in Venice’s fortunes, a financial and cultural flowering not seen since the Renaissance. Venice was recognized as a special case, with a unique importance within Mussolini’s Italy. The ‘new Venice’ was seen as having to ‘balance’ complex elements of economic, spiritual and cultural life. The construction work on Porto Marghera – described, interestingly, as a work whose

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66 Ibid., p.281.
67 *Le Tre Venezia* 1932, p.637.
68 Ibid., p.639.
69 Ibid., p.628.
greatness of conception and execution was truly ‘worthy of Rome’\textsuperscript{70} – was evidence of the new industrial and economic life in the \textit{Serenissima}. Marghera, with its rows of factory chimneys expelling smoke into the Venetian air, was completed in 1932, and is probably the closest thing in the region to Marinetti’s vision of ‘a great strong industrial, commercial, and military Venice’ that would replace the ancient venal canals and the leprous \textit{palazzi}. From 1920, the complex had been a centre for metallurgy, and from 1921, a base for chemical production; yet it was under Fascism that the development of the plant truly got underway. By 1929, there were 55 separate production plants in the complex, of which 15 were for chemical production. Marghera had become like a new Arsenal – with 880 people employed in the complex, it was a centre for Fascist commercial and military production.

By 1932, Marghera had also expanded as a residential area, with 5,000 people living in the vicinity of the complex.\textsuperscript{71} Marghera was proof to many Fascists that Mussolini’s government had regenerated the city. \textit{Le Tre Venezia} claimed:

\ldots noi la vedremo risorgere a una prosperità forse mai vista, e la vedremo adempiere alla funzione che deve assolvere nella vita nazionale.

\ldots we will see her [Venice] rise to a prosperity that has perhaps never been seen, and will see her perform the function which she needs to fulfil in the life of the nation.

That function is: a) a maritime bridge between the East and Central Europe; b) the capital of Art; c) the focal point for all activities of the people of the Veneto region.\textsuperscript{72}

Once again the city’s various aspects had to be held in tense equilibrium. Like the refractions of light upon its canals, Venice could be viewed as many diverse identities. The Fascist approach to the city’s iconography was to try and harmonise these identities. Thus here, against the backdrop of the heavy industrial development at Marghera – where a ‘new’ productive city was being created – Venice is also seen in its historic roles as meeting-point of East and West, and as great city of Art.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid (my italics). Even in a city like Venice, ‘Rome’ was conceived of as the centre of spiritual, economic and political power that was to be deferred to.


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., p.641.
Plans for the development of Porto Marghera in the 1930s.
Art and Iconography

However, the city’s position as ‘capital of Art’ brought both benefits and problems for Venice during the Fascist period. Although many commentators praised its unique beauty – seen in the combination of light and water – as emblematic of the purity of italianità, at other times this beauty could be viewed as a hindrance, linked to the city’s reputation for decadent hedonism. As in the scorching polemic of Marinetti, some Fascist approaches to the city stressed the new Venice’s departure from its old position as temple to the religion of Beauty.

On Mussolini’s visit to the city in 1934 (timed to coincide with his meeting with Hitler at Strà, some miles north of Venice on the mainland) the Duce delivered a speech in Piazza San Marco setting out his vision for Venice’s future, as reported here in the Rivista della Città di Venezia. Mussolini here both upholds the glories of Venice’s past, and proffers a stark challenge to the ‘renewed’ Fascist Venice:

CAMICIE NERE!
…Venezia e il Veneto portavano ancora i segni delle loro ferite (applausi)…Anche allora mi giunse da questa piazza l’urlo della vostra fede (voci: Sì!), il grido della vostra passione (applausi). Vi era una speranza e una certezza. Oggi, dopo undici anni, questa certezza è diventata più profonda, è il patrimonio inalienabile di tutto il popolo italiano (acclamazioni vivissime)…
Dopo undici anni, tornando a Venezia, ho potuto constatare che anche Venezia ha camminato. Taluno ha ricordato in questi giorni tutto ciò che il Governo fascista ha fatto per Venezia. È qualche cosa, ma non basta. Bisogna fare di più.
Venezia per la sua gloriosa storia imperiale di molti secoli, per il suo indomabile patriottismo, per la sua capacità di resistenza e di sacrificio, merita la particolare attenzione del Governo fascista.
È tempo di dire che Venezia non deve vivere soltanto della sua inuguagliabile bellezza. Questo poteva bastare un secolo fa, nel secolo del romanticismo. Non oggi. Venezia deve vivere del suo lavoro (applausi vivissimi), deve ritrovare le strade dei suoi traffici: le strade che le diedero la potenza e la gloria, le strade che le devono dare ancora il benessere e la gloria futura.

BLACK SHIRTS!
…Venice and the Veneto still wear the marks of their wounds (applause) …Today again from this piazza I hear the cry of your faith (voices: yes!), the shout of your passion (applause). Yesterday you had a hope and a certainty. Today, after eleven years, this certainty has grown deeper – it is the inalienable right of all the Italian people (very loud cheers)…..
Today, returning to Venice after eleven years, I could see that Venice also has moved on. Over the past few days people have mentioned all the Fascist government has done for Venice. It’s something, but it is not enough. We need to do more.
Venice, with its glorious imperial past of many centuries, with its indomitable patriotism, with its capacity for resistance and sacrifice, deserves the particular attention of the Fascist government.

It is time to say that Venice must not depend only on its unrivalled beauty. A hundred years ago, in the century of romanticism, this was enough. Not today. Venice must work for its living (*very loud cheers*), must reclaim its streets, full of traffic: the streets which gave it its power and glory, the streets which can once again give it affluence and future glory.\(^3\)

One of the things to be noticed about this speech is the way in which it weaves the strands of past, present and future into its appeal to the people of Venice. Not only does Mussolini remember his own earlier visit to the city in 1923, but an earlier ghost – that of the First World War – is also invoked with the language of the ‘marks of their wounds’. The use of the War as focal point was common in Fascist rhetoric from its earliest days, when the movement originated from interventionist groups who felt their victory was ‘mutilated’ by the unfair terms of the peace treaties.\(^4\) Here Mussolini upholds the fighters of Venice and the Veneto as exemplars of courage and bravery. From the War, the Duce moves, through his speech of 1923, to the present: ‘Today…I could see that Venice has moved on’. Indeed it had; building projects such as the elongation of streets, the construction of a new motor bridge over the lagoon, and the development of the motor terminal at Piazzale Roma all contributed to altering the appearance of the city. Alongside the architectural developments were the cultural projects – the art Biennale and the film festival. Mass tourism had also been brought to Venice. In the words of the Venetian historian Alvise Zorzi, ‘la città subisce…un’ergica cura di ringiovanimento’, ‘the city was subjected…to a strong dose of rejuvenation’.\(^5\) As opposed to the myths of death and decline attributed to decadentist writers, Zorzi argues that ‘la Venezia degli anni che precedono la seconda guerra mondiale è una città giovane’, ‘the Venice of the years preceding the Second World War was a youthful city’.\(^6\)

Mussolini’s speech touches on the decadent city of the past – it is there in his picture of Venice living off the back of its ‘unrivalled beauty’ – only to leave it behind. The Duce,


\(^4\) As in the Fascist concept of the *vittoria mutilata*, paralleled by the Nazi myth of the ‘stab-in-the-back’ enacted on returning War veterans by the democratic-liberal establishment.

\(^5\) Zorzi, p.91.

\(^6\) Ibid., p.114.
The crowd in Piazza San Marco during Mussolini’s visit, 1934.
Mussolini’s visit to Venice in 1934 as recorded by the Rivista della Città di Venezia.
who was fond of Venice and enjoyed strolling over its canals in his blue yachting blazer and sailor’s cap with white slacks, prefers to talk of the city’s ‘glorious imperial’ history and its ‘indomitable patriotism’. By doing so, Mussolini manages to conflate the peculiar history of the maritime Venetian Republic with his own Fascist reading of the Italian story. The word ‘imperial’ here refers triply to ancient Rome, medieval Venice and the ambitions of his own Fascist regime. The particulars of Venice’s maritime past are transmuted into the general ‘patriotism’ of the Italy of today. There is also the critique here of the nineteenth century, the ‘century of romanticism’, whose notions are outdated. The rhetoric has a harsh ring; when the Duce exhorts Venetians to ‘work for [their] living’, it sounds as if he is addressing a lazy huddle of slacker-workers who for too long have rested on their romantic laurels. Shades of Marinetti here. And also shades of Pound, who at times professed to hate the nineteenth century with equal vehemence (‘18th century, in the main cliché. 19th mainly MESS’).

Although the Fascist project clearly looked to the Risorgimento, with its ‘heroes’ of Garibaldi, Mazzini and Cavour – indeed, as Mabel Berezin puts it, the Risorgimento was a ‘fount of cultural and political memory’ – Mussolini also wanted to distance himself from some of the dewy-eyed romanticism associated with Italy in that era. Alongside Ruskin, Marinetti and Pound, Mussolini is concerned with the importance of labour. He is interested in the productivity, efficiency and power of Venice’s imperial past – used here as a spur to further glorious Fascist endeavour.

Mussolini’s earlier 1923 speech to the Venetians, which he refers to in the 1934 address, had been a more uncomplicated paean to Venice’s glory. He had referred to Venice’s proud imperial and naval history, calling the Mediterranean ‘mare nostro’ (‘our sea’) – i.e. Italian property. He had also constructed Venice as the heir to the Roman Empire: ‘Venezia l’erede

78 Guide to Kulchur, p.183.
di Roma, quella che dopo Roma ebbe l’impero più duraturo’, ‘Venice the heir of Rome, which after Rome was the most long-lasting empire [in Italy].’

Mussolini’s concern in both speeches, with their focusing on the imperial past and on the ‘future glories’ to come, demonstrates the wider Fascist concern to mould or ‘edit’ history. Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum, in their extremely useful text on the Fascist approach to art history, talk of the ‘Fascist concern for making the past present and the present part of the past’. This ‘editing’ of cultural history (‘translation’ is the word used by Lazzaro and Crum) was in part a way of unifying the diverse strands of Italian identity. Rhetoric (as in Mussolini’s speech to the Venetians), restoration, rebuilding projects, and ritual all ‘translated’ history ‘from one culture and period to another’. This ‘translation’ also attempted to bridge deeply entrenched regional barriers; as Lazzaro and Crum point out, the past of central or northern Italy was often a ‘foreign country’ to ‘Italians’ in Sicily or Sardinia. In response, Fascism attempted to homogenise differences with imposed rituals of cultural memory.

Not even Venice was immune from the drive to subordinate regional interests to the national good. Marla Stone records how the city’s Biennale became a battle ground for differing notions of how the regime should support Italian art. Increasingly, Fascist officials would pronounce on the need ‘to sever the Biennale from its Venetian roots’. The art exhibitions were thus to be used for the national interest, integrated into Fascist national culture. Accordingly, the 1932 redesign of the ‘Italia’ pavilion in Venice’s Giardini Pubblici was graced by both the lion of St. Mark, the ancient symbol of Venice, and an imperial eagle holding a Fascist littorio. Stone comments that, instead of Art or Venice, the ‘central theme of the façade thus became Italy’. The old lion still had its place, however; the 1932 edition of

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82 Ibid., p.6.
83 Stone, p.37.
84 Ibid., p.62.
Le Tre Venezia commented approvingly that ‘la nuova facciata si presenta con linee di gusto modernissimo, pur essendo composta di nobili elementi tradizionali’, ‘the new façade is presented in the most modern style, while being composed of noble, traditional elements’. These ‘noble, traditional elements’ apparently stand for the Venetian elements in the design, still worthy of their place in the redesigned Biennale. Whilst the emphasis on national culture cannot be denied, the Biennale was publicised by a plethora of Venetian images. Marla Stone stresses the consumer and tourist-orientated drive behind the production of this imagery: ‘The diversified Biennale [including both theatrical and film festivals as well as the art exhibitions] stressed the consumption of the “Venetian experience” in the form of a surfeit of Venetian imagery and references’. These included promotional literature decorated with masks and gondolas, Goldoni festivals, and in 1936 the production of a gold medallion picturing Mickey Mouse steering a gondola. Furthermore – in their status as expressions of italianità – Venetian traditional crafts such as lace-making and glass-blowing received renewed funding. In a sense the Fascist regime both encouraged and dampened expressions of Venetian identity; whilst upholding the importance of the national consciousness, the Mussolini government in the 1920s and ‘30s aimed to regenerate regional identities (including that of Venice) as different facets of the Italian whole.

Whilst it appeared that in the case of the Biennale, Fascism’s nationalising and centralizing tendencies ‘had reduced its Venetian character to tourism’, the persistence of ‘renewed Venice’ myths suggested that some sense of a regenerated Venetian identity was genuine. If, as Marla Stone claims, Venice ‘offered a pleasant and attractive backdrop for a national cultural institution’ (the Biennale) other expressions of venezianità had deeper roots. Although Venetian Fascism was initially a relatively weak movement, Luca Pes argues that ‘Venezia era una città dove più facilmente i miti locali si erano saldati con

85 Le Tre Venezia 1932, p.259.
86 Stone, p.101.
87 In this year, Walt Disney had won best animated cartoon. See the illustration in Stone, p.104.
88 Ibid., p.112.
89 Ibid., p.126.
90 Ibid.
l’irredentismo e l’imperialismo adriatico’, ‘Venice was a city where local myths were very easily welded to Irredentism and Adriatic imperialism’. Thus, as I will explore in chapter five, key chapters of Venetian history and their attendant legends were revisited and moulded to the demands of Fascist politics. Key to this project was a balancing of the ideals of Venice and Rome. Whilst the Fascist popolo in the city was clearly encouraged to turn their eyes to the glorious past of the ‘Serenissima’, this was to be balanced with the virtues of romanità. These new Venetians, in the words of the city’s Fascist commissioner Bruno Fornaciari in 1926, still bore ‘con…impresso nel cuore il leone di S. Marco, ma con negli occhi nuovi la visione di Roma’, ‘in their hearts the stamp of the lion of St. Mark but in their new eyes [they hold] the vision of Rome’. 

Thus, although influential Fascists like Margarita Sarfatti could claim in 1932 that ‘[Fascism’s aim] is to abolish all communal and regional particularism, in order to tie all of Italy solidly to Rome’, there remained in Venice an appeal to the iconography of the old Republic. If this iconography could be marshaled to the aid of the Fascist cause, so much the better. At any rate, Fascism presented Italian history as, in Marla Stone’s words, ‘an explosion of images, relics and symbols’; national identity was an artificial creation and chronology and detail ‘fell prey to the trajectory of national fulfillment’. Expressions of venezianità could therefore be encouraged as expressions of a wider national spirit, or genius, and an abstract, undefinable italianità was appealed to, one that could encompass both the Papacy and the Roman Empire, the Republic of Venice and the Florence of the Medicis. Fascism thus figured as the salvific repository of this record of history, ‘consciously [seeking] an amalgam of past and present, asserting its own iconography while subsuming elements of the preexisting…cosmology’.

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92 Quoted in the Rivista della Città di Venezia 1926, p.89.
93 Quoted in Stone, p.136. Sarfatti, the one-time mistress of Mussolini, was from a Venetian Jewish background.
94 Stone, p.164.
95 Ibid., p.166.
Mussolini (in white naval attire) strolling around the Venice Biennale in the 1930s. To his right in the panama hat is Count Volpi.
This spirit was evident in Fascist art, such as the fresco *La Regina del Mare*, produced for the 1938 Venice Biennale. The central figures in this picture are representative of Venetian history – the lion of St. Mark and the ‘Queen of the Seas’ (*regina del mare*) figure both portray aspects of the city’s identity. Yet the effect of these Venetian ‘signifiers’ is balanced by an appeal to Fascist national culture. Marla Stone comments: ‘The iconography is both national and regional, as the primary symbols of Venice – Saint Mark, the sea, and the city itself – share the space with references to national and Fascist strength. The Queen of the Seas figure holds a fascio in one hand and a Venetian galley ship in the other’. What the fresco is attempting to portray is clear: ‘Venice, given strength by Fascism, will again predominate, and Fascism, as the embodiment of all Italian historical triumphs, has the blessing of history’.  

Such an artwork may be seen as exemplary of the totalising political impetus of late Fascism; indeed Marla Stone argues that by 1938 ‘Fascist official culture had become [a] static museum of dead objects’, of which this clunky allegory was one example. Yet, tracing the course of Fascist culture in Venice, I have discovered similar iconography much earlier in the regime’s history. In 1926, for example, Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata, the Venetian industrialist who became Mussolini’s minister of finance, was presented with a model galley ship of the type featured in the 1938 ‘Queen of the Seas’ fresco as a gesture of goodwill from the people of Venice. Along with the model, Volpi was offered two commemorative medals. One depicts Venice, enthroned as Queen of the Seas, surrounded by waves with the shape of the Ducal Palace and the domes of San Marco behind her. At her feet crouches an alert lion of St. Mark, mouth open as if to roar, holding the open book with its ancient Venetian motto, *Pax Tibi Marcus Evangelium Meum*, ‘Peace be to you, Mark, my evangelist.’ On the other medal, alongside words honouring Volpi as a prized Venetian citizen, is the symbol of the *fascio*, the lictor’s rod garlanded with olive branches. The people of Venice, represented by

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96 Ibid., p.217. Similar ‘veneto-Fascist’ imagery can be seen in Mario Sironi’s 1936-7 mural, *Italy, Venice and the Subjects of Study*, commissioned for the auditorium of Ca’ Foscarí University, Venice.  
97 Ibid., p.253.  
98 By legend the words attributed to an angel as the gospel-writer entered the Venetian lagoon.
The Regina del Mare (Queen of the Seas) fresco produced for the 1938 Venice Biennale.
Mario Sironi’s 1936-7 Fresco for the interior of Venice’s Università di Ca’ Foscari. Note the lion of St. Mark in the right hand corner and the domes of the church of St. Mark in the background. The inscription in the top right hand corner reads ‘L’Italia fara da sé’, ‘Italy will make its own way’ – an inscription that seems to reflect the country’s increasing isolation after the invasion of Abyssinia.
Professor Giovanni Bodiga, compared Volpi to the Venetian ambassadors of old, and presented him his gifts in the confident hope that the ‘old, ravaged lion’ would once again come forward to rule the seas.\textsuperscript{99} The city could look forward to a time when once again, its ships, loaded with weapons and treasures, would forge an empire.

