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# Venetian Soundscapes

An Aural Investigation of  
the Lagoon City in the  
Writings of American and  
British Travelers

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## Introduction

“It is all for the ear and eye, this city, but primarily for the eye” wrote Mary McCarthy in her *Venice Observed* more than fifty years ago (180). One may be baffled to find this statement as the opening of a thesis that purports to focus on ‘the ear’ instead, and their surprise would be entirely justified.

The title of McCarthy’s book itself, after all, should arouse little doubt as to which of the senses would ultimately hold primacy in her discourse on Venice, and upon reading her statement for the first time it rings instinctively true, not least because it finds its place within a long tradition of observers – writers, pilgrims, visitors, natives – whose experience of Venice never failed to include the struggle to describe what they saw before their eyes, whether it met their wildest expectations or proved a bitter disappointment instead. As Davis and Marvin note in their *Venice: The Tourist Maze*, the city “was awash in such ineluctable signs as the Ducal Palace, the Campanile, the Basilica of San Marco, the Rialto Bridge, the Grand Canal, and the gondolier” long before the same happened with the Eiffel tower or the Big Ben, epitomizing Paris and London for the foreign – and aptly named – *sightseer* (262). Other cities, like Stockholm and Saint Petersburg, did not dub themselves ‘Venices of the North’ because gondoliers’ cries echoed through their walls, but because of the visible presence of canals, a type of waterway which Venice had rendered idiosyncratic. Henry James’ fond recollection of the city did not conjure up its famous landscapes, but consisted of an image nonetheless, that of “a narrow canal in the heart of the city – a patch of green water and a surface of pink wall” (*Italian Hours*<sup>1</sup> 17). With this premise, it is hardly surprising that a reader should come across McCarthy’s words and reach a different, or opposite, conclusion. Venetian sounds are harder to come across, after all, while its sights and descriptions are readily available to the curious eye in the shape of photographs, postcards and novels, Venice being, of all the cities in the world “the easiest to visit without going there” (*IT* 3). Although McCarthy’s statement seems to suggest predominance of sight and subservience of sound, I would argue that further quarrels to ensure the triumph of either would mislead one’s attention and ultimately narrow the understanding of both. It is undeniable that the better part of Venice’s fame revolves around the visual impact of its uncommon architectural and natural landscape, but it is often forgotten that such fame is inextricably tied to entirely aural legacies. The

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<sup>1</sup> From here on abbreviated to *IT*.

human voice, with its gossip, its quarrels and its songs, was allowed primacy by silence itself, although in modern times both were forced reckon with different forms of motorized cacophony.

In our day and age, it would not take too long a read to see silence advertised in a guidebook as a key requirement for the enjoyment of the city, nor was its value lost on foreign visitors over a hundred and fifty years ago, when Howells found that after “six months in tranquil, cool, mute Venice”, the hustle and bustle of Milan had simply become “intolerable” (*Italian Journeys* 264). The appeal of silence derives not only from its supposed palliative powers, but also from its universal accessibility, in that it arguably poses no linguistic threat to the foreign mind and requires no prior cultural understanding to be enjoyed. The wedding of Venice and its silence thus further built into the myth of Venice’s ‘impossibility’ as a city, matching the architectural with the aural oddity. To the outsider’s ear, silence is so preponderant a feature of the Venetian narrative that it seemingly overpowers sound, making rare exceptions for the folkloristic gondolier’s song and the accompanying splash of his oars against the water. One could reasonably argue that the erasure of sound from said narrative was prompted by its ability to impair the pristine, silent image of the lagoon city, canonized over hundreds of years, therefore disrupting the construct many outsiders affectionately held true. Yet the manifestations of sound in Venice are far from meagre, as are the inputs they provide in the discourse of a city which is simultaneously like and unlike any other in the world.

Thus, the primary objective of this thesis is *not* to establish a new hierarchy of senses, but to explore the role of human, natural, and artificial sounds in all instances of Venetian life. Hence, Venice’s landscape will be explored insofar as sound is funnelled through the peculiar topography of the city; silence, on the other hand, will be further discussed in its multifaceted manifestations. Lastly, as a native speaker of Italian with an acquired familiarity with Venetian surroundings, I will credit my personal fascination with linguistic and cultural extraneousness, coupled with the presence of illustrious travellers and expatriates in Venice, as motivations for me to filter this process through the perspective of those Anglo-American writers whose experience of the city developed over the course of prolonged or frequent stays, and whose familiarity with its native sounds has hardly been the main, or in fact the sole focus of critics.

At this point, a set of questions may well be raised still: why speak of sound in a city famed for its absence; bear witness to the perception of a decreasingly inaccessible dialect or linger on the singing gondolier, heir to tradition and fantasy in equal measure? Lastly, why answer these questions through the eyes – or rather, the ears – of English

and American writers, by birth and circumstance foreign to the aural dimension of Venice? The answer to these questions stems from a chanced upon chapter of *In other words*, a recent work by American author Jhumpa Lahiri. The book documents Lahiri's lifelong love for the Italian language and traces the defining moments of her learning curve, from the first private lessons to the publication of the book itself, which was written entirely in Italian, and only later translated into English by Ann Goldstein. Lahiri's understanding of the relationship between English and Italian had developed before and beyond her final move to Rome in 2012, and her linguistic journey encompassed Venice, whose fragmented topography offered a metaphorical gateway into the challenges posed by stepping into a foreign tongue:

It's the dialogue between the bridges and the canals. A dialogue between water and land. A dialogue that expresses a state of both separation and connection. ... In the middle of every bridge I find myself suspended, neither here nor there. Writing in another language resembles a journey of this sort. My writing in Italian is, just like a bridge, something constructed, fragile. It might collapse at any moment, leaving me in danger. English flows under my feet. I'm aware of it: an undeniable presence, even if I try to avoid it. Like the water in Venice, it remains the stronger, more natural element, the element that forever threatens to swallow me. (*In other words* n.p.)

I am well aware that Lahiri's main focus here rests on her writing in a foreign tongue, which is something the vast majority of writers whose works are analysed in this thesis did not venture in: Henry James infused his English with the occasional dialectal word or proverb, William Dean Howells pondered the implications of the formal *Lei* and informal *Tu*, while, much later on, Donna Leon steadfastly steered away from Italian and Venetian altogether. Yet it was Lahiri's perception of language as a disorienting yet connective force that prompted me to wonder whether the foreign writers whose work I had studied could have delighted in what they had heard in Venice just as they had marvelled at what they saw. Previous accounts and modern guidebooks might have readied them for Venice's beauty and for the absence of cacophonous modernity (which seems to make for a loud spectacle no matter the century), perhaps providing snippets of useful Italian phrases to navigate the bargaining with one's gondolier, woodman or waiter; but how they had fared in their daily contact with native sounds as a people whose nationality could be guessed at "by the speed with which we pass from one thing to another, and by our national ignorance of all languages but

English.” (Howells, *Venetian Life*<sup>2</sup> 1: 155) remains to be known. The awakening of this linguistic dormancy postulated by Howells owes thanks to the prolonged contact with the Venetian social fabric, which bridged the divide between Venice’s façade and its lesser known aural background, allowing for a closer inspection of a populace – and its ways of life – which was still physically and linguistically preponderant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and for a good portion of the 20<sup>th</sup>. This attitude stood directly, and thankfully, opposed to that of the “sharp, bustling, go-ahead Yankee” who rushed to the Convent on the island of San Lazzaro one morning “rubbing his hands, and demanding, ‘Show me all you can in five minutes’” (Howells, *VL* 1: 180).

