

Letter From Venice

by Curtis Cate

Illusion and Reality, Then and Now



Years ago—so long ago indeed that I hesitate to record the date—a wise lady of Hungarian origin said to me in Vienna: “Oh, to be able to see Venice again for the first time!” It was one of those casual remarks which, behind the smiling mask of a truism, reveals a hidden, monitory depth.

Contrary to what Thomas Jefferson and many other 18th-century optimists believed, human happiness is not something that can be methodically pursued. In its supreme forms or visitations, where it approaches or attains the pinnacle of ecstasy, it is a delicious surprise, a “gift of the gods,” and for all of us that blessed moment when the expectation is equaled or surpassed by the attainment. It is that magic instant, so delicately evoked by Joyce, when on the occasion of his *first* kiss, his autobiographical hero, Stephen Daedalus, experienced with a thrill the “soft, sweet swoon of sin.” It is that extraordinary moment in the life of a young male, described by Stendhal with such psychological penetration in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, when for the first time an adolescent proves his virility with the trembling consent of his female partner.

In citing these two examples, I do not wish to suggest that the “firstness” of any truly happy experience is limited to erotic pleasure—which fortunately for all of us is not the case. It is simply because Venice—the *serenissima* Republic of the Doges, the proud maintainer of a Mediterranean fleet that was long a match for all others, the home of Paolo Veronese, of Jacopo Robusti (better known as a dyer’s son by his nickname of Tintoretto), of Tiziano Vecellio (whom Kenneth Clark once called the greatest portrait painter of all time)—was also the city of that exuberant lecher, Giovanni Giacomo Casanova, and of his libertine

friend, “Abbate” Lorenzo da Ponte—the poet and librettist who persuaded Mozart to compose *Don Giovanni*.

Two centuries ago, many were the travelers who came to Venice with no clearly defined impression of the wonders that awaited them. They were moved by the vivid tales they had heard of this floating city and which, like everything read or heard about, were embellished and embroidered in their feverish imaginations. But in our age of illustrated magazines, travel leaflets, and tourist posters, this kind of visual innocence has virtually ceased to exist. The no longer distant destination must now vie with the pre-existing photographic image which, even before the alluring goal is reached, has robbed it of much of its mystery.

For this 20th-century plight there is of course a kind of ersatz remedy or crutch—the hired or self-appointed tourist guide. As the great art historian, Ernst Gombrich, has never ceased to point out, knowledge of the circumstances in which a great painting, a great piece of sculpture, or a great edifice was created *adds* to one’s enjoyment of what might otherwise be casually dismissed as inexplicably puzzling, quaint, and deplorably “unmodern,” just one more artistic extravaganza sponsored or financed by members of an inexcusably pampered “leisure class” (to use the language of Thorstein Veblen). The extent to which the puritanical “subconscious” adversely affects and cripples aesthetic judgments is, I think, matched in our contemporary democratic world only by the crass ingratitude the *willfully ignorant* tourist displays towards extraordinary works of art that it took years, and sometimes even decades, to complete. For the willfully ignorant tourist is also, in this age of supersonic transport and *spoudiphilia* (love of haste) the itinerant tourist-in-a-hurry. As my brother, no lover of museums, once said to me, after accompanying a Canadian friend to the Palace of Versailles, “I normally go through a museum on a bicycle, but he roared through on a motorbike!”

When I made my first visit to Venice in 1949—for the truth at last “must out”—the floating city did not yet boast an airport. It was linked to the mainland

town of Mestre (since become, o scandal of scandals, an oil-refining center) by a narrow causeway paralleled by a track leading to the railway station. I arrived with a friend by car (more exactly a Jeep), which we left in a large garage or *autorimessa*, which to this day adjoins the Piazzale Roma and the fluvial terminus for the *vaporetti* that ply up and down the Grand Canal. Night had already fallen, cloaking the darkly silhouetted buildings in a mantle of nocturnal mystery in the midst of which, like golden sequins, a row of receding birthday candles seemed to offer us a wobbly greeting.

Even though it was undertaken in a diesel-powered *vaporetto* (steam-driven river ferries were already a thing of the past), that first trip up the Grand Canal, with a long necklace of lanterns illuminating the facades of neo-Gothic palazzi, each with its small wooden wharf and gaily colored barber-poles for the hitching of its gondolas, was an unforgettable experience. Had I been richer, I would have insisted on making the trip by gondola—then, as now, an expensive luxury reserved for leisurely millionaires.

