

Michael O'Neill, Mark Sandy and Sarah Wootton, eds., *Venice and the Cultural Imagination: 'This Strange Dream upon the Water'*. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012. Pp. 212. £60. ISBN 9781848931664.

Bernard Beatty opens with a characteristically erudite and witty essay about Venetian binaries. To set everything in motion, Beatty meticulously unpacks the first six stanzas of *Childe Harold* Canto IV and asks, 'When did Venice begin to be enchanting?' (20). Two Venetian moments in English history, 1603-5 and 1816-20, yield associations of civilization and barbarism; palace and prison; Radcliffean and Napoleonic space. These binaries coalesce in Byron, Byron's Shakespeare, and a spectacular portrait of Venice by Pompeo Girolamo Batoni. Byron's address to Venice in *Childe Harold* resounds through all the essays that follow. For Mark Sandy, Venice's fairy enchantment flows into the works of Percy and Mary Shelley. From their revisionary engagement with Byron's linkage of self and history, Sandy turns to Thomas Mann's visionary mix of legal and illegal, civilized and uncivilized, history and fiction, life and death, delight and decay, light and shade, substance and illusion in *Death in Venice*. The binaries of the Romantic and post-romantic imagination deliquesce again in Andrew Wilton's chapter on J. M. W. Turner's images of the floating city, in which art and architecture merge with air and light. Following Turner's re-vision of *Childe Harold*, Jeremy Dibble focuses on the dark political world of Byron's Venetian plays through analysis of the republican and imperial aspects of La Fenice, and the way Verdi 'kept his finger on the Italian political pulse' (65). In a wide-ranging chapter, Dibble traces the mutations of the barcarolle across several centuries, dipping into opera's obsessive recourse to Venetian settings and motifs. Rippling evocatively out of the dream vision of Venice in *Pictures from Italy*, Michael O'Neill ruminates on the poetry of *Little Dorrit* and 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' to show how Dickens and Browning inherit the real and unreal accents of Byron's Venice. Perceptive and sensitive close reading allows us to hear how Dickens's syllables 'flow like the waters of the lagoon, each phrase floated upon the liquefying prose, each "and" a flick of the gondolier's blade' (82), and how both writers anticipate the post-industrial anxieties of Eliot and Pound. Dinah Birch's chapter on Ruskin picks up some of Wilton's concerns, and deftly summarises the importance of Venice to Ruskin's understanding of architecture, labour and history. Birch's assured reappraisal of Ruskin on the gothic leads to consideration of Venice's links with the grotesque and fears about mortality; finally, she uncovers 'Turnerian uncertainty' (108) in Ruskin's softening attitude to Catholicism. Fresh binaries come into view in Pamela Knight's chapter on Edith Wharton. Beginning with Wharton's contempt for the mechanical tourist who inhabits the superficial foreground space of the guidebook, Knight scrutinises Wharton's elitist claim on Venice's layered textuality. Wharton and all the contributors to this book are readers of Venetian background, but Knight traces the increasing difficulty Wharton finds in sustaining her distinction when 'notes of the essence of the city, "the very life of Venice", are deadened by convention' (120-21). Like Henry James, that other scourge of American tourists, Wharton experiences revulsion at the 'shallow abyss' (124), that Venice becomes when flooded with sightseers. Like James too, she becomes a revenant, haunting later fiction about the city, and inextricably bound in the shallow layers she despised. Sarah Wootton expands the trope of disenchantment with Venice. Her essay on Iain Softley's film adaptation of *The Wings of the Dove* considers 'whether Softley's film fixates on surface at the expense of subtle yet suggestive layers of signification' (128). This question rewardingly brings into focus the relationship between viewer and the layers that make up Venice. Wootton uses visual texts of Venice by Sargent and Whistler to draw out the alienated perspective of the visitor to Venice who always looks 'from without' (137), a sensibility analysed with tact and rigour by Jason Harding, who navigates the anti-Semitism of Eliot and Pound in their raids on Venice as 'the great intertextual echo chamber of Western

literature' (143). Harding's twin dialogues between Eliot and James, and Pound and Browning end with Pound's death in Venice and an eerie photograph of him in Torcello, evoking Venice as macabre enclosure. The final essay confronts the Venice of shadows and assassination: Rebecca White discusses Daphne Du Maurier's *Don't Look Now*, its transformation into Nicolas Roeg's classic 1973 film, and the legacy of this film for later directors, who cast Venice as sumptuous psychological prison. Brilliantly chosen, skilfully interwoven and consistently illuminating, this collection of essays does justice to its subject and represents a new high-water mark in interdisciplinary literary criticism. It is an essential companion volume to Tony Tanner's *Venice Desired*, sending its readers back to books, pictures, music, and to the city itself.

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