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## *Introduction:* Some Exquisite Sea-Thing

THE concluding lines of W. H. Auden's poem, 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud', read:

One rational voice is dumb: over a grave  
The household of impulse mourns one dearly loved.  
Sad is Eros, builder of cities,  
And weeping anarchic Aphrodite.<sup>1</sup>

Auden probably has in mind such passages as the following from Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*: the 'peculiar process' of culture 'proves to be in the service of Eros, which aims at binding together single human individuals, then families, then tribes, races, nations, into one great unit, that of humanity. Why this has to be done we do not know; it is simply the work of Eros.'<sup>2</sup> As against, and opposed to, the 'instincts of destruction', Eros is constructive, and both urges and promotes the building and extending of the containing structures and edifices of civilization. There is the possibility of a paradox, not to say contradiction, in such a proposition, as Auden recognizes by giving 'impulse' a 'household', and making the anarchic Aphrodite mourn alongside Eros the 'builder'. And this of course is recognized by Freud as well. The 'core' of Eros's being is 'his aim of making one out of many; but when he has achieved it in the proverbial way through the love of two human beings, he is not willing to go further.'<sup>3</sup> Again: 'the interrelations between love and culture lost their simplicity as development proceeds. On the one hand, love opposes the interests of culture; on the other, culture menaces love with grievous restrictions.'<sup>4</sup> Eros, it would seem, is not originally a 'builder of cities'; he has, as it were, to be co-opted. In pursuit of its larger communal 'bindings', culture has to 'levy energy from sexuality'. Clearly, to operate with such vast and vague

You know I promised them no Romance, I promised them stones. Not even bread. I do not *feel* any Romance in Venice. It is simply a heap of ruins.

John Ruskin, letter to his father

this amphibious city – this Phocaea, or sea-dog of towns, – looking with soft human eyes at you from the sand, Proteus himself latent in the salt-smelling skin of her

John Ruskin, *St Mark's Rest*

je ne dis pas Venise par hasard

Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*

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abstractions and personifications as 'culture' and 'Eros' can yield little in the way of precise thinking. But the always possibly paradoxical relationship between desire and the city is one which I simply want to state at the outset: desire as the force that engenders, maintains and extends the city, and as the drive which may oppose and subvert it; conversely, the city as a site which engenders, maintains and extends desire, and as a complex of contingencies, constraints and compulsions which may thwart or pervert it.

Let us consider a rather different version of the origin of the city. This is from Plutarch's life of Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens:

After Aegeus's death Theseus conceived a wonderful and far-reaching plan, which was nothing less than to concentrate the inhabitants of Attica into a capital. In this way he transformed them into one people belonging to one city, whereas until then they had lived in widely scattered communities, so that it was difficult to bring them together for the common interest, and indeed at times they even quarrelled and fought one another. So he now travelled around Attica and strove to convince them town by town and clan by clan. The common people and the poor responded at once to his appeal, while to the more influential classes he proposed a constitution without a king: there was to be a democracy, in which he would be no more than the commander of the army and guardian of the laws, while in other respects everyone would be on an equal footing.

... He then proceeded to banish the town halls, council chambers, and magistracies in the various districts. To replace them he built a single town hall and senate house for the whole community on the site of the present acropolis, and he named the city Athens and created a Pan-Athenaic festival as a ceremony for the whole of Attica.<sup>5</sup>

Here, indeed, is the 'binding together' in a 'greater unity' the previously scattered, dispersed and latently hostile units or atoms which precede the city; only the agent in this version is not Eros, but a reasoning, persuading human author and authority who centralizes and organizes and names. This mythological version of the origin of Athens – for of course it has nothing to do with history – has much in common with the Socratic, ideal construction of the city in *The Republic*. And it is notable that this ideally conceived city attempts to *occlude* – or exclude, or abstract from – Eros. Here let me quote from *The City and Man* by Leo Strauss:

The parallel of the city and the soul is based on a deliberate abstraction from *eros*, an abstraction characteristic of the *Republic*. This abstraction shows itself most strikingly in two facts: when Socrates mentions the fundamental human needs which give rise to human society, he is