It should be noted at this stage that, although the ideas expressed in this thesis were inspired by a variety of texts, cardinal relevance was given to two authors who were most vocal about their affection for the lagoon city: William Dean Howells and Henry James. The latter’s love for Venice was hardly a secret: it had begun with his first visit in Venice and spanned over decades of travels and writing, appearing in his collection of travel essays *Italian Hours* and seeping into novels (*The Wings of the Dove*) and short stories (*The Aspern Papers*) alike. On his part, William Howells had lived in Venice for four years as the American consul to the city, having been appointed in 1861 (*VL* 1: x). His experience is documented in *Venetian Life*, which I have read in its fourth edition, published in 1907, and in *Italian Journeys*, with the latter text widening the area of interest to include the neighbouring linguistic communities in the Veneto. Though my explicit focus in this thesis rests on American writers, I have included notable contributions by non-American authors who were connected to the main sources, if not by their culture, at least by their language and experience in Venice. My analysis has included their most notable travels essays and collections of letters, as well as those works of fiction which articulated Venice’s sounds and voices.

In order to structure the discussion over Venetian aurality in all its chief components, I have taken after the approach of Davis and Marvin’s, choosing to appropriate Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “scapes” as “perspectival constructs through which humans impose meaning on an environment” (5). Appadurai had proposed to approach the study of “the current global economy” through “five dimensions of global cultural flow”, i.e. ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, financescapas and, lastly, ideoscapas (“Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” 296). Davis and Marvin employed the same reasoning to identify four coexisting and overlapping viewpoints through which the understanding and the study of Venice could be

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<sup>2</sup> From here on abbreviated to *VL*.



funnelled: timescape, landscape, seascape and worldscape. My attempt to shed light on the intersecting occurrences of Venetian sounds, their ordinariness and their idiosyncrasies stems from this theoretical approach, and the instances of aural manifestations empirically gathered from the works of Anglo-American authors in the last two centuries are hence channelled into an added perspective furthering Davis and Marvin's own work: Venice's audioscape.

Each of the four chapters in this thesis addresses a specific category of sounds. Thus, human voices, shrieks, songs and cries echo throughout the first chapter, where special attention is devoted to the encounter with the spoken word of Venice. The perception of the Venetian dialect will be discussed in connection with the foreign bias which often accompanies it, and the evolution of said dialect will be examined under the modern pressure exercised by polyglot tourism. Then, the focus will shift to the linguistic initiative undertaken by Venetians to communicate with the English-speaking outsider, first within the aural setting of the market place; subsequently as guides to the social, linguistic and geographical labyrinth that the city represents.

The second chapter, on the other hand, will revolve around the manifestations of Venetian music and song. Before entirely transitioning to artificial sounds, which will be discussed in the third chapter, I will focus on the figure of the gondolier, an aural symbol of Venice from time immemorial, whose mediatory role between the city and the outside world was closely intertwined with traditions of music and singing. I will analyse the ways in which such mediation was conducted, to further understand the linguistic impact of this most eminent boatman. I will then talk of music and politics, and how the two overlapped during the occupation of the Austrians, whose bands occupied St. Mark's Square; this will be followed by a brief overview of Venice's operatic traditions. As anticipated, the third chapter will try to trace the substantial changes that marked Venice's naval traffic, and how the introduction of motorized transport impacted the city from an aural standpoint. The fourth and final chapter will be devoted to the subject of silence as an important feature of the aural dimension of Venice. I will analyse the ways in which its presence was felt and documented in older chronicles and how its relevance in recent years was shaped by the impositions of modern sounds. With this work I hope to enter into a new chapter of the everlasting discourse on Venice and to provide some insight into the ways in which this often overlooked asset has audibly shaped the city.



# 1. Venetians heard: Human sound in Venice

## 1.1. Uttering dialect

The expression of historical and geographical belonging in Italy has always been fiercely associated with dialects and the sheer matter of their variety has been cause for unity and pride just as much as it has given rise to conflict and social stigma. Its popular origin often determined its dismissal as a dispensable provincial feature instead of its recognition as a product of a rich and centuries-long linguistic heritage, both in Italy and abroad. To the English-speaking set of authors whose writings I will take into account in this thesis, the Italian language – idiom of officialdom after the unification of the country in 1861, – and its resilient dialectal variations were the first major hurdles to clear on a path towards the understanding of a nation which so often provided the focus and/or the backdrop of their work.

In the case of Venice, centuries of accounts – ranging from the anecdotal to the official, the fictional to the historical – had informed their creative process; but they still had comparatively little in the way of linguistic knowledge of the Venetian dialect (and often, of Italian itself) before they set foot in the city. In this chapter I will hence try to trace the progress of their interactions with the Venetian dialect, especially highlighting the evidence of romanticizing and paternalistic overtones as well as presenting more sober reflections over the authors' own stereotyping influence. I will then attempt to provide some insight into the foreign perception of dialect in our day and age, and proceed to address the linguistic initiative undertaken by Venetians themselves with regards to the English-speaking outsider. In the process I will especially try to bring into focus those interactions articulated within the market space, and those passed between the outsiders and the Venetians who volunteered to guide them through the cultural, topographical and linguistic maze of the city.

### 1.1.1. Stereotype and romance in the foreign perception of dialect

“Nowhere more than in Italy is the traveller who is ignorant of the language debarred from much of the true enjoyment of travelling, and from the opportunity of forming an independent opinion of the country, its customs, history, literature and art” (xiii), Karl Baedeker informed its readers in his *Northern Italy* guidebook, published

in 1868, doubtlessly testing the resolve of the linguistically unskilled traveller, who, whilst possibly agreeing with Baedeker's sentiment, might have had less ambitious aims in mind. While we cannot equate the recipients of Baedeker's travel tips with the famously polyglot mix of artists and writers, aristocrats and expatriates who either resided, transited through or paid assiduous visits to Venice, it must be noted that the proficiency of the Anglophone community on the subject of the Italian language *and* the Venetian dialect was uneven at best.

On one end of the spectrum, illustrious expatriates like Katherine De Kay Bronson, who had resided at Casa Alvisi on the Grand Canal since the late 1800s (Mamoli Zorzi 73), were virtuous examples of linguistic integration. Bronson had learned Venetian, and was able to devote her knowledge to the composition of "short comedies, dramatic proverbs" (James, *IT* 114) written entirely in dialect. Moving further along the scale, however, we find writers who – although prolific in their writing *on* Venice – often failed to engage with its dialect critically and betrayed a heavily stereotyped perception of it. A resident in the city for four years in his tenure as consul to the United States, William Dean Howells openly admits to a chequered knowledge of both Italian and Venetian, the learning of which could hardly have been less encouraged in the charged political situation which characterized his stay, as this fragment testifies:

I suppose that I read a good deal, but what books I cannot think. ... I make sure only of the Italian grammar which I studied in order to meet the Venetians on their own water. I studied it rather faithfully, expecting to use what little German I had the use of until I had mastered sufficient Italian, not imagining how this would socially disadvantage me with them in their hatred of the Austrians. ("Overland to Venice" 840)