As well as obviously imperialistic rhetoric like this, pride in Venice was encouraged at all levels. Schoolchildren, as well as being instructed in Venetian history, were urged to develop their consciousness of the city’s uniqueness in a variety of ways. At the First regional Venetian School Exposition, in April 1927, alongside the usual Fascist emphasis on physical education and political indoctrination, there was also a clear stress on the importance of \textit{venezianità}. The children were encouraged to develop their national (and Nationalist) consciousness: ‘la scuola, ispirata alle alte idealtà del fascismo deve preparare la nuova giovinezza d’Italia’, ‘schools, inspired by the high ideals of Fascism must prepare the new youth of Italy’, reported the \textit{Rivista della Città di Venezia}.\textsuperscript{100} Yet this was to be done in the context of a developing notion of Venice’s special place in the nation’s culture. For the exhibition, an ‘Omaggio a Venezia’, ‘Homage to Venice’ was produced, made by the eight classes of the school of San Provolo with pencils, crayons, string and canvas. In it, described the \textit{Rivista della Città di Venezia}, Venice was ‘illustrata in tutti i suoi aspett\ i caratteristici, i camini, i ponti, i traghetto, i pozzi, le imbarcazioni, le lapidi, gli archi, i palazzi’, ‘illustrated in all its characteristic aspects – streets, bridges, \textit{traghetto}, wells, boats, stones, arches, palaces’.\textsuperscript{101} Such an exercise was aimed at developing awareness amongst schoolchildren of Venice’s materiality, the details of its historical and architectural uniqueness. In the schools’ attempt to balance ideological commitment with Venetian particularity, perhaps we can see most clearly the Fascist aim to ‘march boldly towards the future…respecting the glories of the past’.

\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Rivista della Città di Venezia} 1926, p.89
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Rivista della Città di Venezia} 1927, p.74.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p.77.
The medals presented to Count Volpi by the people of Venice (1926). On the left, Venice is enthroned as Queen of the Seas with a view of the Doge’s palace in the background, and the lion of St. Mark at her feet. On the right-hand medal a Fascist axe is engraved at the top.
Venice as New Jerusalem

‘Yea the lines hast thou laid unto me/ in pleasant places,/ And the beauty of this thy Venice/
hast thou shown unto me’, Ezra Pound wrote in 1908. Beholding ‘this thy Venice’, as he
did first in 1898, the city must have seemed to him like a private utopia opened up for his
enjoyment. It had the sense of a Garden of Eden where he could feel the presence of God
walking in the cool of the day, just as he would later write of the ‘bright gods and Tuscan’
floating in the azure air. It was a city that activated his religious consciousness; he felt
worshipful, in awe of the place:

O God of silence,
    Purifiez nos cœurs,
    Purifiez nos cœurs,
O God of waters,
    make clean our hearts within us,
    For I have seen the
Shadow of this thy Venice
    Floating upon the waters

This early poem, though probably ‘still too much in the shadow…of Swinburne’ as Tony
Tanner has it, seems to exemplify some of the psalmic, liturgical style that is characteristic
of the Cantos. Muttered words in awe of God: in this case, in awe of a God and the city he or
she has created. There was, indeed, ‘no place more sacred’ for Pound; the city figured as a
divine gift, ‘floating upon the waters’ like the Holy Spirit at the creation of the world. Like
Ruskin before him, the city of Venice triggered in this writer all the reflexes to kneel in
worship, all the instincts towards religion. Venice is a gift, a blessing for which humanity
should be duly thankful:

…what great kindness
    have we done in times past
    and forgotten it,
That thou givest this wonder unto us,

103 “Canto III”, p.11.
104 ‘Night Litany’, p.41.
105 Tanner, p.279.
106 Ibid.
107 ‘And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.’ (Genesis 1:2)
O God of waters?  

The presence of the ‘wonder’ of Venice renders humanity responsible for due awe and reverence. Venice, like Eden or the new Jerusalem, is touched with God’s presence: ‘the glory of the shadow/ of thy Beauty hath walked/…./In this thy Venice.’

Pound, as we have seen in this chapter, was not the only one to see in the new Venice opening up before him a repository of hopes and dreams, of divine blessing and uniqueness. The Fascist project, as it developed in the Venetian context, talked often of Venice’s special place in the new Italy. Using the language of ‘faith’, ‘blessing’, ‘promise’ and ‘miracle’, Mussolini’s regime was seen to have regenerated the city, both redeeming its past as a source of pride and laying emphasis on a brave utopian future. The use of rhetoric whipped up an almost religious ecstasy as Nationalist and regional pride were amalgamated and added to a self-consciously ‘spiritual’ language. After the assassination attempt on Mussolini in 1926, for example, the *Rivista della Città di Venezia* had this to say:

Nell’ ondata di sdegno, che tutti noi sentiamo prorompere dal nostro cuore, e nell’ esultanza di sapere salvo Colui che ha dato all’ Italia una nuova vita di Gloria e di grandezza, Venezia innalza con tutta la sua anima il grido che riassume l’amore a la fede di tutti i veri Italiani:

VIVA MUSSOLINI!

In the surge of contempt which we all feel in our hearts, and in the jubilation of knowing that he who has given Italy a new life of power and glory has been saved, Venice raises with all its heart the cry that reassures him of the love and faith of all true Italians:

VIVA MUSSOLINI!  

The Duce here is almost Christ-like, promising ‘new life’, power and glory to Italy and Venice. Furthermore, just as Christianity talks of true and false saints, the writer assumes that there are ‘true’ and false Italians. ‘True Italians’, like true believers, will stay faithful and love their leader, raising their voice to sing his praises. False Italians, presumably are amongst the attempted murderer’s lot (and Violet Gibson, the would-be assassin, was Irish). They are, implicitly, to be purged from this new Italy.

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109 Ibid.
110 *Rivista della Città di Venezia* 1926, p.421.
Not that Mussolini always supplanted the divine in the rhetoric of Venetian Fascism. In 1929, of course, Fascism would reach its concordat with the Vatican in the Lateran Pact. But even in Pietro Orsi’s speech in Venice on Christmas Eve 1926, there is talk of ‘l’impulso possente dello statista meraviglioso che Dio ha dato all’Italia’, ‘the powerful stimulus of this marvelous statesman [Mussolini] that God has given Italy’ (my italics). The Italian regions, Orsi claimed, were engaged in a ‘noble race’, in which Venice, he was sure, would finish highly.111 It was as if – as with Pound – there was a benign providence looking after the city, guarding it for its unique role in the new Fascist wonderland: ‘Purifiez nos cœurs/ O God of waters’.

It is the tendency of criticism to separate the literary and historical approaches to places. Yet, in the case of Venice, there is a remarkable congruity between the visions of the city offered by poets like Pound (even before his political commitment to Mussolini) and the iconography of a political movement such as Fascism. In my next chapter, I will examine in more detail the ways in which Venice acted as a crucible for Pound’s cultural commitment to Fascism. I will also discuss more deeply the ways in which Venetian history was summoned and used by both the poet and the Fascist project, and the similarity of these approaches. Pietro Orsi in his Christmas Eve speech claimed that ‘tutto l’estuario si trova di nuovo riunito in una unità di fede, di propositi, di lavoro, per forgiarsi il suo nuovo e luminoso avvenire’, ‘the whole lagoon is reunited again in a unity of faith, of intention, of work, to forge her [Venice’s] new, bright future’.112 This ‘new, bright future’ would involve a self-conscious reference to high points in Venice’s military, artistic and imperial history. But it would also, as we shall see, involve a ‘dark side’, a narrowing of the terms of what ‘Venetian’ identity consisted of in an ethno-political ideological drive paralleled in the writings of Ezra Pound.

111 Rivista della Città di Venezia 2, 1926, p.524.
112 Ibid.
VENICE IN THE CANTOS: TOURISM AND FASCISM

This chapter places Pound’s depictions of Venice within the specific context of the development of Italian Nationalism in the city and the idea of a ‘renewed Venice’. Working backwards from the idealised city of the post-war Pisan Cantos, where Venice, as one prototype of the mythical city of Dioce, fits the image of what I have called a ‘Fascist Utopia’, the chapter traces the development of the political idea of Venice within Pound’s poetry. Beginning with Pound’s struggle in the early Cantos with the more static Italy presented by Robert Browning, I suggest that the touristic and the political work in tandem to create a Venice ‘made new’ in Pound’s ‘long poem containing history’. I argue for an image of Venice in Pound’s oeuvre that increasingly leans towards Fascism, under the influence of the Italian Nationalist visions of D’Annunzio, and Pound’s early experience of Fascism in Venice.

Reading the Cantos alongside the history of Fascist understandings of Venice, I argue that Pound’s depictions of the city resist the stereotypical emphasis on decay, decadence and pathos. However, the chapter also discusses the disturbing implications of such resistance – Pound’s emphasis on a Venetian ‘renewal’ linked in his mind to ‘the dream’ of Mussolini’s Italy and associated with an anti-Semitism that hints at a Jewish origin to the historical ‘Fall of Venice’. This chapter suggests that Pound’s poetic references to Venice are best understood with an ear to the interplay of contemporary history, myth and tourism, the reader having in some sense to resist the emphatic drive of Pound’s lyrical imagination.

The Fascist Utopia: Venice in the Pisan Cantos

On the 20th June 1936, Congressman George Tinkham of Massachusetts wrote to Ezra Pound advising him that he was planning to visit Italy. Tinkham had briefly fought alongside the Italians in the First World War, and a gun he had fired was now in the War Museum in Rome:
‘I should like to see it’. The letter also contained some political discussion, including Tinkham’s opinion that ‘the United States should not be a “puppet” state of Great Britain’ and that, referring to Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia:

Mussolini certainly has had a great triumph and in his age and generation is a great man. Any man who can successfully defy England and the League of Nations, representing fifty-two nations, is a man of strength and he has my admiration.

The Republican Tinkham opposed any American sanction of Italy and Nazi Germany and found a willing admirer in Pound, who by the mid 1930s was outspoken in his support for Fascism.

After some to-ing and fro-ing, Pound replied to Tinkham about the proposed Italian trip, writing from 310 San Gregorio, Venice:

I “just can’t” get to Rome now but nobody ought to visit Italy (even if it is for the seventeenth time) without passing through Venice. ANY chance of you making it? No big game here for you to shoot [Tinkham was a keen huntsman], only one unfortunate lion, but you might shoot the responsible parties for putting the animal in a cage that is MUCH too small.

The ‘unfortunate lion’, of course, refers to the emblem of St. Mark, Venice’s patron saint. But why and how was it ‘caged’? The implication is that Venice is shed of its former glory. Confined and tamed, the lion stands as some kind of lesson here; there are people, Pound seems to darkly suggest, that have taken away the grandeur of Italy and need to be brought to account. If the Fascist context comes into play – and it is clearly relevant in these letters – then what lies behind these lines might also suggest the remedy for the plight of the ‘unfortunate lion’. For Tinkham’s and Pound’s correspondence addresses the question of what the United State’s response should be to what Pound increasingly referred to as the ‘new Europe’ – a Fascist Europe whose victory in Abyssinia signalled for Pound the advance of a political and cultural renewal. This projected renewal can be seen to be present, I will argue, in Pound’s images of Venice.

2 Ibid.
3 Pound to Tinkham, letter of 10 September 1936, p.81.
Tinkham clearly had a good time in the city with Pound. He stayed at the Excelsior Hotel at the Lido, and wrote to Pound after the trip:

I desire to thank you for all your courtesies and attention while I was at Venice. Had I not had you, I should have been deprived of a great deal of pleasure. All of the places you took me were little “gems” which I never should have seen.

And, as a follow-up, Pound sent Tinkham two postcards: one was of a view of Rapallo, the other a picture of the Venetian church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, which was to feature much in Pound’s poetry as the ‘jewel box’, a perfect piece of Renaissance architecture. In themselves, these details might not be of much interest. But here they occur in a quite obviously political context; Pound is trying to court Tinkham in Venice as an American political figure sympathetic to Fascism. The exchange of postcards, which is a means of reminiscing upon and preserving the touristic encounter, become in this context a further comment on Fascism’s role in Pound’s mind as guardian of culture. These photographic fragments of Italian beauty are also, perhaps, a plea: look at what we might lose if we choose the wrong (for Pound, the anti-Fascist) path. Tinkham’s visit and touristic consumption of the Venetian experience must therefore be seen in the light of Pound’s enthusiasm for, and Tinkham’s apparent assent to, the Mussolini regime. Furthermore, given that Tinkham’s Italian travels also included the re-firing of a World War One Italian gun – recalling Tinkham’s own memory of fighting alongside Italians and also rather aptly demonstrating a key feature of Fascist thought – the trip must be viewed as a political reception of Italy. The firing of the gun recalls a time when the United States stood alongside Italy, but also in graphic form encapsulates Mussolinian rhetoric: the constant repetition of the ‘great sacrifice’ of World War One as the prism through which the modern nation must be seen.

The relationship between tourism and the political in Fascist Italy has been explored by a number of critics, including the architectural historian D. Medina Lasansky, who provides a particularly persuasive analysis of the problem. In her work *The Renaissance Perfected*, Lasansky argues that the development of contemporary touristic Italy is intrinsically linked to the historico-political rhetoric of Fascism. For example, Lasansky

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4 Tinkham to Pound, letter of 17 October 1936, p.870.
shows how Gothic buildings in the towns of San Gimignano and Arezzo were ‘purged’ of ‘foreign’ and ‘baroque’ influences, making the cities simultaneously more unified and consumable touristic experiences and embodiments of the Fascist ideal. Such restoration, seeking to return to an ‘authentic’ Italian-ness was actually an ‘arbitrary reworking of urban space based upon an idealised version of history’. Tourism in Fascist Italy was, as Lasansky argues in her preface, ‘simultaneously a cultural product and a producer of a distinctly Fascist culture’ and furthermore ‘served as a vehicle by which Mussolini’s rhetoric could be distributed efficiently’. Tinkham’s holiday in Venice, with the perfect pro-Fascist tour guide in Pound, should be viewed in a similar light. Tinkham’s consumption of Venice is also a kind of consumption of Fascist politics, one that casts Mussolini’s state (Pound would later see Hitlerian Germany in the same light) as a defender of high culture, of all that is civilized in Europe.

I also suggest that the political prism is the best way to understand the apparently nostalgic and beautiful images of a remembered Venice in Pound’s Pisan Cantos of the 1940s. These Cantos were written before and during Pound’s incarceration at the American detention centre near Pisa after Pound’s indictment for treason on the basis of his pro-Axis radio broadcasts. Pound’s confinement provides the obvious background for much of this poetry; yet there are other details in the Pisans which merit special attention. The aforementioned Congressman Tinkham, referred to as ‘Unkle George’, appears several times in these poems, often in a Venetian setting:

Unkle George in Brassitalo’s abbazia
voi che passate per questa via:
Does D’Annunzio live here?
said the American lady, K.H.
“I do not know” said the aged Veneziana
“this lamp is for the virgin.”
“Non combatta’ere” said Giovanna,
meaning: don’t work so hard,

Arachne che mi porta fortuna;

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6 Ibid., p.116.
7 Ibid., p.XXV.
Athene, who wrongs thee?
τίς ἄδικα
That butterfly has gone out thru my smoke hole

Unkle George observing Ct/Volpe’s neck at the Lido
and deducing his energy. Unkle G stood like a statue…

(LXXVI, p.475)

It is difficult at first glance to decipher the complex imagery. What can be said, initially, is that the appearance of the Arachne myth (‘Arachne che mi porta…’) is ‘book-ended’ by two ‘slices’ of Venetian life that also belong to Pound’s personal recollections. Tinkham (‘Unkle George’) appears firstly in ‘Brassitalo’s abbazia’, suggesting that Pound and Tinkham must have visited it on Tinkham’s 1936 visit. ‘Brassitalo’ is the painter Italico Brass, who Pound got to know in 1908 when the poet lived in Venice. 8 Brass painted Venetian scenes, and his ‘abbazia’ is the Abbazia della Misericordia, an abandoned church which Brass used as a studio. Here also is D’Annunzio, who the ‘American lady, K.H.’ is trying to seek out with Pound. ‘K.H.’ stands for Katherine Heyman, a pianist whom Pound promoted in Venice and London in 1908. But this attempt to see D’Annunzio may have taken place later – Carroll F. Terrell suggests the year 1920, when the Italian poet was living in the Casetta Rossa on the Grand Canal.