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silent about the need for procreation, and when he describes the tyrant, he presents him as *Eros* incarnate. This is to say nothing of the fact that the *Republic* almost opens with a curse on *eros*. In the thematic discussion of the respective rank of spiritedness and desire, Socrates is silent about *eros*. It seems there is a tension between *eros* and the city and hence between *eros* and justice: only through the depreciation of *eros* can the city come into its own. *Eros* obeys its own laws, not the laws of the city however good: lovers are not necessarily fellow citizens (or fellow party-members); in the good city *eros* is simply subjected to the requirements of the city: only those are permitted to join each other for procreation who promise to bring forth the right kind of offspring. The abolition of privacy is a blow struck at *eros*. The city is not an erotic association although in a way it presupposed erotic associations. There is not an erotic class of the city as there are classes of rulers, warriors, and money-makers. The city does not procreate as it deliberates, wages war, and owns property. As far as possible, patriotism, dedication to the common good, justice must take the place of *eros*, and patriotism has a closer kinship to spiritedness, eagerness to fight, 'wasppishness', indignation, and anger than to *eros*. Both the erotic association and the political association are exclusive, but they are exclusive in different ways: the lovers exclude themselves from the others (from 'the world') without opposition to the other or hate of the others, but the city cannot be said to seclude itself from 'the world': it separates itself from others by opposing or resisting them; the opposition of 'We and They' is essential to the political association.<sup>6</sup>

This is indeed the Platonic polis; but over against the abstract, reasoned, reasonable city (or city of reason) of Theseus and Socrates we may suggest, or fantasize, the concrete, desirable, desired city (or city of desire) of Eros – and Cain. For it is Cain, of course, who builds the first city in the Bible, and it could hardly be more intimately related and connected to procreation: 'Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and called the city after the name of his son, Enoch.' And Cain, as we know, is a cursed and banished murderer, a marked man condemned to be a 'vagrant' and a 'vagabond'. It seems strange that the fugitive, transgressive nomad should be the first builder of the city, though, if we think of the latent nomadism and transgressiveness of desire, Cain is perhaps as apt a builder as Eros. We are dealing here with metaphors, and, as Gerald Bruns suggests in an excellent article covering some of this ground, the Cain and Abel story is 'an allegory of desire against reason that figures the city explicitly in terms of nomads, transgressors, and the need to be nameless and invisible'.<sup>7</sup>

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I quote Bruns again: 'over against the polis theory there is a metaphysics of the city which stresses wandering, vagrancy, anonymity, randomness, the underground, the outlaw, the fugitive, the slave, the alien, the streetwalker, the beggar, the trader, and the exile. Here the basic opposition would not be between the city and the country but between the polis and the labyrinth.'<sup>8</sup> We might say that reasoning man dreams the polis, while desiring man lives the labyrinth – but that, perhaps, is to succumb to an extreme of diagrammatic facility. Nevertheless, if there is one city, at once a magnificent polis *and* a literal labyrinth, which might fairly be said to demonstrate and embody and image forth the constructive consummation of reason *and* desire – Theseus and Eros working gloriously together – it would be Venice: a thousand-year triumph of rational legislation *and* aesthetic and sensual self-expression, self-creation – powerful, lovely, serene. *Serenissima*.

My interest, here, is in writing and the city; or, more concisely, writing the city. Unique in so many ways, Venice also seems unique in her relationship to writing. London has Dickens; Paris has Balzac; Petersburg has Dostoevsky; Vienna has Musil; Dublin has Joyce; Berlin has Döblin – and so one might go on. There simply is no comparable writer for – of, out of – Venice. (Goldoni was a Venetian, but his plays tell us very little of the city *qua* city.) The one great writer produced by Venice in the very period of its final dissolution and decline was – it is astonishingly appropriate – Casanova, who did not 'write' Venice so much as embody it. From one point of view, this is quite explicable: the genre of the city is, supremely, the novel, and Venice was fading out of history during the period in which the novel was evolving its mongrel identity. It effectively disappeared from history altogether in 1797 when the thousand-year republic was defeated by Napoleon, and later handed over to the Austrians. After that, it seems to exist as a curiously marooned spectacle. Literally marooned, of course – the city mysteriously growing out of the sea, the beautiful stones impossibly floating on water; but temporally marooned as well – stagnating outside of history (apart from a brief recrudescence of its old republican virtues and energies in 1848, when it held out longer than any of the other revolutions of that insurrectionary year).<sup>9</sup> But *as* spectacle – the beautiful city *par excellence*, the city of art, the city *as* art – and as spectacular example, as the greatest and richest and most splendid republic in the history of the world, now declined and fallen, Venice became an important, I would say central, site (a topos, a topic) for the European imagination. And more than any other city it is inextricably associated with desire. Desire of Venice, desire for Venice, desire in Venice – this is a crucial force and feature in European literature from Byron to Sartre, as this book will seek to show.