Though admittedly Howells did not share in his wife's "rare gift of learning to speak less and less Italian every day" (*VL* 1: 110), his understanding of dialect was not facilitated by his linguistic background nor by his official appointment, and instead largely depended on the interactions he himself forged within the Venetian social scene. His memory of the popular *marionette* comedies – of which he remembers only "to have made out one" – had made for arduous listening, given that these ragged puppets conversed "vicariously in the Venetian dialect" and had "such a rapidity of utterance that it [was] difficult to follow them" (*VL* 1: 66), so that, as he fondly recalls, a vital role was played at the Malibran theatre by his young friend Biondini, who struggled to "tell me in English what I had not understood in Italian from the stage" ("A Young Venetian

Friend” 828). Even as a member of a political elite, social intercourse with Venetian families could have a good share of awkwardness in store, as testified by this comment on the linguistic challenges faced by a hypothetical newcomer:

unless he have thorough knowledge of Italian politics localized to apply to Venice, an interest in the affairs, fortunes, and misfortunes of his neighbors, and an acquaintance with the Venetian dialect, I doubt if he will be able to enjoy himself in the places so cautiously opened to him. Even in the most cultivated society, the dialect is habitually spoken; and if Italian is used, it is only in compliment to some foreigner present, for whose sake, also, topics of general interest are sometimes chosen. (*VL* 2: 108)

It should be clarified, however, that while Howells’s ignorance is paralleled by that of many of his contemporaries, his knowledge of the language was undoubtedly improved by his prolonged stay in the city. After all, he “could not, indeed, dwell three years in the place without learning to know it differently from those writers who have described it in romances, poems, and hurried books of travel” (*VL* 1: 2).

Howells’ compatriot Henry James was also keenly aware of his position as an American outsider in the Venetian world, as he expressed in a letter to his older brother William James: “Ruskin recommends the traveller to frequent and linger in a certain glorious room at the Ducal Palace ... But I feel as if I might sit there forever (as I sat there a long time this morning) and only feel more and more my inexorable Yankeehood” (Mamoli Zorzi 58-9). His languid enjoyment of the city, which he experienced almost exclusively as a welcome guest of prominent expatriate families, was more often than not filtered through the frescoed chambers of an “old Venetian home”: a sure way to enter “by the shortest step into the inner spirit of the place” (*IT* 52-3). It was within such rooms that a large part of his social sustenance was derived, that is when he did not make an effort to avoid it entirely. As a matter of fact, in his recollections of the city, James’ main focus routinely circles back to quiet, enclosed Venetian spaces like the Palazzo Barbaro, where the “call of playing children” and the “floating pavilions of the great serenades” only feature as a rumbustious background to the real heart of the matter, i.e. a palace with his own “moods and its hours and its mystic voices and its shifting expressions”, from whose privileged balconies he is able to “study” the Venetian life unravelling underneath (*IT* 53-4). A similar behaviour was upheld by the Ruskins, as is reported in John Ruskin’s unfinished autobiography *Praeterita*, where he made a case for linguistic ignorance when mentioning his early travels with his parents. He disagreed with the fact that “our isolation was meritorious,

or that people in general should know no language but their own. Yet”, he claimed “the meek ignorance has these advantages. We did not travel for adventures, nor for company, but to see with our eyes, and to measure with our hearts” (171). His extensive, tireless work of drawing and cataloguing Venetian landscapes did require little talking after all, and his Venetian routine during his stay in 1876 – rigorously alternating between writing and painting – is proof of that (*Works of John Ruskin* 210-1). “Carissimo Conte Zorzi, That is all the Italian I know, pretty nearly” (*Works* 220) is the earnest beginning of a letter to his Venetian collaborator and staunch supporter against the reckless restorations of many of the city’s landmarks; and when his Italian correspondence required more than a simple greeting, he could rely on the translating efforts of Count Zorzi’s secretary, or of the Signor Ugo Ojetti, who translated more than one letter addressed to Ruskin’s gondolier, Pietro Mazzini (331, 581). Though it is reasonable to impute some ignorance about Italian and its plethora of regional varieties to geographical and cultural divides, it is also unexpected to see two of the most influential foreign voices in 19<sup>th</sup> century Venice confess to either ignorance or deliberate avoidance of its language. This unexpected cultural discrepancy was perhaps best encapsulated by James himself, who wrote to Grace Norton, confessing:

I have been nearly a year in Italy, and have hardly spoken to an Italian creature save washerwomen and waiters. This, you’ll say, is my own stupidity; but granting this gladly, it proves that even a creature addicted as much to sentimentalizing as I am over the whole *mise en scène* of Italian life, doesn’t find an easy initiation into what lies behind it. (*The Letters of Henry James* 36-7).

It is precisely evidence of this penchant for sentimentality, with all its romantic, exoticising and paternalistic overtones, which I will now try to detail, having analysed those autobiographical writings which document first-hand interactions with Venetian society, as well as the literary works which strove to give a voice to the Venetian setting. For all intents and purposes, that of Lord Byron is an inescapable influence not only over popular culture, but also over those authors whose account of the city would sooner or later have to either align with or entirely distance itself from Byron’s, which is why his perspective will be the first to be taken into account. His Venetian exploits had been exacerbated to a legendary degree, to the point where “for much of the nineteenth century, the casual traveller to or commentator on Venice, needed merely to cite him to attain the status of ‘expert’” (Laven 21), a task which was made significantly easier by the fact the Byron’s opinions on the portraits at Palazzo Manfrin, among

others, could be parroted directly from Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Northern Italy* (328). Unlike the authors already mentioned above, Byron claimed he possessed adequate knowledge of Italian, and his familiarity with the subject provided him with a foothold into the dialect of the city. He writes to Murray, in November 1816:

I have got remarkably good apartments in a private house; I see something of the inhabitants (having had a good many letters to some of them); I have got my gondola; I read a little, and luckily could speak Italian (more fluently though than correctly) long ago. I am studying, out of curiosity, the *Venetian* dialect, which is very naïve, and soft, and peculiar, though not at all classical ... (Moore, *The Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* 332)

Only a month later, he felt enough at ease in the language to write that he was “fluent enough” even in its “Venetian modifications” (333-4). While tales of his rides at the Lido, studies with the Armenians, and swimming feats on the Grand Canal inevitably resurface at the very mention of his name, his relationship with the Italian language and the Venetian dialect are rarely taken into account, though they are not at all hidden from sight. In one of the most famous stanzas of his poem *Beppo: A Venetian Story*, in fact, the narrating voice passionately declares:

I love the language, that soft bastard Latin,  
Which melts like kisses from a female mouth,  
And sounds as if it should be writ on satin,  
With syllables which breathe of the sweet South,  
And gentle liquids gliding all so pat in,  
That not a single accent seems uncouth,  
Like our harsh northern whistling, grunting guttural,  
Which we're obliged to hiss, and spit, and sputter all. (23)

Here Venetian emerges victorious in the phonetic competition envisaged by Byron; the romantic, ‘bastard’ language from a foreign land trumps the studiedly cacophonous alliteration of the English tongue. It perfectly adheres to the picture Byron had insofar painted in the poem of a bucolic, operatic life led with child-like disregard for morally dubious institutions. In fact, despite “all its sinful doings” – such as the custom of the “Cavalier Servente”, a central figure in the poem, – its narrator concludes that “Italy’s a pleasant place to me” (21). In this biased comparison, Venetian benefits

not only from the fond description of its phonetic qualities, but also from the sexual connotations implied in the second line. While this observation might be illuminated by the context of the story – a Venetian wife whose husband is presumed dead at sea enlists the services of a charming, learned and wealthy *cicisbeo* – it is worth noting that this notion of the language and its dialectal variations as inextricable from sensuousness frequently emerges in Byron’s personal writing as well, and is *inescapably* paired with repeated references to its inherent artlessness.