This section of the passage thus seems to focus on Venice’s modern cultural activity. Aside from Tinkham, a sort of guide-figure passing through these scenes, the main characters are all artists: D’Annunzio the poet, ‘K.H.’ the musician and Italico Brass the painter. I suggest that Pound here presents a cultural Venice renewed by artistic activity – writing, music, painting – and grounded on a kind of spirituality. This spirituality is signified by the abbazia with its motif above the door, (the words voi che passate per questa via, ‘you who pass by’, are commonly placed above Italian church entrances) 9 and the presence of the ‘aged Veneziana’ with her lamps for the virgin. As early as Three Cantos, Pound had approved of much Italian Catholic pageantry, seeing it as continuous with classical, Greco-Roman

9 The phrase is a citation from the Old Testament book of Lamentations, 1:12.
pantheism. In *Three Cantos I*, where Pound described the Corpus Domini festival in the Lake Garda region of Italy, he wrote: ‘some old god eats the smoke [incense], ‘tis not the saints’. The practice of lighting lamps for the Madonna may therefore be seen here as the ancient veneration of a goddess, an action towards which the poet is positively inclined.

One could read this spirituality as acting in contrast to the celebrity of D’Annunzio; the shallow hero-worship of the writer shown against something much deeper, ancient and profound, as ‘K.H’’s question about an earthly ‘god’ is met with non-plussed faith. Yet I do not interpret these lines in this way; rather, I see the cultural/artistic activity taking place in Venice as being *complementary* to the worshipful response signified by the ‘aged veneziana’. And here it is important to bear in mind Pound’s context; imprisoned in a Pisan military tent, he remembers Venice and other ‘sacred places’ (the phrase is Hugh Kenner’s) with nostalgic mourning. Venice can be seen, I suggest, as a *paradiso* – an Edenic, spiritual place imbued with divine power. This might naturally lead the critic towards an ethereal, aestheticised ‘Venice’ were it not for the second ‘slice’ of Venetian experience that frames the invocation of Arachne:

Unkle George observing Ct/Volpe’s neck at the Lido
and deducing his energy.

‘Ct/Volpe’ or Count Volpi, whose name Pound misspells, was most famous for being Mussolini’s minister of Finance; an ambitious man, Volpi has been described as ‘unctuous’ and ‘ideologically practical’, a political pragmatist who falsely backdated his membership of the Fascist party in order to progress in the regime. Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata was a Venetian industrialist who had been governor of Tripolitania (Italian colonial Libya) before being given the role in Mussolini’s cabinet. The two references to Volpi in the *Cantos* (there is a further citation in *Canto LXXX*) connect Pound’s idyllic remembrance of Venice to a city undergoing cultural ‘renewal’ or modernisation under the auspices of the Fascist administration. Volpi was perhaps the most

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prominent figure in this Fascist project. He was key in developing the Venice Biennale in the 1930s, he was there, prominently, when Hitler met Mussolini in the town of Strà, just outside of Venice in 1934, and he had a huge influence on the development of Porto Marghera, the industrial complex across the lagoon from Venice which became a Fascist showcase for the Veneto region.\textsuperscript{12} Pound seems to have been impressed by his activism and ambition; even this view of the back of his neck at the Lido is imbued with a sense of the power of the man.

Volpi was literally connected to power; he was responsible for ‘the rural electrification of the Adriatic coast’, making sense of the later reference in \textit{Canto LXXX} to ‘Volpe’s kilowatt energy’.\textsuperscript{13} Rather like Pound’s impressions of Mussolini in his \textit{Guide to Kulchur}, where the physical traits of the Duce are used to highlight his dynamism – ‘Mussolini a great man…in the swiftness of mind, in the speed in which his real emotion is shown in his face’\textsuperscript{14} – this brief encounter with Volpi the energetic Fascist is loaded with significance.

Volpi’s appearance with Tinkham brings in the second ‘slice’ of Venetian life that frames the discussion of Arachne. Pound’s nostalgia here – nostalgia for a lost Venice, for its beauty and culture – is also a political mourning. The appearances of the political figures Tinkham and Volpi are important as part of a central remembering of Fascists and those sympathetic to Fascism interacting within a ‘renewed’ Venice. If the first section of ‘veneziana’ centred around artistic production, the second focuses in on the political landscape of Fascist Venice. This feeling is reinforced if one reads the section immediately before the appearance of ‘Unkle George’ in the Canto:

\begin{verbatim}
by the soap-smooth stone posts where San Vio
meets with il Canal Grande
between Salviati and the house that was of Don Carlos
shd/I chuck the lot into the tide-water?
le bozze “A Lume Spento”/
and by the column of Todero
shd/I shift to the other side
or wait 24 hours,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{13} Terrell, p.400.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Guide to Kulchur} (London: Peter Owen 1938), p.105.
free then, therein the difference
in the great ghetto, left standing
with the new bridge of the Era where was the old eyesore
Vendramin, Contrarini, Fonda, Fondecho
and Tullio Romano carved the sirens
as the old custode says; so that since
then no one has been able to carve them
for the jewel box, Santa Maria Dei Miracoli…

At first glance this appears an idyllic, nostalgic picture of Venice. Pound is remembering the time he stayed in the city in 1908, where he published his first volume of poetry, *A Lume Spento*, a work which had concentrated on fairly simple, picturesque views of the city. Here, Pound remembers asking himself whether to throw the proofs into the Grand Canal: ‘shd/I chuck the lot into the tide-water?/ le bozze “A Lume Spento”.’ This then is a personal mythologizing, and Venice a primal Eden where the decisions he makes (should he throw the poems away or not) become instrumental in determining his later career. The alliterative ‘soap-smooth stone posts’ by the canal evokes the movement of water, which has ground down the posts until they are smooth, with the ‘soap’ suggesting cleansing. One of the aspects of Venice in Pound’s personal mythology is that of renewal, or purification. But here what is suggested by Venice’s appearance in these lines is freedom. ‘Free then’, he writes – which I take to mean, ‘I was free then’, ie. in 1908 when I could choose whether to keep the poems or not. The difference is, he writes, between ‘the great ghetto’ and ‘the new bridge of the Era’. Here he seems to be equating the old Venetian Jewish ghetto with his own confinement, something that appears vastly inappropriate given the time in which he was writing and his rabidly anti-Semitic comments produced in the same period.

The discomfort this produces in the reader does not stop there. When he describes ‘the new bridge of the Era’, we know that the Era in question is the Fascist one. The bridge is the rebuilt Ponte dell’ Accademia, created in 1933 by Eugenio Miozzi. Miozzi, as we saw in chapter four, was also responsible for the brutally modernist lines of the multi-storey car park in Piazzale Roma, a building typical of the Fascist period. Tony Tanner is right in claiming
that ‘Pound is still thinking resolutely in Mussolinian time’ in this section. Remembering Venice here means a number of things: one of those things, disturbingly, is the Venice as reinvigorated, modernized by the Fascist project. What is particularly unsettling about this mythological topology is the ease with which Pound’s references to the Fascist development of Venice seem to melt into a more general praising of Venice’s beauty – one that is familiar, almost stereotypical. The line ‘the new bridge of the Era where was the old eyesore’ seems to speak of the Mussolini regime’s ability to get on and make good aesthetic objects (‘the old eyesore’ refers to a nineteenth-century bridge which was there before). Yet the poetry quickly dissolves into a general view of the Grand Canal. ‘Vendramin, Contrarini, Fondo, Fondecho’ are buildings and palazzi on the canal, and the effect of listing them like this gives the sensation of moving down the water past the facades reflecting in the waves. The reader is then taken into ‘the jewel box’, Santa Maria dei Miracoli, where the exquisite carvings of Tullio Lombardo (who Pound mistakenly refers to as ‘Romano’) flank the entrance. The beauty which he describes and the rhythm of the Venetian words (like Vendramin, Contrarini, etc.) lull the reader (and the critic) into forgetting what is actually going on in the Canto. The idyllic beauty of Renaissance and Gothic Venice is being aligned with the aesthetic project of Fascism, and all of these ‘Venices’ are filtered through Pound’s own mythologizing.

Peter Nicholls has suggested that the Pisan Cantos represents a ‘cleavage between the material and the ideal…[opening] up a complex curve of feeling which incorporates both nostalgia and continuing faith’. In contrast to critics such as Daniel Pearlman and Anthony Woodward, Nicholls refuses to view the Pisan Cantos as in any way a humbled admission of defeat, a capitulation to the realisation of the failure of the ‘New Europe’. Indeed, the visionary city that Pound places as the Pisans’ central image – ‘the city of Dioce’ (LXXIV, 439) – is aligned with the Fascist state. Dioce is Deioces, the Mede ruler who built the city of Ectaban. Ectaban, as in Canto IV where it first appears, is associated in Pound’s mind with paradise. But in the Pisan Cantos it is Mussolini, the ‘twice crucified’ (LXXIV, 439), who is

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15 Tanner, p.339.
associated with this paradisal work of building. Nicholls views the *Pisan Cantos*, with their
central image of the city of Dioce, as drawing ‘more support from the historic actuality of the
fascist state than most critics have recognised’. In this reading, Mussolini and the Fascist Era,
‘twice crucified’, are ‘resurrected’ in the pages of Pound’s epic. Faced with the actual
destruction of Fascism, Pound as ‘true believer’ must re-inscribe the Mussolinian state within
the *Pisan Cantos* as a ‘mystical’, organic process:

[The city of Dioce] is at once Mussolini’s state…and the visionary city which the
poet will attempt to reconstruct from the debris and project into an uncertain future. It
is important to see that the two represent for him a potent and conjoint image, and
that the ideals for which the regime stood are not rendered useless and inert by their
destruction in history.\(^\text{17}\)

It would be too easy for the critic to capitulate to the nostalgic line of sadness or regret which
often colours readings of the *Pisan Cantos*. Nicholls suggests that we view these poems rather
as embodying the tension between the actual failure of Fascism and Pound’s refusal to give
up its politics. Yes, the *Pisans* are flecked with ‘traces’ of nostalgic memory, but the poetry,
seeks to activate those traces, and in doing so to liberate the mind from the turmoil of
the present…So we find that while the fragmentary perceptions yielded by memory
and the floating syntax which gives them a poignantly attenuated sense of
connectedness are signs of suffering and weakness they are also the means by which
the reflective moments of conscience are prevented from fully taking shape.\(^\text{18}\)

I suggest that Nicholls’s paradigm provides a helpful prism through which we can view the
images of Venice in the *Pisan Cantos*. These ‘fragments of Venice’ are not depoliticised; nor
are they simply nostalgic recollections. They contain political weight which Pound intends the
writing to ‘activate’. Yes, this is a mythic Venice, but which myths are being referred to here?
One of them, surely, is a Fascist version of the city – one populated by Volpi, visited by
Tinkham, and characterised by the architectural projects of the ‘Era’. Furthermore, these
‘fragments’ are not intended by Pound to be static. As Nicholls argues:

This is not…a purely elegiac recalling of moments and images: …the various
memories recorded in “The Pisan Cantos” are held by Pound to have a common
power of growth and renewal.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p.165.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p.172.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., p.173.
The problem is that the ‘oblique’ lyrical form of the *Pisans* can easily ‘hypnotise’ the reader with the powerful rhythm of their seemingly consistent elegiac reveries. The obliquity of the poems in practice means that the reader may not pick up on Fascist references as they melt into aesthetic images or invocations of Greek myth. The references to Arachne, which recur throughout these poems and break up the Venice imagery are one such example of this:

\begin{verbatim}
Arachne che mi porta fortuna;
ATHENE, who wrongs thee?
τίς ἄδικε
That butterfly has gone out thru my smoke hole...
\end{verbatim}

The lines might lead us to think that Pound, in identifying with Arachne, is expressing regret; the ‘Lydian maid’ was turned into a spider for her hubris, her belief that she could outperform Athene at weaving. In this reading, Pound could be configured as penitent, aware that he has defied the gods in his poetic or political engagement. Yet this mythic reference is left fragmentary, and therefore with the possibility of being either positive or negative; in the positive version Arachne/Pound the busy spider is left weaving, ‘re-activating’ the subsequent memories of Venice which, as we have seen, are linked to a Fascist utopia. Pound’s poem, and the imagery of Venice contained within it, ‘renoun[es] nothing from the past’ but instead is transformed ‘into a dream which makes political order continuous with nature’.

I suggest that the political ‘meaning’ of Venice seen here in the *Pisan Cantos* is anticipated in earlier depictions of Venice within Pound’s poetry and prose. From the beginning of the *Cantos* as a ‘long poem containing history’, I propose that Pound’s intention is to provide a ‘renewed’ sense of place in which depictions of Venice become increasingly politicised. There are of course problems with ‘reading backwards’ in literary criticism. However, it is certainly true that elements of themes that Pound felt to be consummated in the ‘Fascist utopia’ are very much evident in his earlier work on Venice. There, the city is an arena where a spiritual ‘renewal’ associated with ‘the gods’ is clearly linked to historico-political movements. While the very obvious references to Fascism which we have seen traced out in the *Pisan Cantos* are not present – for Venice surfaces as a ‘Poundian trope’

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20 Ibid., p.178.
before the advent of Fascism on the political stage – I suggest that there is in the development of Pound’s thinking on Venice a clear strain of the historico-political which anticipates or parallels Italian Nationalist/Fascist concerns. However, it is also true that Pound’s ‘image of Venice’ represents both the transformation of, and the adherence to, a touristic impulse. In other words – as this chapter has already shown in the case of Congressman Tinkham’s Venice holiday – the ‘touristic’ and the ‘political’ reception of Venice cannot be easily disentangled within the universe of the Cantos. I will begin to develop this thought by examining the progress of Pound’s ‘touristic’ experience of Venice alongside a key ‘demon’ of Poundian ideology: anti-Semitism.21

Venice, Tourism, Anti-Semitism

Tourism and anti-Semitism may seem an unlikely pairing. Yet in Pound’s thought the two themes can be linked, not least in his engagement with Venice. In the 1936 letter to Tinkham which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Pound envisaged Venice as an ‘unfortunate lion’ and suggested to the American politician that he might ‘shoot’ the ‘responsible parties’ for caging the animal. I read this as a dark hint of unseen forces that have reduced the might and grandeur of Venice to the status of a sad zoo animal. What was in Pound’s mind may be yet more sinister; a marginal note to Canto XXV (a Canto written in the late 1920s and very much concerned with lions, as we shall see later) reads: ‘Who fled [sic] the lion’s rump?’, a reference to T.S. Eliot’s poem, ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’, which is now notorious for its anti-Semitism.22 The note appears to have been added by Pound as he prepared the proofs for the British edition of the Cantos between 1948 and 1950; it appears in the 1950, 1954 and 1964 Faber editions, but not in the 1987 Faber version, which is based on

New Directions’ divergent American text.\textsuperscript{23} The closure of the Faber archives at present make it impossible to determine exactly when the note was added. It is worth noting that Pound himself used the 1954 Faber Cantos as a reading copy, and so it is reasonable to assume that Faber’s editions before 1968 (when they started to adopt the New Directions texts) are therefore the more authoritative.\textsuperscript{24}

If Pound’s intimations in either the marginal note or the Tinkham letter were anti-Semitic (and it would not be out of character), it would also be in keeping with the mood of Fascist Venice from the mid-1930s onwards. Anti-Semitism within Italian Fascist ideology is usually dated from the imposition of the race laws in 1938. However, recent scholarship by historians such as Ruth Ben-Ghiat suggests the prevalence of anti-Semitic and racist ideology from earlier in the Fascist project.\textsuperscript{25} This thesis is supported by material from Venice. A review of an open-air production of ‘The Merchant of Venice’ in the Rivista della Città di Venezia from 1934, two years before Pound’s letter to Tinkham, talks of the character of Shylock as symptomatic of ‘uno spirito giudaico e retrivo, gonfio di odio e di sete di vendetta’, ‘a Judaic, reactionary spirit, swollen with hate and the thirst for vengeance’.\textsuperscript{26} The review frames the play to make Venice its star player, the ‘city of love’ shining ‘like a beacon of glory’ against the dark ‘Semitic’ egoism of Shylock:

Attraverso Antonio mercante, Venezia è indicata da Shakespeare come l’erede dell’onore di Roma, ma lo è anche nella lotta per la civiltà e per la luce contro la tradizione e la tenebra colla impostazione chiara dell’ antagonismo tra il cristianesimo di Antonio e il semitismo di Shylock. A Venezia gli ebrei, nel Cinquecento, già vivevano in una relativa libertà che mal giustificava il soppravivere del vecchio tipo dell’israelita torbito, strozzino e fanatico.

Through Antonio the merchant, Venice is shown by Shakespeare to be the heir of the glory of Rome; but it is so also in the struggle for civilisation and the light against tradition and darkness, with the clear depiction of the conflict between the Christianity of Antonio and the Semitism of Shylock. In fifteenth-century Venice the Jews already lived in a relative freedom which poorly justified the survival of the old type of the dark, fanatical, usurious Jew.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{23} Tony Tanner takes up the question of this note in Venice Desired, pp.327-329.
\textsuperscript{26} Rivista della Città di Venezia, June 1934, p.300.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
The staging of the play, ironically directed by the Austrian Jewish actor/director Max Reinhardt, is seen by the reviewer as reinforcing the divide between ‘light’ Venetian Christianity and ‘dark’ Semitism, with Shylock’s house and the Castello del Belmonte facing each other on opposite sides of the Campo San Trovaso. What the review seems to suggest is that ‘Venice’ belongs to Antonio, Christianity, and the ‘light’; leaving Shylock’s ‘dark’, ‘Semitic’ fanaticism to be cleansed from the ‘glorious’ city.

This notion of Venice being a ‘stage’ (literally or figuratively) for racial conflict based on the unwelcome appearance of ‘the Jew’ is one that is suggested in the work of Pound and Eliot. It is certainly clear from T.S. Eliot’s ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’, the poem which Pound referenced in the later version of Canto XXV. The verses appear in Eliot’s Poems (1920). I quote the first three stanzas:

Burbank crossed a little bridge  
Descending at a small hotel  
Princess Volupine arrived,  
They were together, and he fell.