It was only much later, when I was doing research for my biography of George Sand—whose *Lettres d’un voyageur* (written during her six-month stay in 1834) are among the most enchanting pages ever written about this city by a non-Italian author—that I realized what I had missed. Her description of her own approach to Venice with her poet-lover Alfred de Musset is worth quoting, if only as a sad reminder of how much our modern, time-pressed world has lost in terms of *slowly unfolding* beauty ever since the automobile replaced the horse-and-buggy, and the water-churning *vaporetto* the kind of hooded gondola, poled by three stout gondoliers, in which the two French “honeymooners” were silently propelled toward the heart of the city.

Suspended like a lantern over the twinkling lights of the Giudecca waterway up which they were gliding, the moon now came into view with an almost theatrical sense of timing, a sultry, heavy-lidded moon, against whose huge blood-

shot disk the sculpted fretwork of domes and terraces was magnificently silhouetted. Slowly, as it rose through its shredded bank of cloud, the disk shrank and silvered, until the cornices of the Ducal Palace and the cupolas of San Marco shone like pieces of alabaster.

Recently, when a friend generously offered my wife and myself a second trip to Venice, I knew in advance that it could not possibly offer us anything remotely comparable in visual excitement. Yet I succumbed to the resistible temptation, momentarily forgetting that one's fondest moments are best preserved by *not* trying to relive them.

From the moment our Air France plane touched down at the Marco Polo airfield, located on the mainland north of Venice, I realized that this second trip to the aquatic city was going to be radically different from the first. But the disappointment far exceeded my worst fears and misgivings.

It was a dull afternoon, in which the greyness of the misty sky was reflected in the muddy opacity of the greenish, soup-like sea, so shallow in many places that V-shaped logs mark the waterways boats must use to reach Venice in order to avoid running aground on hidden sandbanks. (It was this "blessed" shallowness which for centuries made the *serenissima* Republic so invulnerable to attacks from the mainland and the Adriatic, just as rocky reefs and treacherous Channel currents once made the Breton seaport of St. Malo a haven for corsairs and pirates.) On this particular afternoon the misty haze enveloping Venice had none of the sun-tinged softness which Turner and Bonington, two of the greatest watercolorists of all time, so magically caught in their delicate aquarelles. It was just one more sea-mist shrouding what, as we grew closer, turned out to be the scrofulous backside of Venice.

The approach to every great city, in this age of suburban sprawl, is now almost invariably made through a squalid belt of unlovely slum-dwellings, cheap tenements, workshops with corrugated-iron roofs, and brick or concrete factory buildings. Venice, as I now discovered to my dismay, is no exception. Whereas the old causeway and the railway track take one directly into the terminal square at one end of the serpentine Grand Canal, anyone arriving by *motoscafo*

speed-boat from the Marco Polo airport is driven past the cemeterial island of San Michele (where, I believe, Diaghilev is buried) and then along the northeastern rim of the city, with its uninspiring waterfront of bedraggled houses, as far as a canal which, cutting across the city's eastern proboscis, takes one past the red-brick walls and battlements of the old Darsena arsenal and out into the bay, or what the Venetians more accurately call the Canale di San Marco.

When I asked the cigarette-smoking driver of our "water-taxi" why he had not approached Venice from the western end and taken us up the Grand Canal, he answered, "Because it's much shorter." The trip, instead of costing a mere 130,000 lire (roughly \$80 at the current rate of exchange) would have cost far more.

This first disappointment was quickly followed by a second, far more serious shock. I had long known that the time *not* to visit Venice was during the mid-summer months when, as George Sand once wrote, it becomes "a city of daytime corpses lethargically stretched out on sofas or the cushioned bottoms of their boats, who slowly fan themselves to life at dusk on the cooling marble of their balconies or beneath the sun-scorched awnings of their cafes." The time to visit Venice, I had been assured by experienced connoisseurs, is September or October, when visitors no longer sweat and swelter in the suffocating heat. But what I had not been told was that precisely for this reason, these two months have now become the "height" of the "tourist season."