It is striking to see how often this approach recurs in his descriptions of the opposite sex. Young merchant’s wife Marianna Segati, with whom Byron “fell in love the first week,” was indeed “very pretty and pleasing,” and she spoke Venetian, something that ‘amused’ Byron, and was deemed “naïve” (Moore, *Letters* 346); Marianna’s voice accordingly exemplified the characteristic “*naïveté* of the Venetian dialect” which was “always pleasing in the mouth of a woman” (329). Peasant-born Margarita, on the other hand, had appeared in Byron’s eyes as “a thorough Venetian in her dialect, in her thoughts, in her countenance, in every thing, with all their *naïveté* and pantaloon humour” (383). A “pretty” Venetian benediction – “Benedetto te, e la terra che ti fara!” – was made even prettier as it came from a Venetian girl, “tall and energetic as a Pythoness, with eyes flashing, and her dark hair streaming in the moonlight – one of those women who may be made anything” (390). In brief, it is evident that when the Venetian dialect *does* come into play, it is as a linguistic accessory to the fruition of Byron’s affairs, and that the women who speak are subjected to the selfsame patronising and exoticising gaze.

Howells’ works are not spared from an equally stereotyped view of the Venetian and the Italian people, although the focus is rather funnelled towards a class perspective, rather than a gendered one, in that many of his observations concern the lower social strata of the men and women met in Venice, as well as in his travels. Upon visiting Petrarch’s house in Arquà, for example, Howells finds himself wanting to prove that the memory of the famous poet had survived amongst his countrymen, and decides to take a “lout, who stood gnawing a stick and sifting his weight from one foot to the other” to the test (*Journeys* 204). While the man is unable to locate the period in which Petrarch had lived, he is adamant in the knowledge that Petrarch was, indeed, a poet. “Certainly the first response was not encouraging,” Howells admits, “but the last revealed that even to the heavy and clouded soul of this lout the divine fame of the poet had penetrated – and he a lout in the village Petrarch lived and ought to be first forgotten” (204). This unknowing participant in Howells’ experiment represents only one brushstroke in a



more elaborate portrayal of the poorer class, where a seemingly innate nobleness of spirit, inherited by their venerable ancestors and polished over time, finally manages to shine through despite an ignorance so artfully described it has only to be set to operatic music in order to be complete.

As a matter of fact, the 'lout', in this instance, is merely a part of a larger ensemble which includes a "rustic matron" making observations on the weather "while pitching manure on the little hill-slope near the house" and the unfazed custodian of Petrarch's house herself, who amiably listens to Howells embark in another educational feat to explain the "geographical, political, and natural difference between Tedeschi and Americani", in response to which she simply "shrugged her shoulders hopelessly, and said, in her rude Venetian, '*Mi no so miga*' (I don't know a all)" (*Journeys* 203-4).

If dialect provided the perfect complement to this operatic scene, it could also serve as a barometer of trust, or in this case, lack thereof. During another leg of Howells' travels, specifically the area of the Sette Comuni, where he had journeyed in order to get a closer look – and a closer hear – to the Cimbrian population that resided there, he met with the owner of the mules who would take him and his party to the town of Fozza, Howells described the man as "a Cimbrian, with a broad sheepish face; and a heavy, awkward accent of Italian which at once more marked his northern race, and made us feel comparatively secure from plunder in his hands" (*Journeys* 220). The idyllic portrayal of Italian life occurs time and again in the account of his travels in the Veneto region and in Venice itself. Thus the look of the "conventional type of shepherds" met in the Cimbrian mountains closely resembled their stone counterparts which adorned "the gates of villas" (223-4), and an evening scene witnessed in Bassano had "all that surface of romance with which the Italians contrive to varnish the real commonplaceness of life", with cooing youths strolling about their "picturesque ways" and the "spectacle" of peasants returning home after a day's work in the fields (218). Venice was no different: the vivacity of its gossip is articulated within an equally "picturesque" set of "balconies, shutters, and chimneys" (*VL* 1: 54), where

Every court had its carven well to show me, in the noisy keeping of the water carriers and the slatternly, statuesque gossips of the place. The remote and noisome canals were pathetic with empty old palaces peopled by herds of poor, that decorated the sculptured balconies with the tatters of epicene linen, and patched the lofty windows with obsolete hats. (*VL* 1: 24)

It is Henry James, however, who perhaps most of all intersperses his writing with sentimental observations on scenes of Venetian poverty, manners and landscapes. In James' work, dialect often features in the reiterated commentaries on the Venetian poor, who are usually painted as oblivious to the fact that their life is led in a place like Venice (*IT* 65), especially considering that the city is often the only thing they can claim as their own (5). As far as their character is concerned, they are deemed to be in possession of a temperament that "may bloom upon a dog's allowance", sustained by "sunshine and leisure and conversation and beautiful views" and which a simple "handful of quick sensibility" can make happy – thus setting them against the nature of the successful American who, instead, needs a great deal to become so (6). Hence we find the fishermen of Burano and Chioggia speaking "their soft Venetian jargon" as they go about their day and, quite unbeknownst to themselves, "decorate the scene with their splendid colour – cheeks and throats as richly brown as the sails of their fishing smacks – their sea-faded tatters which are always a 'costume'" (64). In the same way, the "picturesque and amiable class" of the gondoliers, in whose favour James admits to being "grossly prejudiced", delight him with "their sunburnt complexions and their childish dialect" (*IT* 54).

In James' fiction, and in the *Aspern Papers* specifically, a harsher echo of his opinion seem to pervade the rhetoric of his narrator, who "does not see Venice as Henry James the travel-writer sees Venice" (Tanner, *Venice Desired* 179). As a matter of fact "his terms of approval are invariably equivocal (when they are not simply tourist-book clichés) and not infrequently mingles with deprecations", and just as he is "petulantly patronizing" (179) of Venice's raggedness, he condescends to its dialect as well. His encounter with the secluded spinster Miss Tita (whom he hopes will be the key to access the papers of celebrated American poet Jeffery Aspern, jealously preserved by her elderly aunt), takes place in the enclosed garden of the palace where all the main characters reside, as the sound of bells fills the midnight air:

poor Miss Tita evidently was of the impression that she had had a brilliant youth. She had in fact had a glimpse of the Venetian world in its gossiping, home-keeping, parsimonious, professional walks; for I observed for the first time that she had acquired by contact something of the trick of the familiar, soft-sounding, almost infantile speech of the place. I judged that she had imbibed this invertebrate dialect from the natural way the names of things and people—mostly purely local—rose to her lips. If she knew little of what they represented she knew still less of anything else. (*The Aspern Papers* 152)

The reiterated description of the artlessness of Miss Tita's language perfectly adhere to her earlier characterization as a weak-minded individual, who is more often than not dependent on the whims of her wilful, headstrong aunt. In a way, the 'invertebrate' dialect she learned during childhood resurfaces at the mention of her upbringing, and the 'names of things and people' which are peculiar to Venice alone.