Defunctive music under sea  
Passed seaward with the passing bell  
Slowly: the God Hercules  
Had left him, that had loved him well.

The horses, under the axletree  
Beat up the dawn from Istria  
With even feet. Her shuttered barge  
Burned on the water all the day.

Anthony Julius takes ‘Princess Volupine’ to be a type of Venice – reduced to courtesan and entertainer of tourists – while ‘Burbank’ is a stereotypically naïve American, whose ‘cultured’ reception of Venice is shallow and second-hand. Burbank’s apprehension of Venice is unoriginal; the ‘passing bell’ of the second stanza is borrowed from Ruskin’s Stones of Venice, the imagery of the third stanza derived from Shakespeare’s Anthony and Cleopatra. If Burbank’s ponderous naivety highlights a Venice whose glory has gone, the appearance of ‘Bleistein’ suggests a kind of tourism that Eliot views as barbaric. This tourism, needless to say, is Jewish:

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28 See Julius, pp.99-100.
But this or such was Bleistein’s way:
A saggy bending of the knees
And elbows, with the palms turned out,
Chicago Semite Viennese.

A lusterless protrusive eye
Stares from the protozoic slime
At a perspective of Canaletto.
The smoky candle end of time

Declines. On the Rialto once.
The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot…

Princess Volupine extends
A meager, blue-nailed, phthisic hand
To climb the waterstair. Lights, lights
She entertains Sir Ferdinand

Klein. Who clipped the lion’s wings
And fle’d his rump and pared his claws
Thought Burbank, meditating on
Time’s ruins, and the seven laws.

Julius (persuasively) identifies two anti-Semitic tropes in the portrayal of Bleistein and Sir Ferdinand Klein. In Klein, the imagery is that of the ‘threatening’, ‘omnipotent’ Jew; for it is Klein, argues Julius, who has rendered Venice, the winged lion, ‘powerless’. Bleistein, by contrast, is a ‘music hall’ physical caricature – ‘Eliot’s version of Al Jolson’ – who is ‘debased’ both in his characterisation and in his position within the poem (‘underneath the lot’, in the ‘protozoic slime’).

Sir Ferdinand Klein, entertained by Volupine/Venice, is ‘the Jew’ as aristocratic arriviste, the empowered, moneyed connoisseur. We are wearily familiar with this trope in Pound’s work – the ‘big Jew’ or ‘Jew capital’, often the subject of his radio rants of the 1940s. It is also the prototype, I suggest, lying behind the ‘dark, fanatical, usurious Jew’ of the Fascist-era review of The Merchant of Venice discussed earlier. Shylock’s ghost, as Tony Tanner has convincingly argued, is never far from the surface in ‘Burbank with a Baedeker’. This makes the Fascist rhetoric of the review and the argument of Eliot’s poem closer than

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29 Ibid, p.104.
31 See Tanner, p.328.
one might think; the main difference, as I take it, being that the rhetoric of Fascism argues for a Venice ‘reborn’, purified of dark ‘Semitic’ influences, whereas ‘Burbank’ posits a Venice hopelessly compromised, a city that has capitulated to the rootless ‘Chicago Semite Viennese’ Jewish capitalism embodied in Bleistein and Klein. In other words, in Eliot’s poem the lion is ‘tamed’ forever; in the Fascist formulation the lion is offered the possibility of ‘rebirth’ by the Mussolini regime. Pound’s position with regard to these alternatives is ambiguous. Whereas the letter to Tinkham referring to the ‘unfortunate’ caged lion would suggest that he shares Eliot’s view of Venice as irrevocably ‘fallen’, he seems also (as we shall see) to have hoped for some kind of ‘renewal’ for the city.

The other kind of Jewish stereotype identified by Julius, embodied in Eliot’s ‘music hall’ characterisation of Bleistein, is perhaps less familiar from the writings of Pound. However, this kind of ‘trope’ is present in Pound’s work; and significantly for the concerns of this chapter, it is present in earlier prose that deals with Venice and tourism. *Indiscretions*, published in 1923 but written in 1921, two years after Eliot’s ‘Burbank’ had first appeared in print, is a rambling, autobiographical study tracing the history of the Pound family through two centuries of American life. But, crucially, it is written from and much concerned with Venice, and tourists in Venice. Pound thinks it ‘peculiarly fitting’ that his manuscript should be written in the city as he remembers his first childhood visit there.32 But there are problems with Venice. Pound struggles to ‘make it new’ with Venice, struggles to approach it with fresh eyes. In his room in the Albergo Pilsen-Manin he faces ‘the speculation as to whether…Venice could give one again and once more either the old kick to the senses or any new perception’.33 The ‘possible “picturesque” of roof-tiles, sky-tones, mud-green tidal influx, cats perched like miniature stone lions on balconies’ no longer satisfies Pound, ‘after all that has been “done” about Venice’.34 In other words, the idyllic reveries like ‘Night Litany’ and ‘Partenza di Venezia’ that Pound was happy to write as a younger poet are now inadequate. New approaches to ‘writing Venice’ must be found.

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., p.4.
To this end, Pound wonders whether Venice is a repository of ‘human cliché’, exemplified by the tourists he sees from his window. And here the similarities with Eliot’s ‘Venetian’ picture are evident. Pound names the tourists ‘the Kirchners’ – the name suggesting a Jewish origin – and describes them walking across the Piazza with knees bent, ‘the suggestion of being at guard in a fencing match’. The parallels with Bleistein, who walks through Venice with ‘A saggy bending of the knees/ And elbows with the palms turned out’, are obvious. The racial caricaturing in both writers may be profitably linked, I suggest, given the close proximity of their respective ‘visions’ of Venice. In both works, what is implied is an ‘uglifying’ of Venice by the presence of the tourists, a sense that the ‘rootless’ vulgarity of ‘the Jew’ lacks a place in the harmonious European panorama of what Pound would later describe as ‘kulchur’. Venice, as the beautiful product of culture, is seen in both formulations as being ‘invaded’ by tasteless interlopers, its grace and its ‘highbrow’ artistic allusions satirically contrasted to the ‘vulgarity’ of the Kirchner/Bleisteins. This is a kind of anti-Semitism that sees ‘the Jew’ as anti-culture, ‘ugly’, ‘anti-aesthetic’; in contrast to the creation of Greco-Roman culture, ‘the Jew’ is associated with ‘the swamp’. Thus the arena of Venice is imagined as a touristic battleground where the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘ugly’ are in conflict; or, in the case of the Fascist review of The Merchant of Venice, cinquecento Venice is pictured in terms of a struggle between ‘light’ Christian culture and Semitic ‘darkness’.

Yet Eliot and Pound were conscious that the characterisations of tourists as ‘vulgar’ and ‘rootless’ were often applied to Americans in Europe, a group to which they themselves belonged. There is thus, I suggest, an anxiety here; the question of who Venice ‘belongs’ to is a troubling one for these writers. In the case of Pound, what is being presented in Indiscretions is the poet’s desire to develop from a simplistic, touristic apprehension of the city to a ‘new’, more intelligent reception. Hence this apparent anxiety over differentiation:

35Ibid., p.5.
36 Ibid., p.4.
37 A theme discussed by Julius, pp.111-143.
38 Robert Casillo discusses this aspect of Pound’s anti-Semitism. See Casillo, pp.84-94.
'my’ Venice is a cultured Venice, Pound seems to want us to think – not like the ‘vulgar’ tourists I can see from my window. As well as the racial dimensions of this positioning, there are class-based anxieties too. Pound’s ‘Aunt Frank’, Frances Weston, who had taken him to Venice as a boy, was a relative on his mother’s side. She had ‘danced with General Grant’, and the Westons were ‘high society’, in contrast to the rugged pioneer stock of the Pound side of the family. 39 Pound’s great-aunt ‘believed that travel broadened the mind’, and that an appreciation of the beauties of Europe was a natural part of an upper middle-class American’s education. 40 Pound’s early experiences of Europe were really thus in the style of a reduced Grand Tour. As a context for encountering Venice in particular, this is evident from Pound’s comments in what is now known as Ur-Canto I (written in 1915), his first treatment of the Canto form, whose Venetian sections were to form the basis of the first part of Canto III.  

In the early development of the Cantos, what I have described as a desire to ‘make it new’ with Venice and Italy leads increasingly to a more historico-political reception of place in Pound’s work. At a basic level, this moves the poetic persona from ‘tourist’ to participant in his own epic, and Venice from a flat space to a fleshed-out historical reality. To return to the question of anti-Semitism, Pound’s early consciousness of ‘the Jew’ in Venice seems to be of a crass knee-jerk racial/class prejudice: ‘tourists like that’ shouldn’t be here. Yet by the 1930s, as I have suggested, his racism took a more ideological, political turn: it is ‘the Jews’ who have corrupted Venice, put the lion in ‘a cage that is MUCH too small’. His later cross-reference to Eliot’s poem in Canto XXV suggests, in Tony Tanner’s words, that Pound’s intimation is that ‘it is the Shylocks of this world who have contributed to the undermining of our civilisation, as exemplified in the decline of Venice’. 41 This movement from upper-middle class snobbery to ideological racism (the American Jew changing from ‘vulgar interloper’ to omnipotent Shylock responsible for Venice’s ills) is mirrored by a move

40 Indiscretions’, p.5.  
41 Tanner, p.329.
towards a ‘new’, political Venice which we have seen culminating in the ‘Fascist utopia’ of
the *Pisan Cantos*.

But why was Venice so important to Pound that it was to become a crucible of racial
and political ideologies? The city’s increasing political significance in Pound’s work has a
gradual but clear development and emerges from Pound’s experience of Italy as a subject
mediated through the great Victorian writers. In the early *Cantos* the desire to ‘make it new’
with Venice centres on a struggle with that great Victorian poet of Italy, Robert Browning. It
is in Pound’s overcoming of Browning that the groundwork for a more historico-political
interpretation of Venice can be laid. Pound’s consciousness of the limitations of Browning’s
version of the history of Italy form part of a struggle, I suggest, for a more political, material
experience of Italy, in which Venice plays a major part.

**Towards the ‘New Venice’ and the Struggle with Browning**

Robert Browning was one of Pound’s chief models in writing the first versions of the *Cantos*.
Pound experiences Venice, in *Ur-Canto* I, as a struggle with Browning, the ghost of whose
version of the city he is trying to exorcise:

Your “palace step”?  
My stone seat was the Dogana’s curb,
And there were not “those girls,” there was
one flare, one face.  
‘Twas all I ever saw, but it was real…
And I can no more say what shape it was…
But she was young, too young.  
True, it was Venice,
And at Florian’s and under the north arcade
I have seen other faces, and had my rolls for
breakfast, for that matter;
So, for what it’s worth, I have the background
And you had a background…  

Browning serves here as an artistic antagonist; Pound reactively shapes his poetry in contrast
to the Victorian master. Thus, when it comes to Venice, Pound intends that his version of the
city be extricated from the one Browning had presented in his long poem *Sordello* (1840).

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‘Hang it all, there can be but one Sordello!’, Pound begins his *Canto* by exclaiming; the whole sweep of the poetry that follows is a work of detachment, of differentiating himself from this great antecedent.43

Yet Pound recognises something in the quality of Browning’s work, a vitality which in Pound’s mind is intricately connected with the poet’s apprehension of Italy. For Pound, he was ‘the man who found Italy for our time and our parents’ and grandparents’ time’.44 A 1937 article on the Venice music festival begins with a picture of Ca’ Rezzonico, the palazzo that Pen Browning bought and that Robert Browning died in. Pound sets up the house, with its ‘eight foot square tablet on the side wall’ marking Browning’s name, as a place of pilgrimage, touristic and cultural. In Pound’s mind this vision of the Ca’ leads into a reverie of the Venetian [musical] past as Vivaldi, Lotti and Monteverdi are imagined making music in the *palazzo*. No other poet, until Pound himself, was as interested in recovering Italian history. Browning, ‘the man who found Italy’, to Pound’s mind not only discovered the country as a destination of cultural tourism (for middle class anglo-americans like Pound) but was also involved in painstakingly digging up its past. In Pound’s imagination, therefore, history, literature and a certain kind of ‘highbrow’ tourism are interacting around the figure of Browning. It seems that Pound’s declaration, ‘I have the background/ And you had a background’, has several potential meanings, for Browning had talked of needing a ‘background’ to his poetry. But of course, with the image of consuming rolls at Florian’s, another kind of ‘background’ is suggested, one that Pound’s great-aunt might have been more in touch with – a habit of cultured tourism, of informed middle-class leisure.

However, there is much to suggest that Pound struggled with the touristic consumption of Venice, that there was an anxiety to do with portraying his own travel experiences as differentiated from the herd. In 1920’s *Indiscretions* it is seen in the need to elevate himself above the crassness of the tourists moving across the square, and as early as 1910 he had written to Margaret Cravens from San Vio to say ‘I’m in my own part of Venice – not the San

43 As in the ‘anxiety of influence’ paradigm formulated by Harold Bloom.
Marco-Tedesco-Touristo side’ (my italics).\textsuperscript{45} When it comes to Browning, this need to differentiate is shown in the way Pound depicts Venice, in contrast to the pictures we have in\textit{Sordello}. This is what Browning writes:

\begin{quote}
I muse this on a ruined palace-step
At Venice: why should I break off, nor sit
Longer upon my step, exhaust the fit
England gave birth to?\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

This moment is crucial, both for Pound and for Browning. It is a moment where Browning’s authorial presence breaks into the text, and the reader becomes conscious of the poet’s creative process and of his setting: Venice. This, of course, is what Pound is responding to when he writes: ‘Your “palace step”?/ My stone seat was the Dogana’s curb.’ The Dogana was the customs house; from here Pound would have been able to look out across the Grand Canal to the cluster of buildings around Piazza San Marco. The contrast Pound is making is clearer from the draft which appears in\textit{Lustra} (October 1917) which describes ‘the Dogana’s vulgarest curb’ (my italics).\textsuperscript{47} Browning’s ‘ruined palace step’ suggests a romantic view: Venice’s crumbling beauty is a source of inspiration, a muse for Browning. By contrast Pound, struggling with Browning’s version of\textit{Sordello} and with Browning himself, pictures a Venice where he sits on a ‘vulgar’ curb by the customs house. Pound’s vision of Venice is strongly material. Whilst Browning describes Venice in\textit{Sordello} as:

\begin{quote}
….. a type
Of Life – ‘twixt blue and blue extends, a stripe,
As Life, the somewhat, hangs ‘twixt naught and naught:
‘Tis Venice and ‘tis Life… (III, 723-6, p.217)
\end{quote}

Life here, is seen as fragile – lying between ‘naught and naught’ as Venice is precariously balanced between sea and sky. Browning’s picture of Venice is of a city in constant danger of being overwhelmed by the elements:

\textsuperscript{47} Cited in Terrell, p.8.
In the dead black Giudecca proves sea-weed
Drifting has sucked down three, four, all indeed
Save one pale-red striped, pale-blue turbaned post
For gondolas. (III, 693-6, p.217)

The image is almost of the depths of the ‘dead black Giudecca’ holding some sea monster that threatens to consume the culture of Venice – symbolised by the gondola posts – in its tentacles. If Venice is ‘a type of life’, it is surely a very fragile one. Pound’s approach is different; from the start of *Three Cantos* he battles with Browning’s depiction of Italy. Browning has difficulty in imagining Sordello’s Verona, and this is signified by the repeated, frustrated gesture of *appearance*: ‘Appears Verona …’ (I, 11-12, p.151), ‘Then, appear./ Verona!’ (I, 59-60, p.152), ‘Its outline, kindles at the core, appears/ Verona.’ (I, 77-8, p.152).

It takes Browning three attempts before his projected Italian city can take its place in the poem. But Pound writes: ‘I walk Verona. (I am here in England.)/ I see Can Grande. (Can see whom you will.)’ There is ease, arrogance even, in the way the materiality of Italy is evoked despite Pound’s geographical dislocation: ‘I walk Verona… /I see Can Grande’. Pound is working across geographical and temporal boundaries, embodying himself in the medieval Verona of the city’s Scaligeri rulers. What is suggested here is that the modern poet ‘can see whom [or what]’ he wills. Not only is this poet able to picture Verona, he can actually live it.

In contrast, even when Browning is writing from Venice, the city appears in danger of slipping away from the poet’s grasp: ‘ruined palace step’, ‘Piazza’s slippery stone’ (III, 727, p.218) are phrases that evoke fragmentation, dislocation. There is also much of the Romantic still in Browning’s poetic vision of the Serenissima (which Pound would have taken exception to: he called Wordsworth ‘that bleating sheep’). Pound’s descriptions of Venice in *Three Cantos* I question, with ironic tone, Browning’s use of the city in *Sordello*. Instead of ‘let stay those girls’ (III, 698, p.217, my italics) Pound sees only one ‘flare, face’ (Ronald Bush surmises that ‘E.P. experienced a vision of some sort’), but she was ‘too young’. The
significance of the ‘Dogana’s curb’ has already been examined. There is a concrete 
materiality in those ‘rolls for breakfast’ at Florian’s; the reader is reminded that this poet eats, 
even in Venice. Pound is reaching towards more authenticity, more ‘realness’ in his evocation 
of Venice.