I have never been to Coney Island on a sunny weekend, and I cannot therefore venture a comparison. But the Venice I discovered reminded me of the crush-hour on the Paris, London, or Manhattan subway systems—the main difference being that the crush here was of a less hectic and more *farniente* kind. No matter where one walked or turned—Venice is a city of narrow, winding streets, many of them little more than alleyways—one bumped into or had to avoid tourists. They were everywhere—munching sloppy pizzas or prosciutto and mozzarella sandwiches in crowded trattorias or at fast-food counters; feeding nuts to hundreds of fluttering pigeons on the Piazza San Marco; lining up in pathetic queues in order to be able to clamber up the many steps of the red-brick-and-marble, pencil-pointed campanile;

taking snapshots of themselves against the balustrades of the tree-shaded Giardini ex Reali, where between the sycamores sub-Boningtons and neo-Turners peddle their slick, too sharply drawn views of baroque churches and arched bridges spanning the green waters of narrow *canaletti*; and, above all, they were there in droves, thronging the broad pavement of the Riva degli Schiavoni, the long, curving waterfront facing the floating island of San Giorgio Maggiore and the Lido beyond it, which owes its name to the once proud Republic's Slavic neighbors on the other side of the Adriatic.

The Italians, as humorist George Mikes once remarked, are a nation of exuberant extroverts among whom, after a couple of weeks, even the most inhibited Englishman is likely to start talking in a louder tone of voice and gesticulating like an orchestra conductor. In 1949, the late-evening discussions and, more surprisingly, the early-morning *conversazioni* in the narrow streets below were so sleep-disturbing that twice I had to move from little hotels near the Piazzetta San Marco, not far from the basilica. I finally found a relatively peaceful haven in a humble *pensione* run by an Austrian woman on the Riva degli Schiavoni.

Venice

"The gods returned to earth when
Venice broke
Like Venus from the dawn-
encircled sea.
Wide laughed the skies with light
when Venice woke
Crowned of antiquity,
And like a spoil of gems unmined
on earth
Art in her glorious mind
Jewelled all Italy for joy's rebirth
To all mankind."

—William Rose Benét,
Gaspara Stampa, Stanza 9

Wishing to see if the *pensione* still existed, I set out one morning from the Piazza San Marco, where, as usual, fatuously smiling tourists were having themselves photographed with hopeful pigeons perched on their arms, shoulders, and even heads—it does not take much, in this peanut-producing age, to make of one an ersatz Francis of Assisi—and headed for the Riva degli Schiavoni. Beyond the top-heavy Palazzo Ducale, with its squat arcade pillars, I had trouble pushing my way up and over the marble-lined steps of the first arched bridge, from which dozens of camera-wielders were jostling each other in desperate efforts to “snap” a view of the ornately covered Bridge of Sighs.

I moved on past the familiar russet facade of the Hotel Danieli, with its narrow Gothic windows, where George Sand and her 23-year-old Alfred spent a fateful “honeymoon” (which ended in disaster), and where in more recent times Ernest Hemingway spent several months writing one of his worst novels. The venerable hostelry seemed much the same, although—*politesse des riches oblige*—it had developed a large white annex, surmounted by a penthouse restaurant where those who can afford the prices can enjoy a fine panoramic view of the lagoon.

Sure enough, not far beyond it was my old friend, the Pensione Wildner, whose somewhat seedy exterior was now enhanced by an outdoor restaurant covered by a large green awning. But what in the meantime had happened to the Riva degli Schiavoni? The sense of space once offered to leisurely strollers had completely disappeared. Instead, a series of booths now lined the middle of the broad promenade, exhibiting every-

thing from brightly lettered T-shirts (Ricardo, Angelina, Luigi, and of course “Venezia”) to cheap scarfs, garish postcards, miniature trinkets, and imitation carnival masks—in short, the kind of bargain-basement bric-a-brac which souvenir-hunters now insist on taking home as proof that they really made it to this or that tourist mecca. But even more dismaying was to find that one could now hardly see the elegant flagstones of this once proud promenade. They had more or less disappeared beneath a slowly moving mass of gym shoes, boots, blue jeans, and shapeless pantaloons worn by the kind of hatless, tieless, skirtless rabble which now unconcernedly parades its unkempt sloppiness everywhere—from the waterfront of San Francisco to the sacred grottos of Lourdes.