While evidence suggests that many of these authors posed next to no obstacle to their sentimentalizing efforts, it should be pointed out that they were not entirely unaware of the simplifying influence that they imposed on their surroundings. For example, in *Venetian Life* – the two-volume work on his consular tenure, – Howells gives a sharp jab to linguistic, colonial presumptions when he discusses the ability of the Venetians to “know the real English by their ‘Murrays’” and “make a shrewd guess at the nationality of us Americans by the speed with which we pass from one thing to another, and by our national ignorance of all languages but English” (1: 155). At the beginning of the book Howells had sworn to steer clear of the Byronic standards which seemed preponderant in the Anglophone world, while at the same time confessing to the reader his own partiality for the “scandalous” legends of Venice, which he deemed had “a greater air of knowingness” (VL 1: xiii). However, in the last pages of his account, he mockingly references the tropes of both mainstream genres as he relates his final, frenzied tour of churches, streets and buildings, and advertises them – not without irony – to the eager visitor, offering his expertise in aid of their sentimental writing journey, almost as if he were a location scout for an impending cinematic production:

Does any gentleman or lady wish to write a romance? Sir or madam, I know just the mouldy and sunless alley for your villain to stab his victim in, the canal in which to plunge his body, the staircase and the hall for the subsequent wanderings of his ghost; and all these scenes and localities I will sell at half the cost price; as also, balconies for flirtation, gondolas for intrigue and elopement, confessionals for the betrayal of guilty secrets. I have an assortment of bad and beautiful faces and picturesque attitudes and effective tones of voice; and a large stock of sympathetic sculptures and furniture and dresses, with other articles too numerous to mention, all warranted Venetian, and suitable to every style of romance. Who bids? Nay, I cannot sell, nor you buy. Each memory, as I hold it up for inspection, loses its subtle beauty and value, and turns common and poor in my hawker's fingers. (VL 2: 160)

The consummation of Venice as a city of romance and intrigue had indubitably left a mark on Howells, and problematized his enjoyment of it as someone who was

simultaneously drawn to the sensationalist literature that staged in Venice the vilest crimes and the most passionate romances, while being keenly conscious of every last trope these literatures employed. This near voyeuristic desire transcended Venice, and was applied to the Howells' own experience as a self-professed "emotional traveler", who found, to his disappointment, that many old ducal cities in northern Italy were, in fact, "inhabited, and their rest broken by sounds of toil, traffic, and idleness". He saw places he claimed "would gladly have had done with history", but were "still doomed to be parts of political systems, to read the newspapers, and to expose railway guides and caricatures of the Pope and of Napoleon in their shop windows", and thus did not cater to his own fantasies of urban decay (*Journeys* 16-7). As far as the characterization of the Italian people is concerned, Howells expressed hope that the account of his friendship with a young Venetian man might enlighten "such readers as may cling to our old Northern superstition concerning the gentle people of the South"; although, admittedly, a later attempt of his at sparing the Italians from being labelled "as rash as fire and as false as water" and judged "by the mongrel races of the Sicilies" ends up swerving in the opposite direction, idolizing instead "a Christianity and a civility older than ours by centuries, which cannot have failed to beautify and purify their natures" ("A Young Venetian Friend" 833). Howells also conceded that despite their prevailing shrewdness, Italians could also be unfairly targeted by foreigners who were angered more by perceived wrongs than by their own cluelessness, as was the case with two Danish visitors who related their tale of financial abuse suffered at the hands of a Capriote fishmonger. In this instance, although he privately thought that "something like this might have happened to an imprudent man in any country", Howells nonetheless joined them "in abusing the Italians – the purpose for which foreigners chiefly visit Italy" (*Journeys* 117).

Abuse was far from what Henry James had in mind: as was previously shown, he often praised the Italians' seemingly innate gift for art and leisure. However, on multiple occasions he demonstrates his ability to see himself from their perspective, and become the object of their judgement instead. His keen insight in this matter is here developed along generational and cultural lines, and takes into account the 'pictorial' frame in which his words of praise are usually fitted:

For, if we think, nothing is more easy to understand than an honest ire on the part of the young Italy of to-day at being looked at by all the world as a kind of soluble pigment. Young Italy ... must be heartily tired of being admired for its eyelashes and its pose. In

one of Thackeray's novels occurs a mention of a young artist who sent to the Royal Academy a picture representing "Contadino dancing with a Trasteverina at the door of a Locanda, to the music of a Pifferaro." It is in this attitude and with these conventional accessories that the world has hitherto seen fit to represent young Italy, and one doesn't wonder that if the youth has any spirit he should at last begin to resent our insufferable aesthetic patronage. (*IT* 159)

In this light, human encounters are reshaped to accommodate a new, unprecedented dimension, and the reality-bending efforts of the foreign eye are forced to reckon with the fact that:

half the time we are acclaiming the fine quality of the Italian smile the creature so constituted for physiognomic radiance may be in a sullen frenzy of impatience and pain. Our observation in any foreign land is extremely superficial, and our remarks are happily not addressed to the inhabitants themselves, who would be sure to exclaim upon the impudence of the fancy-picture. (*IT* 164-5)

Dialect cannot be extricated from this larger perspective, and an acknowledgement of the deep-rooted preconceptions of Venice – and Italy – is necessary in order to better understand exactly *what* the authors in question heard when Venetian was spoken, and how its outward characteristics impacted their experience of the city. While it is true that dialect was often fated to acquiesce in the judgement of its speakers, it also held, often unbeknownst to its critics, an unparalleled relation with its environment. Again, it was James who noted that Venetians were heard because in Venice "there is scarcely another heard sound ... no noise there save distinctly human noise; no rumbling, no vague uproar, nor rattle of wheels and hoofs" and their voice was carried across the "still water" (*IT* 21). By joining Venetians in this environment, Anglo-American authors necessarily agreed to negotiate their relationship with the natives through "articulate and vocal and personal" (22) terms, by entering into direct familiarity with its dialect.

### **1.1.2. Dialect today**

Before the Italian language asserted its dominance in the landscape of the Veneto, the Venetian dialect had, quite literally, enjoyed significant linguistic isolation, with separate accents and vocabulary developing not only within the different *sestieri*,

but amongst the many islands of the lagoon. While it is true that over the centuries the Venetian dialect itself has always been susceptible to influence from foreign languages – influences which are observable to this day – I want to report the impressions of those contemporary authors who experienced the city and its dialect anew, after the former had undergone significant demographic and technological changes, and was no longer isolated from the mainland, nor from a steadily increasing flux of foreign visitors. Despite these changes, both the established and the impending, when Mary McCarthy published her account of the city in the late fifties, the Venetian dialect appeared to still be firmly anchored to some unbiased elements, such as “its own peculiar music, high and sweet, like the chirping of birds” and “the same lively rhythm as the quick, tapping step, up-and-down, up-and-down, that the Venetians have developed to match the form of their multitudinous bridges” (*Venice Observed* 273). The majority of Venetians themselves, nearly everyone of whom she viewed as “an art-appreciator, a connoisseur of Venice”, were still eager to play hosts, and “ready to talk of Tintoretto or to show you, at [their] own suggestion, the spiral staircase (said to challenge the void), to demonstrate the Venetian dialect or identify the sound of the Marangona” (178), thus seemingly perpetuating a long tradition of welcoming (and often profiting from) foreign visitors by guiding them through the city.