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you get is what you write. The result is a mixture. Howells has a good eye for the prose of a place, and he certainly gives us what few other writers do – some sense of everyday life in nineteenth-century Venice. But in his decent, resolute way he manages to turn the poetry of the place into prose as well, and the result, it has to be said, is at times prosaic in the slightly pejorative sense. This is Venice with the magic left (or kept) out. It is a work which neither takes you there nor pulls you back. One has a slight sense of an opportunity missed. The place was perfect – a Venice entirely unwritten about; the time was right enough – just approaching the final years of the Austrian occupation; but it wasn't quite the right writer. It is an inside report but from an outside eye. At times you get the feeling that, mentally, Howells has not left small-town America. Yet, as he comes to leave, it does seem as though the place has reached and stirred him.

Never had the city seemed so dream-like and unreal as in this light of farewell, – this tearful glimmer which our love and regret cast upon it. As in a maze, we haunted once more and for the last time the scenes we had known so long, and spent our final phantasmal evening in the Piazza; looked, through the moonlight, our mute adieu to islands and lagoons, to church and tower; and then returned to our own palace, and stood long upon the balconies that overhung the Grand Canal. There the future became as incredible and improbable as the past; and if we had often felt the incongruity of our coming to live in such a place, now, with ten-fold force, we felt the cruel absurdity of proposing to live anywhere else. We had become part of Venice; and how could such atoms of her fantastic personality ever mingle with the alien and unsympathetic world?<sup>11</sup>

But his very final worry is whether his landlord will 'embrace and kiss me, after the Italian manner'. Here is a worry indeed! But he is relieved – 'by a final inspiration they spared me the ordeal.' With his Anglo-Saxon-Puritan sensibility intact and, mercifully, unembraced, he will, in fact, be more at ease in that 'alien and unsympathetic world'. It is where he lives.

But it is the reaction of a third American, who neither takes the Emerson option nor has recourse to the Howells stratagem, which is imaginatively of most interest. In April 1857, Herman Melville spent a few days in Venice. His journal for the visit simply records his hurried itinerary, with one or two impressions briefly noted.

Mirage-like effect of fine day – floating in air of ships in the Malamocco Passage, & the islands. To the church of Santa Maria Salute. . . . Walked in the Piazza of St Mark. Crowds of people promenading. Pigeons. Walked to Rialto. Looked up and down the G. Canal. Wandered

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further on. Numbers of beautiful women. The rich brown complexions of Titian's women drawn from nature, after all. The clear, rich, golden brown. The clear cut features, like a cameo – The vision from a window at the end of a long, narrow passage. . . . You at first think it a freshet, it will subside, not permanent – only a temporary condition of things. – St Mark's at sunset. Gilt mosaics, pinnacles, looks like a holiday affair. As if the Grand Turk had pitched his pavilion here for a summers day. 800 years!<sup>12</sup>

Unlike Emerson, Melville positively appreciates the fact that it reminds him of a 'freshet' (i.e. a rush of fresh water flowing into the sea; or the flooding of a river from heavy rain or melting snow). It adds to the sense of a bewitching mixture of watery impermanence and actual long-lastingness which Venice uniquely generates. A mirage. Yet – 800 years! And Melville, while he may not have remarked on the Austrians, has certainly noticed the women, which Emerson, busy drawing his blinds, as certainly did not. Melville is clearly having a better time than Emerson!

He wrote two poems concerning Venice, and it is interesting to see what his imagination takes, hold of and how he pursues and shapes his material. 'Venice' is an impersonal meditation and salutation, something of an ode.

With Pantheist energy of will  
The little craftsman of the Coral Sea  
Strenuous in the blue abyss  
Up-builds his marvellous gallery  
And long arcade,  
Erections freaked with many a fringe  
Of marble garlandry,  
Evinced what a worm can do.