Mary Ellis Gibson has argued that Pound’s engagement with Browning was a crucial 
stage in his quest to find the poetic language appropriate for the Cantos’ interest in material 
history. In other words, ‘his prolonged encounter with Browning’ (and, by extension, with 
Browning’s ‘version’ of Italy) forced him to evaluate questions of historical accuracy, 
material truth, and the place of the poetic persona.51 Pound’s apparent confidence in dealing 
with the historical geographies of the Cantos is, then, born out of his response to Browning’s 
halting indecisiveness in Sordello: the frustrated and uncertain appearance of Verona and 
Venice are to be replaced by an aesthetic that moves easily between space and time. In 
Pound’s own words, ‘Ghosts move about me/ Patched with histories’.52 What Pound gains 
from the struggle with Browning – ‘the man who discovered Italy for our time’ – is an 
increasing sense of the importance of political topography. Whilst Browning’s engagement 
with Italian history and politics is significant – it is important to note both Robert and 
Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s support for the nineteenth-century Risorgimento struggle – 
Browning’s involvement in historico-political topography in Sordello and other works is 
hampered by the problem of the poetic persona. This, argues Gibson, is what Pound is 
working through in Three Cantos. It is only in the Cantos proper that ‘the effort to yoke 
political geography to the immortal gods’ becomes the central fact of Pound’s poetic ambition; 
i.e. only then does ‘spirit of place’ become imbued with live political, historical and spiritual 
significance for Pound.53

The movement towards a more ‘live’, political genius loci requires Pound to 
overcome Browning, whose ‘spirit of place’ hampers real connectedness. The published

51 Mary Ellis Gibson, Epic Reinvented: Ezra Pound and the Victorians (Ithaca & London: Cornell 
52 Three Cantos I, p.54.
53 Gibson, p.87.
versions of *Cantos* I-III eliminate most of the pained struggle with Browning to present places ‘patched with histories’. The 1925 published version of the *Draft of XVI Cantos* replaces the references to Browning’s work with a more complex and confident web of allusion:

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I sat on the Dogana’s steps
For the gondolas cost too much, that year,
And there were not “those girls”, there was one face,
And the Buccentoro twenty yards off, howling “Stretti”,
And the lit cross-beams, that year, in the Morosini,
And peacocks in Koré’s house, or there may have been.
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(III, p.11)

The ghost of Browning here remains only in the trace of *Sordello* in the line ‘And there were not “those girls”; gone is the continuous conversation Pound seems to be having with the Victorian poet in *Three Cantos*. ‘Your “palace step”/ My stone seat was the Dogana’s curb’ has been replaced with the simple line, ‘I sat on the Dogana’s steps’, and any mention of Florian’s and having a ‘background’ have completely disappeared. Instead, there is a burgeoning economic consciousness (‘the gondolas cost too much, that year’) and an increasingly powerful rhythmic sense; for example, in the listing repetition of ‘And…/And…/And…’. and the subtle prosody demonstrated by Pound’s echoing of ‘lit cross-beams’ and ‘Morosini’.

But it is in the line mentioning ‘the peacocks in Koré’s house’ that the development of Pound’s idea of Venice is seen most interestingly. This line did not exist in the earlier draft of *Three Cantos* but was, as Bush has demonstrated, added in the 1922-25 period, ready to be published as part of the *Draft of XVI Cantos* in 1925. The line seems to derive from Pound’s reading of the Italian Nationalist poet Gabriele D’Annunzio in the autumn of 1922. In D’Annunzio’s *Notturno*, which Pound reviewed for *The Dial* magazine in his “Paris Letter” of November 1922, Venice is figured as an ambiguous, shifting city, full of mist and cloaking sea fogs. ‘Koré’s house’ seems to refer to the Palazzo dei Leoni on the Grand Canal, which, Carroll F. Terrell claims, ‘had become a rookery’. In *Notturno*, D’Annunzio describes ‘the house of Coré’ as being ‘inhabited by white peacocks’ (‘La casa di Coré è abitata dai pavoni

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54 Bush, p.183.
55 Terrell, p.8.
bianchi’). In Pound’s translation, quoted in the Dial’s ‘Paris Letter’, this becomes ‘In Kore’s house there are now only white peacocks’. On first glance, the image of peacocks strolling about an abandoned palazzo might appear reminiscent of the old romantic, ruinous Venice. Yet there may be other contexts for understanding the Venetian imagery here. Notturno, a piece of quasi-autobiographical writing, features a central narrator (D’Annunzio) recuperating in Venice after his efforts in World War One, a conflict the Italian writer saw as a patriotic struggle. In Notturno, the amorphousness of D’Annunzio’s imagined Venice is complemented by staged visions of the city’s military history, as for example when the narrator and a companion go to the Arsenale to ‘guardare i Leoni mandati in dono alla Patria da Francesco Morosini, conquistatore della Morea’, ‘watch the lions given to the State by [the doge] Francesco Morosini, the conqueror of Morea’. This indicates that, although Venice was for D’Annunzio a city of mirage and shadow, it was nonetheless capable of being transformed through its proud history into a locus of political power. The lions here, symbolic both of military conquest and of Venice itself, loom out of the mists as solid landmarks, tangible reminders of military might.

D’Annunzio’s own politics are relevant. The poet had considered himself an honorary Venetian Nationalist; his First World War fighter-plane was decorated with a ferocious looking lion of St. Mark and his flying squadron was called ‘La Serenissima’, the name suggesting the old Venetian empire. Their motto, invented by the poet, was Iterum rugit leo (‘the lion roars again’) and they used Venice as a base for their bombing expeditions into Austria. D’Annunzio also decorated his villa on Lake Garda, the ‘Vittoriale’ (where he would die in 1938), with encrusted lions of St. Mark. Indeed, D’Annunzio personified much of what was to become known as venezianità: a new, revived ‘Venetian-ness’, imperialistic and military in its outlook. Furthermore, his irredentismo adriatico – his affinity for, and

56 Gabriele D’Annunzio, Notturno (Milan: Treves 1921), p.443.
58 D’Annunzio, p.49. This is the same ‘Morosini’ family as mentioned by Pound in Canto III, as in ‘the lit cross beams … in the Morosini’ – i.e. in the old house of the Morosini family.
desire to claim back for Italy the former Venetian possessions of the Adriatic – placed him on the side of an Italian Nationalism which put Venice at the heart of its cultural and political project. The Adriatic Dalmatian coast was seen by D’Annunzio as Italy’s inheritance by right of its history as part of the old Venetian empire. As early as 1905, in his play *La Nave* (which Pound admired and cites in *Canto XCIII of Rock Drill*, 1955), D’Annunzio imagined a revived Italian naval prowess centred on the Dalmatian coast, a vision culminating in the final scene:

- Alleluia!
- Cristo regna!
- Signor nostro, redimi l’Adriatico!
- Libera alle tue genti l’Adriatico!
- Patria ai Veneti tutto l’Adriatico!
- Cristo regna! …
- Proteggi, o Dio, la libertà dei Veneti! …
- Cristo e San Marco! …’

Venice served as the base for D’Annunzio’s successful raid on the Dalmatian town of Fiume, claimed in 1919 for Italy and now in Croatia. The Adriatic, in this ‘D’Annunzian’ view, was Venice’s natural territory and therefore Italy’s. Buoyed by approving editorials in the local newspaper, the *Gazzetta di Venezia*, D’Annunzio made a number of speeches in 1919 in Piazza San Marco to whip up support for the expedition, all of which played on an ingrained Venetian-imperialistic symbolism.

As described by the contemporary Irish writer Walter Starkie in his book *The Waveless Plain*, D’Annunzio told the crowd how he ‘had come among the Venetians as a Venetian,

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wishing to pay tribute to this sacred city’. Starkie goes on to give an eye-witness account of
the speech. Here D’Annunzio is speaking:

Saint Mark, our gallant, wise Saint Mark, when he thought the time had arrived to
curb the eloquence of his ambassadors, would close the book. Our leaders too, seated
at the table of swindlers [...] have followed the example of our lionhearted patron
saint and closed the book. They closed it at the page of falsity and lying. All praise to
them!’\(^{61}\)

D’Annunzio’s speech came at the time of a shift in Italian policy towards favouring more
action over the Fiume question. The culmination of D’Annunzio’s speech to the Venetians, as
reported by Starkie, is his emotive cry: ‘are you ready to suffer again?’, to which ‘the whole
crowd’ answers in the affirmative.

Thus, as John Pemble has argued, D’Annunzio’s Venice was not a crumbling city of
‘exhaustion and decay’, but of ‘resurrection and renewal’: ‘quintessentially Italian and
quintessentially modern’, holding the ‘promise of power and prestige’. The Venice that
attracted D’Annunzio was ‘not elegiac but heroic’.\(^{62}\) It will therefore be useful to examine
D’Annunzio’s (and Pound’s) peacocks in the context of a renewed venezianità. A close
examination of the imagery here shows that there are hints of something other than a romantic
Venice in these lines: into this idyll of water, light and stillness comes Koré or Corè, the
Greek goddess also known as Persephone. Persephone’s appearance is ambiguous. She brings
associations with the Underworld, but is also symbolic of rebirth through the changing of the
seasons. This is not, therefore, a simplistically static or dying Venice; rather, D’Annunzio and
Pound are imagining a city imbued with the possibility of renewal. In this context the
appearance of the ‘white peacocks’ may also be of interest; bringing with them the early
Christian association of the peacock with resurrection, the shedding and re-growth of the
bird’s tail feathers mirroring the rising of Christ from the tomb. That the peacocks are ‘white’
and thus an image of purity amongst the dark ruins of the house of Korè would further
suggest the possibility of a Venice made new. Despite the note of doubt suggested by the

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phrase ‘or there may have been’, this interpretation would fit with the images of spirituality and life in the rest of Canto III:

And peacocks in Koré’s house, or there may have been.
Gods float in the azure air,
Bright gods and Tuscan, back before dew was shed.
Light: and the first light, before ever dew was fallen.
Panisks, and from the oak, dryas,
And from the apple, mælid,
Through all the wood, and the leaves are full of voices,
A-whisper, and the clouds bowe over the lake,
And there are gods upon them… (III, p.11)

Here the lake on which the gods appear seems to be Lake Garda; in Three Cantos I an earlier version of this passage had referred to ‘Our Olive Sirmio [Sirmione]/…and the mounts Balde and Riva’ (p.54). But an immediate reading of this passage would suggest that we are still in Venice, the vision of ‘Tuscan’ [Etruscan] gods in the air linking us to the appearance of Persephone or Koré on the Grand Canal. Certainly the Canto’s imagery majors on themes of rebirth and spirituality, and here I am in agreement with Tony Tanner who, in contrast to critics such as Guy Davenport and Hugh Kenner, sees Pound’s images of Venice as being concerned primarily with rebirth.63 Tanner writes that Venice for Pound is ‘a triumph of nature’, a ‘magical product’ of the gods.64 Pound’s evocation of Venice is no decadentist, corrupting vision, but a place alive with spiritual energy: rebirth, the classical gods. Pound’s emphasis here on a spiritually enlivened Venice mirrors D’Annunzio’s political and literary engagement with the city; the Italian poet wanted to see Venice revived as a centre of Italian political and cultural power.

Certainly Pound’s interest in D’Annunzio seems to come as much from a political as a literary standpoint. Pound, as Rebecca Beasley has observed, looked to D’Annunzio as a symbol of the re-emerging might of Italy. In his ‘Paris Letter’ in the literary journal The Dial, Pound addresses himself to the ‘decadence’ and ‘enervation’ of contemporary London and Paris, which he contrasts with ‘a reawakening Italy’. This comparison is strengthened by

63 See Tanner, pp.306-310.
64 Ibid., p.307.
Pound’s move, in his review of current writing at the end of the letter, from the languid literature of Proust and Martin du Gard to D’Annunzio’s *Notturno*:

> One turns from the indisputable enervation of Paris to D’Annunzio’s *Notturno*, I think with relief. At any rate one finds the Italian readable. In the fury of Fiume, in the general bewilderment of manifestos, aeroplanes, bombs, *fascisti*, et cetera, together with memories of vast verbal emprise, one had forgotten – if one ever had – a critical estimate of the “poet hero” as a writer.\(^{65}\)

Beasley makes the connection between Pound’s estimation of D’Annunzio the ‘poet-hero’ here and his references earlier in the ‘letter’ to Sigismundo di Malatesta, another one of Pound’s Italian ‘heroes’. In Pound’s mind Sigismondo, like D’Annunzio, stood at the crossroads of politics and art, as both patron and military leader. Furthermore, D’Annunzio is firmly connected in Pound’s mind, as is *Notturno*, with Venice. D’Annunzio, says Pound, ‘writes of Dolmetsch, Wm. Lawes, Scriabine, *Venice*, of the things that make life bearable’ (my italics).\(^{66}\) Furthermore, in his ‘bombarded Venice’, and in the ‘fury of Fiume’, the Italian poet reflects to Pound the synthesis of the political-military and the artistic consciousness.\(^{67}\)

The timing of Pound’s paean to D’Annunzio is also, as Beasley comments, crucial, for the ‘Paris letter’ was dated ‘October 1922’. Beasley writes: ‘Pound wrote this advertisement for a reawakening Italy and the poet who had since been adopted as a fascist-hero in the month of Mussolini’s March on Rome’.\(^{68}\)

Certainly by 1928 (in his essay on Guido Cavalcanti) Pound was referring to D’Annunzio as ‘Nostro Gabriele’: ‘solitary, superficially eccentric, but with a surprisingly sound standard of values’. D’Annunzio, as the ‘only living author who has ever taken a city or held up the diplomatic crapule at the point of machine-guns’ was ‘in a position to speak with more authority than a batch of neuraurasthenic incompetents or of writers who…are…incapable of action’.\(^{69}\) Essential to Pound was D’Annunzio’s claim not to be a ‘mere poet’, but an artist: ‘Tutte le manifestazioni della vita e tutte le manifestazioni dell’

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\(^{65}\) *Paris Letter*, pp. 552-3.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., p.552.


intelligenza mi attraggono egualmente’, ‘All manifestations of life and all manifestations of intelligence are equally attractive’, he wrote.\(^7\) This led to an increasing military consciousness, and an emphasis on the idea of the fighting artist, a figure that Pound found extremely attractive. Pound saw Sigismundo in this light, as he would later F.T. Marinetti and the Duce himself.\(^7\)

Connections between D’Annunzio and Fascism are strong, if more complex than popularly imagined. In Venice D’Annunzio was certainly a crucial figure for the development of political movements associated with Fascism. The poet’s close collaborator in the Fiume campaign, Pietro Marsich, was among the founders of the Venetian *fascio di combattimento*, and the *fascio* honoured D’Annunzio as its first patron. The Italian historian Mario Isnenghi suggests that in contrast to the later focus on Duce-worship, Venice’s early Fascist groups were ‘D’Annunzian’ (*dannunziano*) rather than ‘Mussolinian’ (*mussoliniano*) in their tone.\(^7\)

Pound also associated the city of Venice with early Fascism. In his 1935 defense of the Italian Fascist state, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (which attempted to draw comparisons between Mussolini and the American founding father), Pound describes encountering a group of Fascists at Florian’s, the café on St. Mark’s Square:

> What I saw was the line of black shirts and the tense faces of cavalieri della morte … Suddenly a little old buffer rushed up to the front table and began to sputter forty-eight to the dozen …. It was a different kind of excitement, a more acrimonious excitement than the noise of the midday pigeon-feeding. Then came the file of young chaps with drawn faces and everyone stood to attention and took their hats off about something, all except one stubborn foreigner, damned if he would stand up or show respect until he knew what they meant. Nobody hit me with a club and I didn’t see any oil bottles.\(^7\)

From the context in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, it is probable that this encounter took place in the early 1920s (the exact year is uncertain), and that it was the poet’s first experience of

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\(^7\) Cited in Pemble, ‘The Resident Strangers’, p.47.

\(^7\) Despite the turn-of-the-century rivalry between the Vorticists (inspired by Pound and led by Wyndham Lewis) and Marinetti’s Futurists, Pound’s ‘Italian’ Canto 72 (1944) elegises the late poet and artist, picturing him fighting on for Fascist Italy (*Canto LXXII*, pp.425-431).


\(^7\) *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (London: Stanley Nott 1935), pp.50-51.
Fascism in Italy. What Pound seems to be suggesting in this passage is that the static, touristic Venice represented by ‘the noise of the midday pigeon-feeding’ (a favourite tourist activity which still arouses the scorn of native Venetians) was given a jolt by the presence in the city of political activism, namely Fascism. The staging of this event in St. Mark’s Square is crucial: the square is the centre of Venice both culturally and politically, and its associations with St. Mark (Venice’s patron saint, represented by the winged lion) give it an even weightier significance. A further context for this passage is provided by the reports of Fascist violence that had begun to seep into the British consciousness from the middle 1920s (Pound’s book was published by Stanley Nott in London). Unlike some of his contemporaries who wrote about the violence of the fascisti – D.H. Lawrence’s 1925 description of ‘bullying’ fascists in *Movements in European History* for example – Pound stresses the non-violence of the encounter, and this despite his own ‘stubbornness’ as the only ‘foreigner’ in the scene; one, moreover, who wouldn’t stand up or take off his hat. Yet Venice is transformed for him here into a place of life and political activism; far from degrading this Venetian scene, Pound seems to suggest that the Fascist presence energises it.