When Jan Morris’ *Venice* was first published however, less than twenty years later, a significant change was beginning to affect the “rich and original dialect” of the Venetians, which was “beginning to lose its vigour under the impact of cinema and television” (19). As a people, Venetians were still helpful to befuddled visitors, though perhaps overly-optimistic when, “pointing a finger through the labyrinth of mediaeval lanes ... entangled in canals, archways, dead ends, unexpected squares and delusive passages” they instructed to go “*Sempre diretto!*” (39).

Variations of Venetian were still eminent in the islands of the lagoon. In Chioggia, for example, a supposedly “incomprehensible dialect ... said to be the language of the early Venetian settlers, with Greek overtones” (257) was spoken, and the appearance of its men was reminiscent of “Giorgionesque” features, as opposed to the “tousled and knobbly” men of Burano (236). And if Morris noted Venice to be still “criss-crossed with local flavours and loyalties” to the point that their very dialect changed “from quarter to quarter” (20), it is unsurprising to witness such behaviour exacerbated outside the immediate confines of the city:

The lagoon islands were much more independent in the days before steam and motors, with their own thriving local governments, their own proud piazzas, their own marble columns and lions of St. Mark: and each retains some of its old pride still, and is distinctly annoyed if you confuse it with any neighbouring islet. ‘Burano!’ the man from Murano will exclaim. ‘It’s an island of savages!’ - but only two miles of shallow water separates the one from the other. (236-7)

It is certainly a testament to its adaptability that the Venetian dialect, a reportedly “slurred but breezy affair” was in fact “lively enough for Goldoni to write some of his best plays in it” and at the same time “formal enough to be the official language of the Venetian Republic” (Pemble 19), used in its official documents since the 16<sup>th</sup> century (93). In his book, Morris discusses its heterogeneous origin and traces the etymology of some of the staple words of the current Venetian vernacular, looking at its complex heritage, which is “partly French, and partly Greek, and partly Arabic, and partly German, and probably partly Paphlagonian too, the whole given a fine extra blur by a queer helter-skelter, sing-song manner of delivery” (19). The Venetian *zecchino*, for example, was derived from the Arab “*sikka* (a die)”, which developed into “*zecca* (a mint)” and finally gave the name to the coin, while the word *arsenale*, embodying a proud naval institution established in the namesake area of Castello, followed a similar linguistic journey, from *dār aṣ-ṣinā’a* (house of art), to *arzena*, to *arsenale* (172). Space is also given to the instances in which the Venetian dialect was the one to impose its influence on Italian or maintain a separate, dialectal word in coexistence with its Italian counterpart. As a result, Venetian toponymy is often hard to navigate, barring a robust knowledge of saints and a talent for portmanteau. For example, the “real name” of the “factional church of San Trovaso is in Dorsoduro ... is Santi Gervasio e Protasio, far too large a mouthful for the Venetian vernacular” (Morris 217). The same reasoning lies behind San Zanipolo (Santi Giovanni e Paolo), San Stin (Santo Stefano) and San Marcuola (Santi Ergmagora e Fortunato), the latter in particular being “a usage which they toss at you with every appearance of casual logic, but never a word of explanation. It is, as they would say, their custom” (217). Being characterized by its own rules of pronunciation, Venetian also possessed its own vocabulary running alongside Italian, thus *piron*, *pistor* and *relozo* were used in stead of *forchetta*, *fornaio* and *orologio* respectively (20).

Moving closer to the new millennium, this linguistic coexistence was undermined by a deepening divide between Venice and the rest of the world, a divide in which fluency in dialect often proved to be a determining factor. Large cultural and

linguistic shifts were forcing modern Venetians to reckon with the loss of their isolation. While the *Ponte della Libertà* had been operative for over a hundred and fifty years when the new millennium began, the impact of tourism, both national and international, was growing in unprecedented terms of magnitude. This change meant that native Venetians were reassessing the boundaries of their identity in a place where the language, the streets and the landmarks were no longer their sole province, but had become easily accessible to Italians and foreigners alike – both of whom would have uncompromisingly been grouped by Venetians under the umbrella term of *foresti*.

The notion of ‘Venetianness’ could no longer afford to be loosely defined, and instead had to be distilled into recognizable tropes that could be accessed by the largest possible number of visitors, yearning for visible signs of Venetian ‘authenticity’. As Davis and Marvin noted in their research, the list of requirements that defined this authenticity was rather uncompromising. It relied heavily on a notion of ‘purity’ and was, interestingly enough, at times perpetrated by self-confessed outsiders to the city, or by Venetians who outsourced this burden of identity to those fellow citizens who inhabited the least identifiably Venetian areas. Thus:

Those who live elsewhere in Venice, even if they can trace their lineage in the city back for generations, might still refer to friends or relatives living on the Giudecca or in Castello’s Secco Marina as ‘true Venetians.’ This can often be a half-derisive accolade, however, for while residents of the Venetian Periphery do indeed speak the purest dialect, own and operate the most private boats, and still maintain some sense of community life, they are also by and large the oldest, poorest, and least educated of the sixty-five thousand or so Venetians still left in the city. (101)

Author Polly Coles, having lived in Venice for a year with her Anglo-Italian family, had encountered a similar pattern when discussing this matter of authenticity. “True Venetians? There are FIVE of them!” commented an historian, while an acquaintance of hers pondered the linguistic implications: “Ah yes, dialect ... Yes, I know! The best speaker of dialect is Alvise’s brother’s wife’s mother-in-law” (47).

Because the emerging need for unadulterated dialect necessarily mythicised its speakers and further narrowed the access into an already restricted group, it is unsurprising to see that some people chose to rely on different denominators to define this identity. According to long-term resident of the city, a “self-confessed outsider” from Emilia-Romagna Davis and Marvin interviewed, dialect could no longer claim a significant role in the building of the Venetian self, as “the mark of a ‘true’ Venetian”



was found “less in speaking the dialect (which has in any case faded greatly under the recent impact of television and consumerism) than in knowing the city with the kind of intuitive sense that only a native can have” (85). This claim, while somewhat sweeping, is not entirely unreasonable. As a matter of fact, the relationship between those Venetians who currently work in the tourist trade and the tourists themselves is, in the vast majority of cases, linguistically uneven, the big difference being that the dialect does not always have the upper hand. The suspected ‘rudeness’ of tourism operators, they write:

is by no means new to Venice ... and it is unquestionably one of the best benefits of knowing a dialect. It is a handy psychological release valve that may not exist much longer, however, since the Venetian dialect has, in the last generation or so, faded into little more than a strong accent that many Italians can understand. We have seen the results: rude gondoliers or ticket sellers who were understood by an Italian or even a Venetian whom they failed to recognize, followed by a lengthy shouting match, with accusations of *infame!* and *maleducato!* flying back and forth between the insulter and the one who was not supposed to understand the insult. (Davis and Marvin 127)

Thus the ‘psychological release valve’ of dialect, a necessary tool for the linguistically outnumbered, often proves to be unreliable in our day and age. In her book *No Vulgar Hotel: The Desire and Pursuit of Venice*, author Judith Martin speaks of its weakening status in no uncertain terms, going as far as to say that the Venetian dialect is now not only endangered, but almost extinct, “barely being kept alive by a few scholars, by old people who speak it among themselves, and old families, including hereditary patricians and hereditary gondoliers, who speak it to their children as a second language”. She then proceeds to draw a rather discouraging comparison between Venetians and the generational pride that those “old Italian-Americans used to have in getting their children to learn Italian”, hinting that such pride will inevitably wane as the generations pass (247-8).