Laborious in a shallower wave,  
Advanced in kindred art,  
A prouder agent proved Pan's might  
When Venice rose in reefs of palaces.<sup>13</sup>

The conceit is clinched by the final words, 'reefs of palaces'. Venice is culture's answer to nature; or, rather, Venice is nature's response to the cultivated craftsmanship evinced by the coral reef. Characteristically, Melville seeks to confound and link even to merging the two realms of nature and culture, suggesting, as he increasingly did, that many of our cherished oppositions and binary divisions begin to show signs of reversibility and interchangeability, when submitted to a little imaginative scrutiny and pressure. So here the Coral Sea is peopled by craftsmen, and architected with galleries, arcades and garlands, and the worm has a 'Pantheist energy of

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will'. Venice, on the other hand, is not crafted and built, but simply 'rises' as if in some wondrous surge – an emanation and demonstration, not of some *pantheist* energy, but of 'Pan's might' itself. Nature is a laborious pantheist: Venice is an epiphany of Pan. The repetition of the syllable-name 'Pan' in both stanzas is undoubtedly meant to reinforce the suggestion that the arts which build coral reefs and Venetian palaces are 'kindred'. But Pan's agent, and agency, is 'prouder', and, we are allowed to feel, in the last analysis his power is greater. In offering a vision of Venice as the triumphant manifestation of Pan, Melville is indeed suggesting that it is a special testimony to the constructive genius of Eros, a unique site where the distinctions between nature and art are dazzlingly dissolved in the reefy palaces engendered by the art of Eros, the erotics of art. One way and another, this is a vision of Venice which we will find being constantly rehearsed.

The erotic aspect of Venice appears in another mode in the second poem, which is, by contrast, personal, narrative, even confessional. It takes place, and is entitled, 'In a Bye-Canal', which suggests a more secretive, even furtive, part of Venice – and, we might add, of Melville too. The opening line – 'A swoon of noon, a trance of tide' – sets the atmosphere: it is also 'Dumb noon, and haunted like the night / When Jael the wiled one slew'. Just why a Venetian noon should suggest a murderous Old Testament woman to Melville soon becomes clear, for the apparent incongruity is premonitory:

A languid impulse from the oar  
Plied by my indolent gondolier  
Tinkles against a palace hoar,  
And, hark, response I hear!  
A lattice clicks; and lo, I see  
Between the slats, mute summoning me,  
What loveliest eyes of scintillation,  
What basilisk glance of conjuration!<sup>14</sup>

Venice has turned her sexual eye on the impressionable American; or, rather, Melville has opened his desire, and perhaps his sexual fantasies and fears, in and to Venice. This glimpse of a glance of a mute and latticed eye, leaves – permits, provokes – everything to be imagined. 'Basilisk', the mythical reptile with a look that killed, compounds the sense of latent apprehension or terror adumbrated by 'Jael', fearless slayer of Sisera with a tent-peg; and, if the poet may be arguably presumptuous in imagining that the barely discernible eyes are 'summoning' him, there is little doubt about the sexual dread with which he flees from them. The next part of the poem says, in effect – I have encountered most of what is dangerous in nature and man: I have swum between whales and sharks; I have wandered in enemy deserts;

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I have turned on the leprous figures of Envy and Slander which have noiselessly dogged me:

All this. But at the latticed eye –  
‘Hey! Gondolier, you sleep, my man;  
Wake up!’ And, shooting by, we ran;  
The while I mused, This, surely now,  
Confutes the Naturalists, allow!  
Sirens, true sirens verily be,  
Sirens, waylayers in the sea.

Well, wooed by these same deadly misses,  
Is it shame to run?  
No! flee them did divine Ulysses,  
Brave, wise, and Venus’ son.<sup>15</sup>

This rationalization and defence of the somewhat panic-stricken flight from some fantasized sense of the possibility of sirenic seduction is hard to judge tonally. Is the invocation of sirens and Ulysses a deliberate exaggeration – mock-heroic burlesque? Or is Melville, with characteristic ambiguity of tone, articulating some real sense of dread – an intimation of the possible deadly-ness, death-bringingness, of a kind of mute and appallingly enticing mode of sexuality, ‘summoning’ the male tourist-visitor to who knows what form of oceanic or lacustrine ecstatic extinction associated with Venice? It is an intimation most famously to be explored by Thomas Mann, but it is a far from uncommon one in connection with ‘tranced’ Venetian reveries. It is also worth just noting that Melville is, deliberately or not, messing up or confusing his mythology. Ulysses’ mother was Anticleia, daughter of Autolycus; while the son of Venus is, traditionally, Cupid or Eros. Perhaps he wants Venus’ son to be fleeing the very city of Venus, as Venice surely is – at the same time as he wants to be Ulysses fleeing the sirens, though even that is wrong, since Ulysses had himself tied to the mast so that he could hear their siren-song without succumbing to it. It would not do to make too much of this, but the merging and crossing of figures does suggest the awakening of troubled feelings and apprehensions concerning the writer’s relation to female sexuality. Certainly, the sorts of feelings – desires, anxieties, dreads – which may be awakened by the ‘latticed eye’ in some unfamiliar part of Venice, some literal or metaphoric ‘bye canal’ stumbled or glided into, by chance or otherwise, often recur as writers’ imaginations turn to Venice, and Melville is neither the first nor the last writer to suggest that the city’s Venus eye may turn out to be a ‘basilisk glance’. For Ruskin, it was Medusa. Neither is Melville the first or last writer to flee.