Perhaps my trouble is that, like Baudelaire, I have read too many books. Nostalgia, like all romantic moods, can easily become a pleasure-spoiling ailment as well as a distorting mirror of the past. Those who—and I confess that I am one of them—secretly regret the passing of the horse-and-buggy age must take to heart what Jane Jacobs, in *The Economy of Cities*, had to say about life as it was really lived in 19th-century London or Paris. The streets reeked of horse dung and urine; every time it rained the pedestrians were splattered by mud; and, as readers of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* may recall, the sound of metal rims rolling over cobbles was so grating and unpleasant that straw was often strewn in front of doorways to soften the noise made by passing carriage-wheels.

We should similarly beware of overidealizing the rosy image we may have formed of 18th-century Venice, immortalized for us in the geometrically precise paintings of Canaletto and the lovely canal and seascapes of Francesco Guardi. Venice was then a still prosperous city of 200,000 souls, whereas today its population has dwindled to 70,000. It is romantic fancy to imagine that its narrow streets and its 400 bridges were not often crowded and thus radically different from the idyllic vision so many 18th-century artists and engravers have left us of beautifully uncluttered European squares graced by one or two horse-drawn carriages and several untroubled strollers armed with canes and parasols. This said, of one thing I am certain: the crowds in Casanova’s or Canaletto’s Venice were certainly far better dressed than the mass of itinerant vagabonds one

now sees on the Piazza San Marco and the Riva degli Schiavoni at the height of the tourist season. Or, for that matter, on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, which once prided itself on its vestimentary elegance. For soon, at the present dizzying rate of free-and-easy “progress,” the only well-dressed people left in the Western world will be head-waiters and the concierges of posh hotels.

Ours is, among other things, the Age of the Instant: instant coffee, instant “knowledge,” fast food, faster fornication (generously supplied by many TV channels). It is also the Age of Instant Tourism. I do not say—of instant travel. For, as André Malraux once noted on an unpublished slip of paper, “Tourism is to travel what prostitution is to love.”

A century and a half ago any Englishman, Frenchman, or German wishing to see the pyramids of Egypt, the great mosques of Istanbul, or the temples of the Peloponnesus had to endure a week or more of rough sailing to reach the longed-for destination. During that period those hardy travelers had plenty of time to work up a high degree of anticipation prior to the magic moment when—for Byron, Chateaubriand, and Lamartine, for example—the minarets and dome of the Sulimaniye, of the Sultan Ahmed mosque, and of Hagia Sophia emerged slowly from the Sea of Marmora like a watery mirage. The ineffable pleasure then experienced was enhanced by the obstacles and dangers they had had to overcome to reach the distant city, the dimly surmised unpromised land beyond the seas. Theirs was the happiness that is vouchsafed to the courageous, when it comes not as a gratuitous gift but as a well-earned recompense for risks taken and hardships endured.

Every time I read or hear a new announcement informing us that the international airport of this or that great city urgently needs to be expanded and its runways doubled in order to absorb an ever-increasing volume of human traffic, I experience a sinking of the heart. In this age of facility—the unnamed god to which all industrial and postindustrial activity now pays instinctive homage—travel agencies, like airlines, municipal authorities, and governments, combine their efforts to lessen the time needed to get from one place to another. They thus eradicate the temporal dimension of psychological expectation which, like good wine and so much else in life, needs time

LIBERAL ARTS

IT'S TRUE BECAUSE I SAY IT IS

“When the first lady complains of a right-wing conspiracy, it rings true even though there is little or no evidence that right-wingers have done anything.”

—Ted Koppel on Nightline, quoted in *Media Reality Check*, a publication of the Media Research Center

to ripen and mature. Instant tourism, they lightheartedly assume, is a mass recipe for instant happiness, or at any rate contentment. But one may well wonder if what it really manufactures is not ersatz entertainment, the illusion of happiness, and, when all is said and done, one more blasé form of individual or collective boredom.

Let no one think that I am here indulging in fun-spoiling *Schadenfreude*. But if you feel that you must absolutely visit Venice *for the first time*—and I sincerely hope you do—let me offer you, free of charge, four pieces of advice. Do *not* fly in by air, but approach by road or rail, or even better, if you can afford the time, by ship, when this aquatic miracle, as E.M. Forster noted long ago in *A Passage to India*, looms out of the mists of the Adriatic as a perfect architectural embodiment of the West's sense of symmetry and order.