Modern Venetian dialect, as we have seen, is better understood within the context of the cultural pressures exercised by the burgeoning tourism industry, which often accounts for the xenophobic tones that characterize much of the current discourse on Venice. “If once the cordiality and the sympathy of the Venetian were proverbial” recited a 1982 article on the *Gazzettino*, “now the opposite is true”, all evidence pointing to the fact that “the ‘real’ citizen is becoming scurrilous in his physiological character” (Davis and Marvin 63). Language irrevocably sets the foreigner apart from

the local, and can trigger an all too predictable series of behavioural responses. “If I go into the wrong bar and ask, in my foreign accent, for a coffee, I may automatically pay twice what the man next to me is paying with his singsongs of a Venetian accent”, complains Coles, adding that “not only do I pay twice the money, but I pay also for being a stranger, with the off-hand, unsmiling manner of the waitress, the palpable contempt of the shopkeeper” (95). She relates another incident in a similar setting: an Indian couple who stumble into a markedly ‘local’ *pasticceria*, enjoy some coffee and pastries, and ask for directions to St. Mark’s Square upon leaving. After “no serious explanation is given” and “hands are waved in roughly the right direction ... in the time-honoured Venetian style” an elderly client waits for the door to shut behind them and amuses the clientele by saying “There she was with her third eye and she can’t even find the way to San Marco!” (142).

Another aged woman (one cannot help but sense a generational trend) is angered by the presence of Coles’ bilingual children on the briefly active, residents-only Number Three waterbus, to which their season tickets provided unfettered access. When the woman hears them chat in English, she vainly tries to persuade the *marinaio* that they have cheated the system: their language betrays the fact that they are not Venetians, and hence should disqualify their “mere residency” in the city (49). There are endless episodes of this nature peppering the modern chronicles of Venetian life, all symptomatic of a deep-rooted discontent with the current situation which explains – though it does not always excuse – these bursts of anger at the expense of foreign visitors. There seems to be room for acceptance still, however, if the outsider is keen enough to learn Venetian, or has perfected the art of nodding and looking like a local, by sauntering in the city during the low season with a “full-to-bursting trolley” (Coles 107). The ways in which knowledge of dialect can circle back to – and be employed by – foreigners, are numerous, and a rather unsuspected one is explained by Coles’ rowing instructor, in the course of a discussion on “Venice’s chances of survival” (202). He claims that “the number of people speaking Venetian dialect is growing now” and that “all the immigrants who come from Eastern Europe to work in Marghera and Mestre are learning it, because that’s how everyone communicates in those factories. Tell that to the Lega Nord” he continues “it’s the foreigners who are putting new life into our dialect!” (202).

Another eager candidate for linguistic proficiency is the Venetophile: an individual, Judith Martin explains, whose interest for Venice is constantly at its height, and who will go to great lengths to enter its homes, its mysteries and its language. If

such a person is to proceed to “advanced assimilation”, then he or she must, in Martin’s mind, move beyond Italian, which “presumably [they are] already making an effort to speak”, and learn the dialect, a skill “that few Venetians have” (247-8). In order to achieve fluency, it is necessary to “knock the vowels from the ends of words, including proper names” and “to smush two names together or to change them entirely”, as well as remember that “Venetian has a profusion of Xs and Js, so that the proverb ‘Better little than nothing,’ which in Italian is ‘E meglio poco che niente,’ becomes ‘Pitosto de ninte xe mejo pitosto’” (247-8). Morris agrees, and reiterates that “often the Venetian seems to be mouthing no particular words, only a buttery succession of half-enunciated consonants”. The language “is very fond of Xs and Zs, and as far as possible ignores the letter L altogether, so that the Italian *bello*, for example, comes out *beo*” (19). Coles echoes McCarthy when comparing the sound of dialect to that of birds, even if that sound is less like the chirping of a sparrow and more like the “petulant shriek of gulls ... swooping down the canals or taking up imperious positions on chimney pots” (25). Sound-wise, seagulls and Venetians appear to Coles as belonging to the same ilk, and when these birds are gathered together “they sound like people cackling with laughter, and you could almost mistake the bleak vowels of the Venetian ‘Ciao’ or ‘eeow’, that you hear repeated all day long in the streets, for the seabirds’ plaintive cries” (25). A fatalist tinge also seems to colour Coles’ experience of dialect, like when the “disembodied and despairing voice” of the postman announces itself at the doorbell every morning, “dragging out all his vowels like a Venetian Eeyore who knows that everything will go to the bad, if it hasn’t already” (69); or when a woman working at a kiosk in Torcello, comments on the staggering increase in tourism since Coles’ last visit to the island, by saying “E! Cio! ... in that way Venetians have of saying; well, there you are: I could have told you that everything goes to the bad” (115).

If, however, the dialect is learned, the fatalism is taken on board, and no small amount of adjustments are made to the boundaries of ‘Venetianness’, then the “real directions” are given, and after “going through a sestiere, past the scuola, down the fondamenta or the riva to the ramo, to the rio terà to the calle, ruga, rughetta, or salizzata and under the sottoportego” the foreigner might finally reach their new Venetian friends for “drinks on the altana”, and enter into real dialogue with the living city and its language (Martin 63). Such adjustments are necessary for dialect to become apparent in the daily interactions of the natives, and not slip under the radar of the untrained ear. Mundane scenes that would otherwise resemble the pictorial ensembles described by nineteenth-century authors are animated by dialect and lose the mere

patina of authenticity. Two fishermen “sorting deftly through a stream of hundreds of very small crabs” and “untangling a matted bunch of fishing nets”, are seen “talking with animation in the thick, consonantal, sometimes nasal Venetian dialect” (Coles 47); the schoolchildren who roam the city during the feast of San Martino make a point of “bashing their tinny homemade drums with gusto and going from shop to shop singing the song of San Martino and asking for goodies” (Coles 83). School life, an entirely unexplored province for many a visitor, is found to be made up of many people moving “back and forth between Italian and Venetian”; a place where, at parent-teacher meeting “the discussion might well be carried out with one person speaking Italian, while the other speaks in dialect” (Coles 63). Lastly, Venetian is known in its connection with gossip, the kind of private talk that can be shared with knowing grocers (Martin 72) or with those friends who are trusting enough to share the history of their family with the enquiring outsider. It is the case of an acquaintance of Coles, who interrupts her own recounting of her family tree to exclaim: “Madonna, I find it hard not to speak in dialect when I’m talking like this!”, implying that her “argot is the natural place for that kind of confidence, and while ... the Italian language is public, official and formal, Venetian is private and personal” (147).

On the surface, this might suggest a rather stark separation between private and public life, where the former is articulated through dialect and latter employs Italian and foreign languages to interact with non-Venetians. However, I would argue that these examples, perhaps unwittingly, testify to an attempt on the part of Venetian inhabitants to ‘privatise’ their public existence and, by “talking right through the strangers all around them and creating a private space of language and recognition that they can share with their friends” (Davis and Marvin 127), thus reconnoitring the linguistic ground occupied both by Italian and by foreign languages.