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His two poems comprise a doubleness of response to the city which could fairly be called paradigmatic.

But Venice can be used more panoramically, so to speak – even, to talk of first and last things. My example here is Browning's *Fifine at the Fair* (1872) in which, taking his cue from Molière's *Don Juan*, Browning imagines Don Juan seeking to explain to his now wife Elvire why it is licit and necessary to pursue his attraction for the gypsy strolling-player girl, Fifine, while remaining at the same time loyal to Elvire. Elvire, understandably enough, asks him to clear up this 'fine mysteriousness'. The scene set for the dialogue – though it is mainly his monologue – is a fair at which the itinerant entertainers are putting on their show. Don Juan wonders why it is that these self-marginalizing people, 'Misguided ones who gave society the slip', even though disgraced, 'seem to relish life the more'(VII).<sup>16</sup> 'What compensating joy . . . Turns lawlessness to law?' (XIII). His wife is already 'in trouble', but Don Juan explains his attraction to the beautiful and alluring Fifine – dancer, tambourine player, probably prostitute – by saying that she will 'make my thoughts be surer what they mean' (XV). Fifine seems to embody a principle which would radically challenge and disturb all sorts of orthodox Victorian precepts, namely 'self-sustainment made morality' (XVI). Don Juan/Browning maintains that 'by demonstrating the value of Fifine' he can show that 'sparks from heaven transpierce earth's coarsest covertures' (XXVIII). The 'sparks' are important: Don Juan believes in, and supremely values, the 'self-vindicating flash' which he believes is potentially present in everybody. 'Howe'er produced', he says, 'flame is flame' – and *that* for him is the 'fine mysteriousness' 'Whereof solution is to seek'. And he seeks the solution in, or through, Fifine, and the desire she arouses.

Elvire is less than impressed by what she regards as a shamelessly specious line of argument. As far as she is concerned, Don Juan is simply drawn to shining filth: 'my husband hankers ever / After putridity that's phosphorescent'. For all his talk of 'soul, in search of soul', she regards his explanation as a piece of deceptive – self-deceptive? – rationalization which simply allows him to 'review the sex . . . of womankind', rather like a bee sampling whatever flower he comes across and taking his 'Matter-of-course snatched snack' – a telling-enough formulation! Undismayed, Don Juan maintains that he is always seeking the True, even if that means enmiring himself in the False, and Elvire, fairly enough, asks him to explain how one might 'rise into the true out of the false?' (LXIV). He replies with an example. I went bathing this morning, he says, and if I put my head under the water it promised 'dark and death at once'. But raise the head back into the air, and you are reassured that 'light and life' can still be reached. This is so attractive that

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there comes an instinct to try to climb out of the dark and deathly water altogether:

Try to ascend breast-high? wave arms wide free of tether?  
Be in the air and leave the water altogether?  
Under went all again until I resigned myself  
To only breathe the air, that's footed by an elf,  
And only swim the water, that's native to a fish.

(LXIV)

I will note here that these sentiments – or this realization – are echoed almost exactly in one of the most famous passages that Conrad wrote. The philosophic, if enigmatic, Stein is explaining his view of man's ontological condition to Marlow as they discuss the case of Jim:

Yes! Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns – *nicht war?* . . . No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.<sup>17</sup>

The background to both passages is, of course, Darwinism and evolution, and the Victorian rediscovery in new terms of an old truth – namely, that man is in every sense amphibious, physically, philosophically, metaphysically, and must learn to negotiate both elements, from watery origins to aerial (call them transcendent) aspirations. It is to my purpose to note that Venice is exactly a city that crosses, or merges or binds, the elements – both, and always, in and out of the water at once. I hope the relevance of this will emerge.