Do *not* visit Venice during the stiflingly hot summer months of July and August. Do *not* visit Venice during the now "fashionable" months of September and October. Instead, choose one of the months of early spring when, as George Sand once wrote, the caged nightingales regain their voices and the flower-boxes on the arched balconies blossom forth with giant campanulas, honeysuckle clusters, and Greek roses.

Above all, discard your newspapers and your magazines and prepare yourself "for the occasion" by buying or borrowing a volume of Casanova's *Memoirs*. Or, if you can possibly find a copy, of Lorenzo da Ponte's almost as fascinating autobiography (first published, oddly enough, in New York). Don't, whatever happens, miss the hilarious story of how Casanova despoiled the Marquise d'Urfé of her jewels, only to be tricked by his Venetian manservant, Costa, who, when they later met again in Vienna, explained to his former master that he had merely wanted in his turn to become an itinerant gentleman and poet; a more successful, real-life Leporello, whose opening lament in *Don Giovanni* was not idly chosen by Da Ponte: "*Voglio far il gentiluomo.*" "I want to play the gentleman"—in other words, the opposite of what today's jet-propelled tourist tramp wants to be and consequently becomes.

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Letter From Germany

by Josef Schüsslburner

Totalitarian Again?



On January 9, 1997, in an open letter in the *New York Times* to German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, American artists and intellectuals criticized the discriminatory treatment of Scientologists in Germany. Although the petitioners claimed not to be biased in their complaint by sympathy for this church, their objectivity has to be questioned, for there are far more serious instances of discrimination and intolerance in Germany. These social activists usually end up "Nazifying the Germans," equating the "victims" of the moment with the Jews of the holocaust. What they miss, however, is that the past most relevant for understanding Germany today is not the period of the 1930's and 40's but the period of the communist dictatorship, when the Soviet Union ruled the major part of our country.

Though the unification of Germany was ostensibly a crushing defeat for the left who opposed it, this defeat has been turned into a stunning victory, as the communist past is now repeating itself in Germany in the guise of liberalism. The victorious left is currently represented in the *Bundestag* by the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), by the "Greens" (whose leaders came from the radical '68 generation and were sympathetic to the left-wing terrorists of the 1970's), as well as by the Social Democrats, classified as "liberals" by American analysts. After unification, the leading communists of the East German regime dubbed themselves the "Party of the Democratic Left"; the Christian Democrats of that dictatorship were absorbed by Kohl's Christian Democratic Party (CDU), and the Liberal Democratic Party was incorporated into Kohl's coalition partner, the liberal Free Democratic Party. This inclusion of communists and their willing Christian and liberal collaborators into the "democratic bloc" has imposed a communist mindset on the culture of unified Germany.

Uninformed people around the world

are used to identifying Kohl's Christian Democratic Party as "conservative," though it is nothing of the sort; it is even to the left of the neoconservative British Tories and American Republicans. The CDU's top leaders, in fact, would reject the label "conservative." In its early years, the party openly embraced Christian socialism and the nationalization of "key" industries. Only the circumstances of the Cold War and the expectations of its supporters forced the CDU to appear more conservative than it really is. In the last European elections, Chancellor Kohl favored Mr. Blair's New Labour over the Europe-doubting British Conservatives, and he was not unhappy with the election results in France that brought the united left, including communists, back into government.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and her tyrannical internationalism forced the left to find a new ideological fatherland, which ironically turned out to be either liberal America or multicultural "Europe," meaning the left has had to turn to political ideas it had previously associated with the enemy. The majority of Germans, at least 60 percent, are hostile to the left's agenda, especially the abolition of Germany's currency. Chancellor Kohl, in his zealotry for a united Europe, must therefore buck the will of his people and forge left-wing internationalism with the pan-Europeanism of the centrist Christian Democratic parties.

Americans may wonder how 60 percent of Germans can oppose the abolition of their currency, but still have the measure rammed down their throats by a 99 percent majority (a classic Soviet majority) of their freely and democratically elected representatives. Can this be democracy? Why not simply sack these rascals and throw them out of office?

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to do this within a party system based on proportional representation and ruled by party bosses. It is therefore imprudent for members of Parliament to oppose the party leadership, which in the case of the "governing party" is largely identical with the government. To comprehend the totalitarian nature of the situation, keep in mind that the original "anti-fascist" constitution of communist East Germany in 1949 was only a cunning version of the previously adopted constitution of West Germany, which is now the constitution of reunited Germany. This similarity shows that one only has to