Venice’s appearance in the early *Cantos* therefore has a significance that is linked to the stirrings of Fascist Nationalisms in northeastern Italy. This is not to downplay the complexity of the web of references to the city in the poetry. After *Canto III*, the city’s next appearance is as one of Sigismondo di Malatesta’s employers. Here (from *Canto VIII* onwards) Venice is viewed ambiguously – at times as enlightened artistic vortex and at times as money-grabbing: ‘…the Venetians sent down an ambassador/ And said “speak humanely,/ But tell him [Sigismondo] it’s no time for raising his pay.’ (*Canto IX*, p.35). However, this is arguably a consequence of the morally complex universe which Pound presents revolving around Sigismondo; despite Pound’s use of him as a model in the *Cantos*, Sigismondo is a mercenary whose success as an artistic patron is forged through war.

The signs of life and rebirth that are presented in *Canto III* are thus consummated in the movement of the poetry towards a complex quattrocento Italy that is ‘born again’ on the

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pages of Pound’s epic. In *Patria Mia* (1913), Pound had written that ‘as for Venice; when Mr Marinetti and his friends shall have succeeded in destroying that ancient city, we will rebuild Venice on the Jersey mud-flats’. At this stage, Pound is thinking solely of an ‘American Risorgimento’ in which the remembrance of Venice and other fragments of Italian history are useful as models for fuelling American change. In a rebuttal of Futurist bombast (though he was later to be reconciled to F.T. Marinetti through Fascism) Pound provides this image of ‘rebuilding’ Venice outside of New York. The city is ‘reborn’, in a kind of Blakeian vision, on American soil. Yet in the *Cantos* another kind of ‘rebuilding’ is undertaken. In this model, Venice’s history is ‘brought to life’ through the historical fragments of recorded time, where historical events and persons are threaded through lyrical imagery. In other words, Pound’s ‘rebuilding’ of Venice takes place not as a projected political change within the United States, but within his poetry. Yet, as I have shown, political re-figurings of Venice from a Nationalist Italian perspective do act as a crucible for Pound’s work, creating a sense of urgency around the depictions of Venice contained in the poetry. These political contexts can therefore add a new understanding to the ‘reborn’ past encountered in the *Cantos*. In the *Draft of XVI Cantos* Pound begins to experiment with this format; in the later *Cantos* the poetic evocation of the past becomes ever more complex.

**Power and Politics: Venice in Cantos XVII, XXV and XXVI**

In the middle *Cantos* the appearances of Venice are in a world increasingly concerned with the interplay of politics, economics and art. In *Cantos* XVII and XXV, Venice appears as architectural structure; its *palazzi* rising out of the water are compared to poetry and the vision of a *paradiso terrestre*. In XXV, this structural interest in Venice is displayed in a focus on the material construction of the *Palazzo Ducale*, the Doge’s palace. In *Canto* XXVI, whilst the interest in art and architecture remains, Venice appears primarily as political and imperial

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power. If this section of the *Cantos* is above all concerned with the crossroads of economic, political and cultural impetuses, Venice appears here as a place where these worlds collide.

In *Canto* XVII – a *Canto* which is clearly linked to *Canto* III in language and imagery – Venice is presented as ‘organic’ form, a theme which various critics have noted.\(^7^6\) The first view of Venice here is as a *paradiso*, coming as it does after the imagery of vines that ‘burst’ with grapes and ‘bees weighted with pollen’ (XVII, p.76). Here again, as in III, the gods bring life to this scene – there is ‘Zagreus’ [Dionysus] (who Pound associated with fertility and the ‘rites of spring’\(^7^7\)) and a figure he calls ‘the goddess of the fair knees’. This goddess is identified as Artemis/Diana by the ‘white hounds/ leaping about her’. Here, in a reverse of *Canto* III, the poem moves *from* a sylvan, spiritual scene *into* a vision of Venice, rather than the other way round:

\begin{quote}
The green slope, with white hounds
leaping about her;
And thence down to the creek’s mouth, until evening,
Flat water before me,
and the trees growing in water,
Marble trunks out of stillness,
On past the palazzi,
in the stillness…
\end{quote}

(*Canto* XVII, p.76)

But here, as in III, it is clear that the picture of Venice is meant to be associated with the imagery of rebirth and spirituality in the preceding lines. The ‘vines’, ‘vine-shoots’, ‘branches’ and ‘oak-woods’ that speak of agriculture and a rural context are mirrored in the ‘trees growing in water,/ Marble trunks out of stillness,/…the palazzi’ – the vision of Venice rising from the seas. This rising of Venice is, as Tanner and others have remarked, associated with the birth of Venus:

\begin{quote}
in the stillness,
The light now, not of the sun.
Chrysophrase,
And the water green clear, and blue clear;
\end{quote}

\(^{76}\) See, for example, Tanner, pp.316-17.
\(^{77}\) See Terrell, p.73.
On, to the great cliffs of amber. Between them,

Cave of Nerea
she like a great shell curved...

The (beautiful) language here links Venice, the city that appears out of the sea, with the goddess who is born out of the seashell: ‘Cave of Nerea/she like a great shell curved’. In Greek mythology, the Nereids were sea spirits; thus Venus/Venice is seen to rise organically from the spiritual water-world associated with ‘Nerea’ [the Nereids]. Tanner, in keeping with the emphasis of his study, stresses this imagery as related to sex: ‘both sacred and sexual, sexually sacred’. But the implications of this parallel are also, surely, that the city of Venice itself becomes imbued with a kind of spirituality and, I suggest, is offered the possibility of ‘rebirth’. Certainly Pound seems to be giving the ‘stones of Venice’ a kind of life here, one akin to the bursting vine-branches and oak woods encountered at the beginning of the Canto. Furthermore, the organic forms associated with the shell and cave imagery – ‘Chrysophrase’, ‘cliffs of amber’, ‘shell curved’, and later ‘cool, porphyry smooth,/ the rock sea-worn’ (p.77) – seem to be paralleled in the architectural structure of Venice: the ‘marble trunks’ and the palazzi.

This imagery, as Tony Tanner, Caterina Ricciardi and others have noted, is at least in part derived from the language of The Stones of Venice (for example, Ruskin’s ‘marble foliage’, X, pp.82-3). As we have seen, Ruskin’s ‘living’ Venice was informed by contemporary political contexts; Ricciardi notes the fusion of Ruskinian and Paterian aesthetics with elements from D’Annunzio’s writings. Given D’Annunzio’s emphasis on a Nationalistic, politically regenerated Venice, I suggest that Pound’s poetic vision here may be seen as a kind of synthesis of nineteenth-century aesthetics and spiritual Nationalism. Another figure behind the Venetian imagery of this Canto is the English art-critic Adrian Stokes,

78 Tanner, p.305.
79 See Caterina Ricciardi, EIKONEΣ: Ezra Pound e il Rinascimento (Naples: Liguori 1991), pp.232-243. For Ricciardi, D’Annunzio’s images of Venice centre on the idea of ‘reviviscenza’ (‘revival’), an idea which Pound absorbs into the rhythms of Canto XVII. I suggest that this ‘revival’ is Nationalistic, as well as spiritual and sexual, giving a political edge to the images absorbed by Pound from Ruskin, Pater and the Renaissance paintings of Tintoretto, Veronese and others. For more on the Nationalistic qualities of D’Annunzio’s writings, see Pericles Lewis, Modernism, Nationalism and the Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000).
whose friendship with Pound came to an end over differences in their critical approach and Stokes’s growing need to break free of Pound’s influence (and possibly over Stokes’s bisexuality, about which Pound taunted him).  

Stokes’s interest in psychoanalysis (he was in therapy with Melanie Klein in the 1930s) distinguishes his writings on Venice from Pound’s. However, as Richard Read has shown, Stokes flirted with Fascism, justifying it as a ‘reaction against liberal democracy’. In his work on Giorgione, Stokes displays a conflicted anti-Semitism (he was himself Jewish by maternal descent) and a subtle Fascism, absorbing Arnaldo Ferriguto’s arguments about the quintessentially Venetian art of Giorgione and its opposition to foreign influences. Ferriguto, whom Stokes described as ‘a young Italian of the Fascist State’ placed Giorgione’s painting in contrast to the ‘tendenza all’astratto’, ‘tendency towards abstraction’ in Jewish-dominated philosophy schools and saw the artworks as emerging from a quasi-Fascist moment of national liberation: ‘[un] momento in cui la nostra coltura si libera da intimidazioni forestieri’, ‘a moment in which our culture freed itself from foreign intimidations’. This political consciousness adds another layer to the ‘complex fantasies’ of Venice which Stokes, filtering Ruskin, Pater, D’Annunzio and Pound through psychoanalytical theory, provides in his critical writings.

But is Canto XVII a political vision? A close examination of Pound’s drafts for Canto XVII seem to reinforce the impression that the poet was working within a schema where Venice is seen not only as organic form but as politico-cultural city. Pound’s notebooks, stored at the Beinecke Rare Books Library at Yale, are covered in pencil scrawl and give us an insight into the connections Pound was making in his mind when he planned the Canto. The natural world represented in the poem by the ‘white hounds’ that leap about the goddess and the opening lines describing ‘vines’, ‘bees weighted with pollen’ and ‘birds sleepily in the branches’ are sketched in Pound’s pencil shorthand as:

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81 Quoted in Read, p.171.
82 Quoted in Read, p.169.
84 Read, p.133.
This ‘zoo/jungle’, with its associations of rich, exotic animal and plant life, is soon joined by other concerns in Pound’s rough schema. Underneath, encircled in pencil line, the word ‘gods’ is marked. Pound seems to be highlighting it; indeed, it is positioned in the draft in such a way as to lead us to think of it as a key-word, leading into the main concerns of the draft (and the poem) in what is written below:

Venice
urbs
passion
politics
craft
work

Venice, the urbs, is linked not only with ‘passion’ and – a Ruskinian association – ‘craft’ and ‘work’, but centrally with ‘politics’. The Lewis and Short Latin dictionary speculates that the roots of the word urbs are in the idea of ‘making strong’, a useful concept for Pound’s concerns here. At any rate the urbs/city was not synonymous with architectural structure alone; with its related concept urbanitas (the root of ‘urbane’), the word implies civilization and refinement. Specifically, the urbs meant Rome (Lewis and Short cite Cicero, Ovid and Horace on this point) – apex of political power and cultural activity. Pound’s suggestion, I think, is that medieval Venice has Rome’s mantle, with all that implies: political power, cultural importance, hard work, craft. The Canto thus has something of an evolutionary movement about it; from the ‘zoo/jungle’ of birds, beasts and flowers, the writing culminates in the marble vision of the urbs, where nature, culture and politics are fused in a spiritual harmony granted by the ‘gods’.

85 Beinecke Library, Yale, Ezra Pound papers, YCAL MSS 43, Box 71, folder 3174.
Pound’s draft for Canto XVII (Yale, Beinecke Library). Underneath the typescript the words ‘Venice, urbs, passion, politics, craft, work’ can be identified.
Yet the ‘organic’ roots of this civilization are never lost by Pound. This imagery is echoed in a cyclical motion throughout the *Canto*. Later the boatman, who seems to be associated with ancient Egypt and its gods, takes up the theme:

…the great alley of Memnons.
   Beyond, sea, crests seen over dune
   Night sea churning shingle,
   To the left, the alley of cypress.         A boat came,
   One man holding her sail,
   Guiding her with oar caught over gunwale, saying
   “ There, in the forest of marble,
   “ the stone trees – out of water –
   “ the arbours of stone –
   “ marble leaf, over leaf… (pp. 77-8)

Here the ‘great alley of Memnons’ points to the giant statues of gods that line the Nile at Thebes. But this vista opens up to ‘Night sea churning shingle’ and finally the boat with its oarsman, shouting out the images – ‘forest of marble’ etc. – that take the reader back to Venice.

   William Cookson is right in saying that this Canto is about a Venice ‘transfigured’, granted a spiritual power. 86 For the *Canto* continues:

   Koré through the bright meadow,
   with green-gray dust in the grass:
   “For this hour, brother of Circe.”
   Arm laid over my shoulder,
   Saw the sun for three days, the sun fulvid,
   As a lion lift over sand-plain;
   and that day,
   And for three days, and none after,
   Splendour, as the splendour of Hermes,
   And shipped thence
   to the stone place,
   Pale white, over water,
   known water,
   And the white forest of marble, bent bough over bough,
   The pleached arbour of stone,
   Thither Borso, when they shot the barbed arrow at him,
   And Carmagnola, between the two columns,
   Sigismundo, after that wreck in Dalmatia.
   Sunset like the grasshopper flying. (pp.78-9)

The Greek Eleusinian Mysteries are suggested in this new mention of Koré/Persephone, whose journey into Hades and out again (the seasonal arc from winter to spring) was performed by initiates into the ancient cultic religion. The Eleusinian Mysteries were central to Pound’s thought; he wrote in his *Guide to Kulchur* that the ‘truth’ had ‘been at Eleusis’. What could he mean? Perhaps that he was searching for some kind of mystical fusion of the sacred and secular; for the ‘mysteries’ reflected back to the Ancient Greeks the rhythm of the seasons. Persephone/Koré’s winter descent into the Underworld is followed by the rebirth of the land in Spring – a theme taken up, of course, in Eliot’s *Waste Land* of 1922.

Images associated with rebirth are never far from Pound’s mind. The *Canto* started with bursting vines and moved into the stone trees of Venice. In this extract the grass of Koré’s meadow gives way to yet another picture of the ‘white forest of marble’. Some critics suggest that Venice is here a picture of hell, that we have here descended into the Underworld. This reading is perhaps reinforced by the presence of dead Borso and Carmagnola, Renaissance mercenaries and princes. Carmagnola in particular, in his dramatic execution by the Venetians on suspicion of treachery, would lead us to suspect that this is a negative portrayal of Venice. ‘Carmagnola between the two columns’ refers to his public decapitation between the columns of St. Mark and St. Theodore at the edge of Venice’s Piazza San Marco. Yet the extraordinary beauty presented in the ‘white forest of marble’ and ‘pleached arbour of stone’ complicate a simplistic understanding of the movement of this *Canto*. Tony Tanner’s work on the overwhelmingly positive connotations of marble and precious stones in Pound’s work is helpful here. Tanner argues that in these references ‘we receive glimpses and intimations of the organic and the inorganic, of nature and art, working, moving, surging, together’.

This suggests an essential ambiguity in the poetry – a reading supported by Pound’s interest in the Eleusinian Mysteries. If, as in the cycle of the Mysteries, the cold lifeless

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87 *Guide to Kulchur*, p.294. Another important point in Pound’s thought to be noted here is the neo-platonic absorption of ‘Greek’ spirituality into Renaissance Europe through figures like Gemistus Plethon.


89 Tanner, p.308.
winter is essential for the ‘rebirth’ of spring, then the images of death and the Underworld which intertwine themselves with pictures of vitality and ‘organic’ growth seem to bolster the essentially cyclical nature of history as presented in the Cantos. In other words, what is witnessed is a kind of repeated ‘fortunate fall’, a necessary descent into Hades in order to emerge ‘reborn’. Venice, as one of Pound’s ‘sacred places’ appears as a particularly central point of Pound’s topography here, a theatre for the cyclical patterns of death and rebirth. This topography is live and political as well as spiritual and artistic, and for Pound all three ideals seemed to dance together in visions that were increasingly esoteric.

The writing of topographical space in the Cantos – i.e. ‘writing Italy’ – was mirrored by Pound’s increasing desire to integrate into the contemporary Italy he had moved to in 1924 (when he settled in Rapallo, on the Ligurian coast). Looking back on the move in 1931, Pound compared an Italy of ‘new virility and continual growth’ with a ‘tired’ France and the ‘stupidity’ of England:

The thing that most interests me in the world…is civilization, the high peaks of culture. Italy has twice civilized Europe…Each time a strong, live energy is unleashed in Italy, a new renaissance comes forth.⁹⁰

Italian ‘civilisation’ then, in both the history evoked in the Cantos and the contemporary Fascist state, is what Pound calls a ‘strong, live energy’. This focus on ‘live energy’ (related, I think, to the idea of Venice as ‘living complex’ noted in the previous chapter) convinces me that the spiritual renewal of ‘the gods’ associated in Pound’s poetry with the Italian past is one of a kind with his active political engagement. In other words, Pound was ‘seeing’ the Italian past and the ‘Mussolinian’ present as a continuum. In the case of Venice, the period that produced those evocations of the Venetian past found in Cantos XVII, XXV and XXVI were also periods of ‘live’ engagement by Pound in the culture of the contemporary city. Pound’s lover, Olga Rudge, had bought a small house in Venice in 1928 (Pound wrote that ‘a

palaZZZooo is more her style\(^91\) and Pound corresponded with Venetian writers, critics and academics from the late 1920s onwards.

In 1928, the Venetian Biblioteca Querini Stampalia, part of whose collection was curated by Pound’s friend Manlio Torquato Dazzi, acquired a collection of ten of Pound’s *Cantos*, including XVII. Dazzi, as Mary de Rachewiltz has recorded, was in awe of Pound’s poetic genius.\(^92\) Dazzi wrote to Pound that the *Canto*, with its lyrical evocation of Venice, was the work that ‘meglio conviene alla mia sensibilità’, ‘best accords to my sensibility’.\(^93\) And the library’s director, Giovanni Bodiga (whom we met in the previous chapter presenting Volpi with his commemorative plate) described the ‘sottile sottiglie di Venezia che pervade quei canti’, ‘subtle suggestion of Venice which pervades these Cantos’ and Pound’s exquisite editorial attention which made it a ‘happy gift’ for the Querini’s collection.\(^94\) Pound would continue to be involved with contemporary Venetian culture throughout the 1930s; as well as Dazzi, his regular correspondents included the writer-critics Aldo Camerino and Carlo Izzo. Izzo published a variety of Pound’s poetry – with a particular focus on the Venetian *Cantos* – in the magazine ‘Ateneo Veneto’ during the 1930s.