As far as Don Juan is concerned, 'our business' is 'with the sea' – 'not with the air, but just o' the water, watery'. We have, and are bound, to 'keep immersed' in 'this wash o' the world, wherein we life-long drift' (LXVI). The water is, at once, the realm of the real, and 'the false'. We must move in it, through it, even while trying to emerge upwards out of it – hence those moments when 'we taste aether, scorn the wave' (LXVIII). But, most importantly, water is the realm of Woman. It is she – this is very Victorian – who, as it were, helps man, Man, in his upward aspirations. 'Woman does the work' (LXIX). Just so, for Don Juan, it is Fifine who has given 'the lucky lift' (LXVII). It is not entirely clear what the 'lucky lift' is *to* – truth? purity? a soul of blue air? – or *from* – the wash of sexual appetites? the foul rag and bone shop of the heart? the liquid uncertainty of temporal knowledge? But it has to be a woman who helps you up – 'still some Thalassia saves' (LXIX). This idea of the saving sea-goddess is import-

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ant for Browning, and will be very important for Ezra Pound. Browning has already imagined a Michelangelo statue – like those inchoate slaves struggling to emerge from the rock of which they are made – of a woman, ‘partly blent / With stuff she needs must quit’ (LII). I do not know the statue (perhaps he invented it), but he thinks that Michelangelo meant it to depict ‘the daughter of the old man o’ the sea / Emerging from her wave, goddess Eidothée’ (LII). It is just this image of a saving, sensual beauty rising from the water which I want to focus on, since I think it prepares for the denouement of the poem in which Venice so extraordinarily figures. From sea-goddesses emerging from the waves, it is no very great imaginative leap to dolphins – ‘dolphins, my instance just’ (LXXVIII). Byron sees Venice as a dolphin-city – magically rising, poignantly falling – and the general moral which Don Juan draws from his long meditation on sea-born(e) saviours, from goddesses to dolphins, which ‘Fifine’ or elevate us out of our hapless flounderings, is a faith, or a hope, which is central to this whole book:

Whatever roughness rage, some exquisite sea-thing  
Will surely rise to save.

(LXXVIII)

The lines suit equally well whether you believe in Venus, or Venice. Or, of course, both.

Much of Don Juan’s argument has to do with Browning’s belief that man cannot attain directly to the single white light of Truth but instead must, as it were, traverse the spectrum of partial, multi-coloured reality, following the Fines of the world as and when they alluringly occur – to learn, I suppose, what fragment of the truth of this destructive element, in which we are perforce immersed, they may embody. It is a convenient, not to say self-serving, doctrine, and one can understand Elvire’s scepticism. But the safe, the known, the domestic, the land-locked, offer no scope for discovery – it is in this poem that the famous line ‘My hunger both to be and know the thing I am’ (CII) occurs – and in pursuit of ‘fire and life and truth’ (XCI) Don Juan feels he must, as it were, go down to the ships and trust in ‘sea-tracklessness’ (LXXXII).

Yet it is not the sea which provides Don Juan with his final image for the wide realm of the real. He describes how, after a smoke, he fell into a reverie and played Schumann’s *Carnival*. So: ‘the Fair expands into the Carnival, / And Carnival again to . . . ah, but that’s my dream’ (XCI). As he drifts into a dream – ‘gone off in company with Music’ (XCIII) – his destination is predictable: ‘Whither bound / Except for Venice? She it was, by instinct found / carnival-country proper’ (XCIV). In St Mark’s Square he sees:

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a prodigious Fair  
Concourse immense of men and women, crowned or casqued,  
Turbaned or tiar'd, wreathed, plumed, hatted or wigged,  
but masked –  
Always masked, – only, how?

(XCV)

What the crowd collectively displays for him is the 'infinitude of passions, loves and hates' (XCVI) which move, and mar, humanity. It is a vision simply, comprehensively, of 'life', in all its 'variant quality' (CI). Venice equals carnival equals 'Life' might not seem a particularly arresting, or original, equation – though it was crucial for Byron, as will emerge in a later chapter. But Browning, or Don Juan, goes on to ask a more interesting question.

Experience, I am glad to master soon or late,  
Here, there and everywhere i' the world, without debate!  
Only, in Venice why? What reason for Mark's Square  
Rather than Timbuctoo?

It is a pertinent question. As Proust will later write, 'I do not say Venice by chance', and that is one of the mottoes of this book. Browning effectively gives two answers. One might be thought to be unremarkable:

what I took of late  
For Venice was the world; its Carnival – the state  
Of mankind, masquerade in life-long permanence  
For all time, and no one particular feast-day.

(CVIII)

The other answer is more interesting. It takes the form of a vision in which the proud buildings of Venice start to merge, like clouds at sunset:

heights and depths, beneath the leaden stress  
– Crumble and melt and mix together, coalesce.  
Re-form, but sadder still, subdued yet more and more  
By every fresh defeat, till wearied eyes need pore  
No longer on the dull impoverished decadence  
Of all that pomp of pile in towering evidence.  
So lately:-

(CVI)

Even thus nor otherwise, meseemed  
That if I fixed my gaze awhile on what I dreamed

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Was Venice' Square, Mark's church, the scheme was straight  
unschemed,  
A subtle something had its way within the heart  
Of each and every house I watched, with counterpart  
Of tremor through the front and outward face, until  
Mutation was at end; impassive and stock-still  
Stood now the ancient house, grown – new, is scarce the phrase,  
Since older, in a sense, – altered to . . .

(CVII)

Altered to – what? For a while, Don Juan meditates on change and permanence in a way which need not detain us, then he starts to imagine, rather apocalyptically, 'the close of things' – before he returns to the matter of what the edifices of Venice have been altered to.

Just so, in Venice' Square, that things were at the close  
Was signalled to my sense; for I perceived arrest  
O' the change all round about. As if some impulse pressed  
Each gently into each, what was distinctness, late,  
Grew vague, and line from line no longer separate,  
No matter what its style, edified . . . shall I say,  
Died into edifice? I find no simpler way  
Of saying how, without or dash or shock or trace  
Of violence, I found unity in the place  
Of temple, tower, – nay hall and house and hut, – one blank  
Severity of peace in death; to which they sank  
Resigned enough till . . . ah, conjecture, I beseech,  
What special blank did they agree to, all and each  
What common shape was that wherein they mutely merged  
Likes and dislikes of form, so plain before?

(CXX)

What is this 'special blank' and 'common shape' into which the buildings of Venice resignedly die? The short answer – Browning, it need hardly be said, is long about it – is a 'Druid monument'. This is, presumably, the earliest human erection (I use the word advisedly) Browning can think of. Last things turn out to be first things. Browning clearly thinks the 'piled stones' were phallic (I think there is no evidence for this, but that hardly matters). He explains how the Christians tried to efface or overlay the pagan meaning of the pile of stones – but the 'folk' were not mocked.

Hence, when the earth began its life afresh in May,  
And fruit-trees bloomed, and waves would wanton, and the bay  
Ruffle its wealth of weed, and stranger-birds arrive,

## INTRODUCTION

And beasts take each a mate, – folk, too, found sensitive,  
Surmised the old grey stone upright there, through such tracts  
Of solitariness and silence, kept the facts  
Entrusted it, could deal out doctrine, did it please:  
No fresh and frothy draught, but liquor on the lees,  
Strong, savage and sincere: first bleedings from a vine  
Whereof the product now do Curés so refine  
To insipidity, that, when heart sinks, we strive  
And strike from the old stone the old restorative.

(CXXIII)

Not much doubt what ‘the old restorative’ is, nor what ‘the old stone’ signifies. What *is* remarkable is Don Juan’s dream-vision of Venice resolving itself into a phallic monument.

To this it was, this same primeval monument,  
That, in my dream, I saw building with building blent  
Fall: each on each they fast and founderingly went  
Confusion-ward; but thence again subsided fast,  
Became the mound you see. Magnificently massed  
Indeed, those mammoth-stones, piled by the Protoplast  
Temple-wise in my dream!

(CXXIV)

Never mind about the Protoplast, whoever or whatever He might be, for Browning this is clearly the erection behind *all* the other erections of mankind – ‘strong, savage and sincere’ – even, no, *particularly*, the magnificent creation which is Venice. Venice ‘unschemed’ is no more, and no *less*, than an amazing memorial to, and manifestation of, the most primordial generative drives. Venice ‘schemed’ is about as far from a Druid column as man can travel, yet through the one Browning sees the other. Eros, builder of cities – first and last things, indeed. This is the reverse of reductive. ‘Whatever roughness rage, some exquisite sea-thing / Will surely rise to save’: the words now take on an added resonance. And Venice – rising – is simply the most ‘exquisite sea- thing’ there is.