For Pound’s part, he tried to encourage a Venetian ‘literary renaissance’ with Fascist underpinnings, writing after the invasion of Abyssinia, ‘Now you blokes have got an IMPERO, what about trying to wake up Italian letteraria’\(^95\) and urging Izzo to include ‘No pre fascist points of view’ in his magazines.\(^96\) Pound also writes approvingly of the Venice music festivals, where ‘the old…regime had throughout given place to the new regime’ and where the ‘Triestine chorus’ was led ‘with snap and discipline’:

\[Viva Venizia, Viva VIN=U=GIA\]

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91 Letter from Pound to Rudge, 23 December 1928, Beinecke Library, Yale, Olga Rudge Papers, MSS YCAL 54, Box 7, fld.176.
93 Dazzi to Pound, 11 November 1928, Beinecke Library, Yale, Olga Rudge Papers MSS YCAL 54, Box 7, fld. 171.
94 Bodiga to John Roedker, 12 November 1928 Beinecke Library, Yale, Olga Rudge Papers, MSS YCAL 54, Box 7, fld. 172.
95 Letter from Pound to Izzo, 12 May 1936, Beinecke Library, Yale, Ezra Pound Papers, MSS YCAL 43, Box 1, fld. 1054.
96 Pound to Izzo, 1937 (?), Beinecke Library, Yale, Ezra Pound Papers, MSS YCAL 43, Box 1, fld. 1054.
Viva Vinegia
In terrr = ah e Maar.\textsuperscript{97}

The ‘live energy’ of the new, Fascist Italy may have existed to a greater extent in Pound’s head than in historical reality. Yet Pound’s sense of an essential energy in Italy is a strong theme in his poetry, where, as in Fascism, history is ‘recycled’ to speak of a dynamic present. Catherine Paul has written of Pound’s approval of the Italian Fascist exhibitions of the 1930s; the placing of exhibits in these Fascist carnivals suggested, in their condensation of Italian history into confined spaces stuffed with symbolic weight, the ‘renewal’ of the Italian historic continuum by the regime. Pound’s relationship to these exhibitions suggests an acquiescence to Fascist romanità – an aesthetic associated with the EUR district of Rome, the Foro Italico, or the gargantuan heads of the Duce planted in the Ethiopian desert. Paul argues that this enthusiasm compromises Pound’s cultural endeavours outside of the Fascist prism, that ‘his attempt to embrace all of culture’ in other writings ‘must fail’.\textsuperscript{98} In other words, Pound’s capitulation to the monolithic and totalising tendencies of Fascist cultura – its Nationalistic fantasies centred on Rome and ‘Roman-ness’ – conflict with the broader interests of Pound as critic and artist.

As yet, critical attention has not been centred on the way Pound’s depictions of the city of Venice may also be related to a Fascist ‘use’ of history. Jennifer Scappettone sees the Venice of the Draft of XXX Cantos as ‘a counter to Pound’s eventual fascist city of man’ (my italics).\textsuperscript{99} Scappettone joins Tony Tanner in viewing Pound’s city as living organism, as opposed to the ‘splendidly dead’ Venice described by Hugh Kenner.\textsuperscript{100} Yet Scappettone ultimately sees the Venice of XXX Cantos as ‘entropy’ – an energy unavailable to Fascist monumentalism and unable to be assimilated into political processes. Whether Pound succeeds in harmonising ‘Mussolinian’ live energy and the visions of a ‘lost’ Italian past to be

\textsuperscript{98} Catherine E. Paul, ‘Italian Fascist Exhibitions and Ezra Pound’s Move to the Imperial’, Twentieth Century Literature 51.1 Spring 2005, pp.64-96, p.64.
found in his poetry is debatable. However, I have shown that these concerns are linked in Pound’s thought and that reading them together will be profitable; the city of Venice, with its history of naval power and trading wealth, will not escape being claimed for the Fascist project in Pound’s schema.

Cantos XXV and XXVI, written during the 1925-7 period as Pound was ‘settling in’ to Italian life, describe a Venetian ‘golden age’ of political pomp and ceremony. XXV is concerned with construction – in this case, the construction of the Doge’s Palace, the Palazzo Ducale. XXVI begins with a picture of Pound himself in Venice, before moving on to describe various political machinations to do with the meeting of East and West, alongside which he also examines changing attitudes to art. It is easy to read these Cantos, so concerned as they are with movements in Venetian history, as about decline, Pound engaging in a ‘Ruskinian’ theorising of the corrupting influence on Venice and its art. This is, in the main, how Tanner reads them, hearing ‘his master’s [i.e. Ruskin’s] voice’ in the poetry of these Cantos.101 But again, the language here is extremely complex and any simple ‘fall of Venice’ narrative gleaned from these poems must be thoroughly examined. The beginning of XXV seems to immerse the reader in Venetian detail. I shall quote a lengthy section from this Canto in order to adequately appreciate the language here:

THE BOOK OF THE COUNCIL MAJOR
1255 be it enacted:
That they mustn’t shoot crap anywhere in the hall of the council, nor in the small court under pain of 20 danari, be it enacted:
1266 no squire of Venice to throw dice anywhere in the palace or in the loggia of the Rialto under pain of ten soldi or half that for kids, and if they wont pay they are to be chucked in the water. be it enacted
In libro pactorum
To the things everlasting memory both for live men and for the future et quod publice innotescat
in the said date, dicto millessimo of the illustrious lord, Lord John Soranzo by god’s grace doge of Venice in the curia of the Palace of the Doges,

101 Tanner, p.327.
neath the portico next the house of the dwelling of the Castaldio and of the heralds of the Lord Doge. being beneath same a penthouse or cages or room timbered (trabelsilis) like a cellar one Lion male and one female simul commorantes which beasts to the Lord Doge were transmitted small by that serene Lord King Frederic of Sicily, the said lion knew carnally and in nature the Lioness aforesaid and impregnated in that manner that animals leap on one another to know and impregnate on the faith of several ocular witnesses Which lioness bore pregnant for about three months (as is said by those who saw her assaulted) and in the said millessimo and month on a Sunday 12th. of the month of September about sunrise on St. Mark’s day early but with the light already apparent the said lioness as is the nature of animals whelped per naturam three lion cubs vivos et pilosos living and hairy which born at once began life and motion and to go gyring about their mother throughout the aforesaid room as saw the aforesaid Lord Doge and as it were all the Venetians and other folk who were in Venice that day that concurred all for this as it were miraculous sight. And one of the animals is a male and the other two female

I John Marchesini Ducal notary of the Venetians as eyewitness saw the nativity of these animals thus by mandate of the said Doge wrote this and put it in file.

Also a note from Pontius Pilate dated the “year 33.”

Two columns (a.d. 1323) for the church of St. Nicholas of the palace 12 lire gross.
To the procurators of St. Marc for entrance to the palace, for gilding the images and the lion over the door … to be paid …

(pp.115-116)

The *Canto* begins by raising a moral/ethical point. The medieval Venetian state will not allow moral corruption to creep into the sacred centres of their city: neither the *Palazzo Ducale* nor the loggia of the Rialto (Pound consulted the Venetian archives at various points in his career) are to be sullied by gambling. Economics is creeping in here. Venice has a tight control on its financial and architectural development: no gambling allowed. Alongside the unflinching sternness of the Venetian moral code, the reader witnesses the gradual, glorious growth of the Doge’s Palace. The immersion in detail that the reader experiences is achieved by Pound’s
keeping of the poetry as close as possible to the feel of the archive, the English interspersed with Latin phrases, and metred clumsily, heightening the sense of reading a difficult, ancient document. As the Canto continues, it now revolves around the image of the lion, sacred to Venice. A ‘miraculous’ event is described: the birth of the lion cubs on St. Mark’s Day. This miraculous event is also replete with political significance – a portent of Venice’s fortune as the lions, symbols of Venice, are born on Venice’s own saint’s day.

Is there a contrast being made between these living lions, ‘vivos et pilosos’ that go ‘gyring’ about the mother, and the stone ‘lion over the door’ ‘(a.d. 1323)’ at the end of the quotation? Uncertain – the way the ‘living’ and the stone lions are placed so close to each other in the Canto suggests that there is a unity here. In other words, the beginning of the Canto posits a city full of political life – the lion ‘moving’. This is a city whose lion-sculptures are mirrored in the living, moving, powerful lions that the lioness gives birth to. We can contrast these images of a powerfully, politically muscular city with what comes later in the Canto:

Noble forms, lacking life, that bolge, that valley
the dead words keeping form,
and the cry: Civis Romanus.
The clear air, dark, dark,
The dead concepts, never the solid, the blood rite,
The vanity of Ferrara;

(118)
Pound’s notes for the draft of XXV lists a number of words he associates with the ‘dead words’ of ‘Civis Romanus’:
cold.
emptiness.
listlessness
lifeless

Underneath, Pound has scribbled: ‘the animal moving. San Marco.’ That ‘the animal moving’, associated with the lion of St. Mark, is meant to be contrasted with the ‘dead’ forms of ‘Civis Romanus’ seems clear. Pound’s reference to the ‘vanity of Ferrara’ is to the 1438

102 Beinecke Library, Yale, Ezra Pound papers, YCAL MSS 43 Box 71, folder 3212.
theological council of Eastern and Western churches, where issues such as the *filioque* clause (the debate about whether the Holy Spirit proceeded ‘from the Father and the Son’ as the Western church affirmed, or whether the Spirit emanated solely from the Father, as the East held) were discussed. Pound mocks these arguments in the following *Canto*: ‘as to the which begat the what in the Trinity/…you would have burst your bum laughing/ To see the hats and beards of those greeks’ (XXVI, pp.123-4). What Pound seems to see in Ferrara is a kind of academic, bookish pedantry associated with ‘dead words’ and ‘dead concepts’ – a Christianity rendered sterile when contrasted with the life he associates with the classical pantheon. The cry ‘Civis Romanus’ therefore implies pejorative connotations with the concept of a society in civic and spiritual stagnation whose sense of order is outdated and grown corrupt. In opposition to this are the lions: with their life and vitality they are symbols of power and of politics.

This central emblem of the lion has another, contemporary, context. There was much debate in Fascist-era Venice over the ‘lost’ lions of the Venetian Republic; these symbols, which had often been effaced in foreign rule, were emblematic of the past glory of Venice – a glory which the Fascist regime liked to claim it had recovered. So for example Count Giuseppe Volpi (who, as we have seen, Pound referenced in the *Pisan Cantos* and who also featured in chapter four) appealed to the lions of the Venetian past to justify ideas of Italian expansion in the eastern Mediterranean. Volpi wrote in 1926: ‘Nella mia prima gioventù ho lasciato queste lagune e ho solcato il breve golfo, che non è mare, è acqua nostra, e ho ritrovato sull’altra sponda ad ogni palmo il leone della Repubblica e questo leone è in gran parte, ora, su terra nostra’, ‘In my youth I left this lagoon and I sailed the tiny gulf which is not a sea, but our water, and I found on the other side on every post the lion of the Republic. This lion is now, for the most part, on our territory again.’ This is a reference to the territory in present-day Croatia claimed by D’Annunzio and early Fascist expeditions. He continues: ‘ho trovato in mezzo alla Macedonia….ho trovato un nome, un leone veneziano,…e ho trovato à Constantinopoli i segni mortali di Enrico Dandolo. E ho trovato, in tutti gli scali d’oriente, il franco parlare di Venezia e la sua memoria’, ‘in the middle of Macedonia I found
a name, and a Venetian lion….and I found in Constantinople the mortal remains of Enrico
Dandolo [the medieval Doge]. And I found, in all the ports of the Orient, the free discussion
of Venice and her memory.¹⁰³

This linking of Venice – via its lions – to the East has ideological significance; the
Italian historian of Fascism Renzo De Felice has argued that Fascist rhetoric of the 1920s and
1930s ‘assumeva…consistenza nella prospettiva di una…espansione…italiana nel
Mediterraneo Orientale’, ‘assumed a…consistency in the idea of Italian expansion in the
Eastern Mediterranean’.¹⁰⁴ Fascist Italy’s first act of international aggression was the
bombardment of the old Venetian colony of Corfu, and the rhetoric of Fascist expansionism
appealed both to ancient Rome and the maritime republics of Genoa, Amalfi and Venice as
models of Italian empire. A contemporary French cartoon on the Corfu crisis depicted the
Italian fleet as gondoliers.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Fascist culture in the Italian eastern Mediterranean
would make constant reference to the colonial history of the Venetian republic. For example,
the Palazzo del Governo on the Greek island of Rhodes, designed by the architect Florestano
di Fausto is, in Medina Lasansky’s words, ‘with its neo-Gothic windows, Venetian-style
crenellations and bichrome brickwork a direct quotation of the Doge’s Palace’.¹⁰⁶

Yet many of the symbols of the old Venetian republic had been destroyed by Napoleonic
or Austrian armies in the nineteenth century. Volpi described finding Venetian lions
‘scalpellato e sovrapposto da un’aquila grifagna’, ‘rubbed out and superimposed with a
double-headed [Hapsburg] eagle’.¹⁰⁷ Under the Mussolini regime, the restoration of lost or
defaced lions became a matter of renewed national pride. Local Venetian journals ran articles
highlighting the variety of Venetian lions throughout the Eastern Mediterranean – in Istria,
Dalmatia, Corfu, and Crete. These sculptures were a stark reminder of Venice’s lost imperial
past and perhaps served as an incitement to a renewed Italian expansionism. The imagery of

¹⁰⁴ Renzo De Felice, Il Fascismo e l’Oriente: Arabi, Ebrei e Indiani nella Politica di Mussolini
¹⁰⁵ In Le Canard Enchaîné, 5 September 1923.
¹⁰⁶ Lasansky, p.196.
¹⁰⁷ ‘L’Offerta Navale’, p.90.
A French magazine’s impression of the Italian bombardment of Corfu in 1923. The gondolas armed with cannons suggest Corfu’s history as a Venetian imperial possession, as well as providing a jokey take on aggressive Fascist Nationalism.
The Fascist Palazzo del Governo on the Greek island Rhodes adopted a neo-Venetian style in keeping with the regime’s imperialistic rhetoric.
the lion was revived in myriad ways during the Fascist period in Venice, often in conjunction with Fascist symbols such as the eagle or the *fascio littorio* (lictor’s rod). Venice’s pavilion at the Tripoli Fair in Libya in 1927, for example, was dominated by a 2m-long lion with two panels at the sides depicting marine animals and lionesses. This was complemented by two giant lictor’s rods flanking the entrance.¹⁰⁸ The Tripoli Fair, devoted as it was to Italian imperialism in the East, was a natural setting for the symbols of Venice’s old empire.

Pound’s lions of *Canto XXV* thus become particularly interesting in the context of the revival of the lion as a symbol of Fascist imperialism. Whilst avoiding the simplistic suggestion that the poet was a Venetian imperialist, it is certainly interesting to compare these evocations of the Venetian past with his exploration of the city’s history in *Canto XXV*. Pound’s move to Italy and increasing engagement with Fascism in the late 1920s and early ’30s suggest he would have encountered this rhetoric. Certainly these Fascist investigations into Venetian history – debates pursued throughout the later 1920s – were contemporaneous. The ‘lost Venice’ which Pound is trying to reclaim here in *Canto XXV* was also being ‘revived’ for the time of modernity by the Fascist administration. The idea therefore of a Venice *irrevocably* ‘lost’ or ‘fallen’ in *Canto XXV* does not do full justice to the implications of the writing; there can be seen to be a contrast between the ‘life’ centred around the lions’ miraculous birth at the beginning of the *Canto* and the ‘dead’ words and concepts which Pound later describes.

Even in the midst of this vortex of lifelessness, there are still ‘Forms, forms and renewal, gods held in the air’ to contend with:

Forms, forms and renewal, gods held in the air,
Forms seen, and then clearness,
Bright void, without image, Napishtim,
Casting his gods back into the υ ouç

(119)

Napishtim, or Ut-Napishtim, is a character from the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*. In a parallel with the biblical account of the Flood in Genesis, Ut-Napishtim survives the destruction by building an Ark (like Noah) and is granted immortality by the gods. Ut-Napishtim’s name means ‘he who saw life’. Ut-Napishtim’s appearance in the *Canto* suggests that the spark of life survives even after the judgment of the Flood. And, just as it was down to Ut-Napishtim to ‘renew’ creation and be granted immortality, so there is, I suggest, the hope that Venice’s ‘life’ will be renewed again. The end of the *Canto* depicts the laziness of Titian in the 16th-century, who ‘profited’ from the money of the Venetian Senate and ‘for about twenty years’ ‘has not worked’ (p.120) on the paintings inside the *Palazzo Ducale*. It seems that this *cinquecento* idleness is being contrasted with the glories of the first half of the *Canto* – the medieval scenes revolving around the lion of St. Mark. Yet, as I have argued, even amongst this apparent decline the suggestion of the possibility of life or ‘renewal’ remains.

Neither is reading the subsequent *Canto* XXVI as a straightforward chronicle of decline easy. The *Canto* begins with a lyrical vision of Pound’s youthful experience of Venice in 1908: gondolas, singing and lanterns. The beautiful flowing imagery here suggests an eternal or mythic vision of Venice pictured as boats moving over water, light interacting with shade:

> And I came here in my young youth  
> and lay there under the crocodile  
> By the column, looking East on the Friday,  
> And I said: Tomorrow I will lie on the South side  
> And the day after, south west.  
> And at night they sang in the gondolas  
> And in the barche with lanthorns;  
> The prows rose silver on silver  
> taking light in the darkness.

(121)
Cover of *Le Tre Venezia*, January 1929. Note the Fascist axes incorporating Venetian symbolism.
Massimo Bacigalupo reads these lines with Pound as the prototypical artist working ‘secondo ritmi che non possano stipularsi per contratto’, ‘following rhythms which cannot be determined by contract’. Here the rhythm is the movement of the sun in Venice, and Pound idles under the two columns in St. Mark’s Square, the same that Carmagnola was executed between back in Canto XVII. There is certainly a lot to do with art and artists in this Canto: the sculptor Matteo De Pasti, the painter Carpaccio, and Mozart all feature. Yet these references are against a backdrop of political and economic intrigue. Aside from the excursion into the Salzburg of Mozart at the end of the Canto, it is Venice as political and cultural powerhouse with which the poem is most concerned.

In particular, XXVI is interested in Venice’s relationship with the East. Pound begins by describing himself ‘looking East on the Friday’ and this first reference to the East establishes it as a recurrent theme in the Canto. Venice itself was often seen as a kind of gateway to the East and ‘to look East’ from the ‘crocodile’ was to look out towards the sea, towards Venice’s former colonies in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, the ‘crocodile’ itself is interesting in this context, for the ‘crocodile’ or dragon perched on one of the two columns at the water’s edge in Piazzetta San Marco, is associated with St. Theodore, Venice’s first patron saint. An eastern saint, Theodore is associated with Venice’s origins as a trading post of the Byzantine empire. Like St. George, he was supposed to have fought a dragon (the ‘crocodile’ which Pound is resting under) and was one of a number of Greek military saints. This reference to Theodore seems to reinforce the connections to the East in the Canto – as a primarily Eastern Orthodox saint, his appearance anticipates the arrival of the Eastern Orthodox bishops later in the poem. Furthermore, Venice is considerably further west geographically than many of the places with which St. Theodore is associated – Constantinople, Jerusalem and Damascus. Pound appears to be setting up Venice as a point of departure to the East and a place for encounters between East and West.

The first ‘encounter’ is witnessed fairly early on in the *Canto*, where the sculptor Matteo De Pasti, under the employment of Sigismondo de Malatesta, is despatched to Constantinople in 1461 to paint the Turkish sultan’s portrait. Here he is intercepted by the Venetians, who suspect him of being in league with the Turks. Pasti is released:

…with a caveat
“caveat ire ad Turchum, that he stay out of
Constantinople
“if he holds dear our government’s pleasure.

Pasti is ‘let out’ on condition that he beware the Turks and stays clear of Constantinople.

What significance does this encounter hold, then, for the portrayal of Venice in Pound’s epic?

Robert Casillo, in his impressive study of Pound’s Fascism and anti-Semitism, suggests that Venice here is set up in the *Canto* as a rather suspect place, ‘infected’ by contact with the Orient. It is, like Gibraltar, one of ‘Pound’s border places, where demarcations disappear and usury therefore inhabits’. Like Gibraltar – where, in *Canto* XXII, Pound recalls the interior of a synagogue and Christians, Jews and Muslims interact – it is a place where Eastern and Western traditions meet. Casillo sees this as having primarily negative connotations. His appraisal of the Venice of the *Cantos* as a place where ‘usury inhabits’ relates it to the context of anti-Semitism. For Casillo, the ‘luxury’ or *luxuria* that creeps into *Canto* XXVI is from the Orient and connected to Pound’s paranoiac anxieties around ‘Jewishness’. The key passage is:

And hither came Selvo, doge,
that first mosaic’d San Marco,
And his wife that would touch food but with forks,
Sed aurei furculis, that is
With small golden prongs
Bringing in, thus, the vice of luxuria…

Casillo identifies ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forms of luxury existing in the universe of this poem. The ‘bad’ luxury – *luxuria* – comes from the Orient: ‘introduced into Venice by the Doge’s Greek wife [Theodora, daughter of the Byzantine emperor, Constantine Ducas XI], whose culture is
already corrupted by the decadent Near Eastern world’. 111 ‘Decadent’ in this context stands for the effeminising luxury that Pound associated with Hebraic culture.

But for me Casillo’s reading dichotomises too much; for the ‘good’ luxury that Casillo associates with the ‘mosaic’ing’ of the basilica of San Marco has also come from the East – Doge Selvo ‘required every Venetian ship loading in the East to bring home marbles or fine stones for the basilica’ (my italics). 112 Furthermore, as Tanner has argued, it is unlikely that Pound saw the use of forks as an indicator of decadent luxury, thus making the comment on luxuria ‘a contemporary [i.e. medieval] one’. 113 This further complicates Casillo’s reading of the comment on luxuria here as signalling the ‘decline’ of Venice. What is more, the ‘luxurious pageant’ that follows this section, which the critic takes to be ‘an image of Venice corrupted by Renaissance opulence’ 114 seems, again, to be a more sympathetic evocation of Venetian pomp than such a comment would suggest. There is much joy and exuberance here:

The masters of wool cloth
Glass makers in scarlet
Carrying fabrefactions of glass;
25th April the jousting,
The Lord Nicolo Este,
Ugaccion dei Contrarini,
The Lord Francesco Gonzaga, and first
The goldsmiths and jewelers’ company…

(122-3)

The whole scene seems to come out of one of Carpaccio’s processions and the presence of Niccolò D’Este, one of Pound’s ‘heroes’ in the Cantos (these were the wedding festivities for Niccolò’s son Leonello), would further support the theory that this procession is being portrayed in a positive light.

Casillo sees the Venice of Canto XXVI as ‘both earthly paradise… and… Hell’. 115

Whilst it is true that the ambiguities of the city as portrayed in the middle Cantos never leave Pound’s poetry, I do not read Venice’s contact with the East as corrupting here. In the caveat

111 Ibid., p.236.
112 Cited in Terrell, p.105.
113 Tanner, p.331.
114 Casillo, p.235.
115 Ibid.
quoted near the beginning of the *Canto*, it is Venice that is cautioning less contact with the East (the Turks, Constantinople). Furthermore, recent scholarship in Renaissance studies has constructed the East as a more complicated concept for Western Europe than had previously been thought. Rather than being construed as a dark ‘other’, the East (Ottoman Turkey in particular) is seen as a vital trading partner and site of cultural exchange, for Venice as for other European powers.  

Certainly, Pound’s interest in China and Japan might lead us away from a simplistic concept of ‘the East’ as ‘corrupting’ within the Poundian universe. In Casillo’s analysis, as we have seen, the sense of ‘corruption’ which degrades Venice comes from the East and is related to the poet’s anti-Semitism. Other critics see Venice as inherently corrupt – Guy Davenport, for example, who views the city portrayed in both *Cantos* XXV and XXVI as a ‘dark moral entity’ or an ‘ominous, unworldly place’. The ‘crocodile’ viewed at the beginning of XXVI is, in Davenport’s reading, stripped of all its contexts and set up simply as a symbol of ‘insincerity’, setting up the dark, unnatural world to follow.

This thesis finds these arguments to be too simplistic a take on the meaning of Venice in these *Cantos*. The appearances of Venice in the middle *Cantos* come in an ever more complicated – and ever more political – world. Whilst the emphasis on ‘rebirth’ and organic form remains, Pound’s increasing interest in economics lead him to complex appraisals of Venetian history. Fascist approaches to a ‘lost Venice’ run parallel to Pound’s investigations and act as a catalyst for his own recovery of the Venetian past in these poems. Pound’s discovery of the Veneto-centric ‘poetic’ Nationalism of D’Annunzio, along with his actual experience of the Fascist-era city suggest that the depictions of Venice in the *Cantos* may be seen as having an increasingly political colour. Related to this is the growing anti-Semitism within Pound’s vision of the city. This chapter has detailed how tourism and the touristic impulse are interwoven into the development of an ideologically, historically and racially conceptualised Venice. The late, paradisal visions of Venice in the *Pisan Cantos*, related as

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116 As, for example, in the work of Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art Between East and West* (London: Reaktion 2000).


118 Ibid., p.231.
we have seen to the ‘Fascist Utopia’ and the city of Dioce, are the culminations of Pound’s imagining of a ‘renewed’ Italy. Despite the complexities of Venice’s appearance in the middle Cantos, this ‘potential’ city revived by Nationalism is never absent from Pound’s epic. Much as the lyrical beauty of Pound’s visions may enchant, the relationship of his ‘Venices’ to the ideology of contemporary Italian Nationalisms remains crucial.
CONCLUSION

The focus on Ruskin and Pound in this thesis has highlighted differences between the two writers’ approach to Venice. Whilst in the case of Ruskin, it was clear that a particular moment of Nationalism (1848) informed the production of _The Stones of Venice_, for Ezra Pound a different, more subtle approach was required to evaluate the influence of Nationalist/Fascist uses of the image of Venice in his work. Analysis of Pound’s writings uncovered a trajectory towards an increasingly Fascistic use of representations of Venice, informed not by a particular ‘moment’ but by a series of moments, his awareness of Italian Nationalism and Fascism shaping his portrayals of the city.

The thesis has shown how John Ruskin’s conception of Venice in _The Stones of Venice_ was born out of his conflict with the prevailing _leggenda nera_ myths of the city as dark and secretive. Ruskin portrayed Venice as morally pure and just – a project that paralleled the recovery of the history of Venice by Italian Nationalism. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated how the critic’s work can be viewed in the context of the aftermath of the 1848 Venice revolution and subsequent Austrian repression. The chapter showed how the tension of the ‘moment’ of 1848 worked its way into his central descriptions of Venetian architecture in _The Stones of Venice_. It also showed how the development of Ruskin’s thought could be viewed as belonging to a ‘Nationalist continuum’. His interest in national unity, seen in early works such as _The Poetry of Architecture_ and developed in _The Stones of Venice_, were viewed in relation to the thinking of figures such as Michelet, and linked to the general rise of European Nationalism in the nineteenth century. Also demonstrated were the ways in which Ruskin’s later engagement with restoration in Venice was construed by his Italian colleagues as part of a Risorgimento project of renewing national pride.

In my work on Ezra Pound, I situated the poet’s writings on Venice within the complex cultural context of the first half of the twentieth century. Using original research
conducted in Venice, I analysed the ways in which Fascist and other Nationalisms made use of the image of Venice. I looked at a number of responses to the city, from Marinetti’s pre-Fascist Futurism to mid-1930s architectural debates. I then demonstrated how the images of Venice in Pound’s *Cantos* subtly absorbed and recapitulated these political debates.

Using Barthes’s theory of mythology, the thesis has consistently argued that the critical paradigm of ‘Venice-as-dream-city’ is problematic. With examples including Hemingway, Hofmannsthal, Mann and Dickens, the thesis showed how, even in what are apparently classic ‘Venice-as-dream’ narratives, attentive reading can identify key contemporary historico-political concerns. Thus, as I set out in my introduction, this thesis does not intend to ‘write off’ dream visions of Venice, and recognises the importance of psychoanalytical and other readings of ‘Venice fantasies’. Instead, this project has wanted to emphasise the sometimes neglected influence of contemporary political iconography and rhetoric on Ruskin’s and Pound’s literary visions of Venice. By extension I have hoped to offer new political perspectives on other Anglo-American representations of Venice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both Ruskin and Pound can be said to provide visions of Venice which are transmutable and shifting; Pound’s idea of Venice as the ‘living complex’ came to him whilst walking in southern France, Ruskin’s Venetian visions are interspersed with depictions of English cathedral towns. Both writers were interested in ‘craft’ and ‘work’. The importance of labour to both (as with Marinetti and Mussolini) is closely linked to the political contexts of Nationalism – Venice as a city of industry rather than a ‘dream of art’.

The battle for Venice continues today. Visiting the city in the Spring of 2006 during the Italian elections, I noticed the billboards plastered with Lega Nord posters, depicting the figure of Alberto da Giussano, the mythical defender of Lombardy. Above Giussano was a large Lion of St. Mark, the symbolism demonstrating the absorption of ‘Venetist’ ideology into the pan-northern rhetoric of Umberto Bossi’s ‘Padania’ (his name for northern Italy). The Liga Veneta was the first of the northern Italian
autonomist movements to be founded, predating Bossi’s Lega Lombarda, and now all Lega Nord symbols across the ‘North’ (Alto Adige/Südtirol, Emilia, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, Liguria, Lombardy, Le Marche, Piedmont, Romagna, Trentino, Tuscany, Umbria, Valle D’Aosta) feature the Lion of St. Mark embossed on Alberto’s shield. Both before and after its incorporation into Bossi’s Lega Nord movement, the Liga Veneta has traded on Venetian symbolism and ideology. Referring to the history of the Venetian Republic pre-1797 and to the 1848-9 revival of the Republic, the Liga has made much use of the traditional Lion symbol of Venice and has pressed for the advanced teaching of Venetian dialect and history. An article sympathetic to Venetian autonomism by Ezio Toffano has talked of the ‘oramai sopito senso di appartenenza alla grande patria veneta’, ‘the now dulled sense of belonging to the great Venetian fatherland’.1 The Liga also attaches significance to events of Venetian cultural importance. Shortly after its initiation, it celebrated the anniversary of the birth of the painter Giorgione at the cathedral church of Castelfranco, with the ceremonial draping of a Venetian flag over the altar and the reading of a poem in Venetian dialect.2

Like the Lega Nord, the Liga Veneta has resisted what it sees as ‘Italian colonisation’ of the North from Rome. In this sense, it presents itself as anti-Fascist, pointing to the aggressive unifying projects of Mussolini’s regime that aimed at erasing regional loyalties. Yet there are some similarities to the Fascist project. As we have seen, Fascists often made use of Venetian symbolism when it suited them, willing to adopt any historical precedent (Roman, Tuscan, Venetian) for a ‘glorious Italy’. Furthermore, the racist implications inherent in the propaganda of northern Italian autonomist groups are reminiscent of Fascist rhetoric. Bossi’s construction of an ‘Alpine’ origin for northern Italian ‘Padania’3 mirrors Mussolini’s emphasis after 1938

2 Ibid., pp.2-3.
on the ‘Aryan’ origin of Italians: ‘we are evidently Aryans, and we came from the Alps, from the North’, the Duce argued.  

A 2006 television campaign for the Lega Nord featured a charging Alberto da Giussano with a crusader flag galloping through Italian woods. The verbal message stresses ‘rispetto della nostra terra, delle nostre tradizioni, della nostra storia, onestà, coraggio, famiglia, protezione, libertà’, ‘respect for our land, our traditions, our history, honesty, courage, family, protection, liberty’. The video ends with the crusader raising his sword and transforming into the Lega Nord symbol. Here, ‘our’ land and traditions, identified with the crusading knight, are seen as belonging to a Europe under threat from nameless, foreign outsiders; in a climate of European suspicion of Islam and of Moslem immigration, the crusader image has, of course, a particular set of connotations.  

Perhaps the strangest episode in the modern history of Venetian politics is the raiding of the Campanile in St. Mark’s Square in 1997 by a band of eight armed vigilantes who then proclaimed the rebirth of the Venetian Republic, raising the flag of St. Mark. The eight ‘Serenissimi’, as they were termed, have been identified with the Veneto Serenissimo Governo, whose website features Venetian imagery and deplores what it describes as 142 years of ‘Italian colonisation’ in the Veneto. The actions of the Serenissimi were part of a series of political and cultural events that marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the fall of the Venetian Republic. On the seventeenth of March 1997, a radio program was interrupted by fifteen minutes of proclamations of Venetian liberty in dialect. A demonstration marking the fall of the Republic was announced for the twelfth of May, on top of the pre-planned Lega Nord demonstration for the eleventh of May. The motivations of the Serenissimi remain unclear. Although they subsequently accepted aid from Lega Nord groups, at the time Bossi disclaimed

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6 Toffano, p.13.
their actions and suggested that the event in St. Mark’s Square had been staged by the security services to take attention away from his ‘Padania’ project.\(^7\)

In the iconography of the Italian Left, Venice is a more ambiguous symbol. Massimo Cacciari, twice-elected mayor of Venice (1993-2000, 2005 to the present) and formerly a Marxist philosopher, constructs Venice as closed and elusive: ‘a mask that hides being’, ‘a symbol of the loss of homeland’.\(^8\) Cacciari’s nihilistic, Nietzschean vision sees the city as essentially ‘an anti-city symbol’. In his collaboration with the experimental Venetian composer Luigi Nono on the choral work *Prometeo* (1984-5), the music, with its ‘sharp sounds…contrasted with long and drawn-out utterances’ creates a difficult, complex lagoon city.\(^9\) Cacciari’s Venice is ultimately ‘a house from which he is excluded’, and in a sense it is this ‘resistant’ aspect of Venice that Cacciari celebrates.\(^10\)

What these examples show is the still-weighty political significance of Venetian symbolism within modern Italy. Ironically, the strongest support for ‘Venetian autonomism’ comes not from within Venice itself but from the towns of the mainland Veneto: Padua, Treviso, Verona and Vicenza. Venice to these new autonomists is not a ‘Dream City’ or tourist trap, but a glorious political idea promising freedom and empowerment. There is a need, then, to be shrewd in our analysis of the use of Venice as a trope, whether in Ruskin and Pound or in contemporary Italian political dialogue. For the critic, taking Venice seriously means taking seriously the power of the political ideas embodied in representations of the city. This process provides new ways of analysing the relationship between culture and politics in one of Europe’s most enduring icons.

\(^7\) For more on this episode, see Alvise Fontanella, *1997, Il Ritorno della Serenissima*, (Venice: Editoria Universitaria 1997).


\(^9\) Ibid., p.413.

\(^10\) See also Scappettone, ‘Utopia Interrupted’, p.115.
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