## **1.2. Venetians meet the outsider**

Thus far I have chosen to focus on the perspective of Anglo-American authors, and on how they fared in the challenge posed by the Venetian dialect, by garnering evidence of this linguistic relationship from their own written accounts and, partly, from their fiction. In this literature Venetians have, often unbeknownst to them, figured as the passive recipients of foreign judgement: their conversations were observed, their mannerisms discussed with other expatriates and their character epitomised in books,

novels and letters destined for English-speaking audiences. There is little evidence of direct retaliation against what James' defined as "our insufferable aesthetic patronage" (*IT* 159), but in order to show that this linguistic relationship is not as one-sided as it may appear at first glance, I will now bear witness to the ways in which Venetians themselves initiated and cultivated their relationship with the English-speaking outsider, by using their linguistic knowledge to guide, profit from, or simply communicate with them.

### 1.2.1. Market voices and market places

Before Venetians had to deal with tourist masses as a socioeconomic phenomenon of their own, they lived in constant cultural promiscuity with people from Germany, Turkey, Dalmatia, Greece, Albania, Armenia and other regions of Italy (Davis and Marvin 302) in a city that was, for all intents and purposes "a commercial hub, filled with whole colonies of foreign artisans and merchants pursuing their trades, some in continual rotation back and forth to their home countries and some in a state of almost permanent residency" (12). In the early sixteen-hundreds, Thomas Coryat wrote that in St. Mark's Square alone, one could

see all manner of fashions of attire, and heare all the languages of Christendome, besides those that are spoken by the barbarous Ethnicks; the frequencie of people being so great twice a day ... that (an elegant writer saith of it) a man may very properly call it rather ... a market place of the world, not of the citie. (*Coryat's Crudities* 314)

Before St. Mark's was "turned almost exclusively into a hub for socializing" under the French and Austrian occupations of the nineteenth century, it was a lively market place in its own right, with "stalls of money changers, food sellers, and every sort of huckster" clamouring their way into the pockets of natives and foreigners alike (Davis and Marvin 62-3). Most importantly, the square was linked by way of the *Mercerie* to another cornerstone of commercial life, the Rialto. These streets, which connected the two hubs, were lined with shops, and their narrowness was no deterrent for the shopkeepers who, as Howells discovered on an afternoon stroll, simply brought "whatever goods are not exposed in the shop windows ... to the door to be clamored over by purchasers; so that the Merceria is roused by unusual effort to produce a more pronounced effect of traffic and noise than it always wears" (*VL* 2: 41). The racket

culminated in the “deafening uproar of bargains” (2: 41) of the Rialto Bridge, to either side of which market stalls had sprawled, along with the chatter and the holler of their occupants.

Howells could boast first-hand experience of market places, having lived in Campo San Bartolomeo, to the east of the Rialto Bridge, for the better part of a year. He had taken up rooms in early March partly because at that time, as he writes, “the tumult under my windows amounted only to a cheerful stir, and made company for me,” but by the time “winter broke, and the windows were opened” he found that he had “too much society” (VL 1: 55). Howells ended up leaving San Bartolomeo, not least because his restless days were being followed by restless nights in which “sleepless youths” gathered in the *campo* and “melodiously bayed the moon in chorus” (1: 58). Upon moving there, however, he was of the opinion that “there was a charm” about the bubbling noises of the market, and he spent a lot of time “in the study of the vociferous life under my windows, trying to make out the meaning of the different cries, and to trace them back to their sources” (1: 56). One particular cry appeared to belong to a “wretched, sunburnt girl, who carried about some dozens of knotty pears, and whose hair hung disheveled round her eyes, bloodshot with the strain of her incessant shrieks”. Her “sharp, pealing cry” he observed, “ended in a wail of angry despair” and was eerily reminiscent of “the cry of that bird in the tropic forests which the terrified Spaniards called the *alma perdida*” (VL 1: 55-6). The cries of actual birds, of course, could be heard just as easily in the *campo*, from the many cages which hung on the balconies of the *appartamenti signorili* and the “innumerable finches, canaries, blackbirds, and savage parrots” held within them, which “sang and screamed with delight in the noise that rose from the crowd” (VL 1: 56-7).

The swarm of market-goers, however, was never upstaged by the animals’ singing; on the contrary, it rivalled it in terms of size and variety. In San Bartolomeo, even the smaller dealer made up “in boastful clamor for the absence of quantity and assortment in his wares; and ... an almost imperceptible boy, with a card of shirt-buttons and a paper of hair-pins, is much worse than the Anvil Chorus with real anvils”. Fishermen, louts, charlatans and jugglers were joined by “organists who ground their organs; and poets of the people who brought out new songs, and sang and sold them to the crowd” (VL 1: 55-6). To the grievance of Howells’ ears, the *campo* also “swarmed with the traffic and rang with the bargains of the Rialto market” which took place just across the namesake Bridge (VL 1: 55). The clamouring and the “coquetting” that surrounded its numerous eating houses rippled across the Grand Canal, and the only

true contrarian amid the bustle of the Rialto market place was the “singularly calm ... statue called the Gobbo” (VL 1: 131). Perhaps due to their piercing pitch, the same cries even reverberated in one of Howells’ short poems “The Mulberries”:

On the Rialto Bridge we stand;  
The street ebbs under and makes no sound;  
But, with bargains shrieked on every hand,  
The noisy market rings around.  
"Mulberries, fine mulberries, here!"  
A tuneful voice, – and light, light measure (*The Literary Network* n.p.)

The loud advertisement of mulberries which opens the poem serves, in this particular instance, as a gateway into Howells’ childhood memories, but in the account of his adult life in Venice, these fruits simply figure as a savoury commodity, grown in the gardens of the Giudecca island. They were sold with added fervour during the Festa del Redentore by vendors who filled the air “with their sweet jargoning”, clashing with the “intolerable uproar” of the other tradesmen who set up their wares along the quay (VL 2: 17-8). Howells’ observation of Venetian customs in market places had helped him narrow down their human interactions to a precise, if somewhat theatrical, science. Such “embattled commercial transaction,” he wrote, predictably began with the customer entering the shop, and pricing an article (VL 2: 93). Then,

The shopman names a sum of which only the fervid imagination of the South could conceive as corresponding to the value of the goods. The purchaser instantly starts back with a wail of horror and indignation, and the shopman throws himself forward over the counter with a protest that, far from being dear, the article is ruinously cheap at the price stated, though they may nevertheless agree for something less. (2: 94)

Passionate haggling ensues: the indignant customer leaves the shop, he is called back in, a price is finally agreed upon and the transaction is concluded. The raging argument fizzles out spectacularly, and ends “without bloodshed” as the shopman “says cheerfully, ‘*servo suo!*’” and the customer responds “‘*Bon di! Paron!*’ (Good day! Master!)”. The foreigners who assist at such behaviour, Howells observes, are eager to replicate it, and although they apply themselves to these disputes “with a zeal as great as that of natives” they do so with significantly “less skill” (2: 94-5), because “far more

dearly than any Yankee, a Venetian loves a bargain, and puts his whole heart into upholding and beating down demands” (2: 42).

This might explain why Howells, after his disastrous attempt to strike a bargain for the purchase of firewood with the captain of a ship that carried it, confessed to having “lost my self-respect in being plundered before my face” and resolved “thereafter to be cheated in quiet dignity behind my back” (1: 98). The routine overcharging of Howells’ first woodman had prompted the ruinous feat, but the latter’s most remarkable trait was not his gift for evading justice. It was the “superb incantation with which he announced his coming on the Grand Canal” (1: 96) which had earned him Howells’ admiration in the first place, who considered it to be the “most impressive of all the street cries of Venice”. It surpassed the “exquisite sadness and sweetness in the wail of the chimney-sweep”, the “winning pathos in the voice of the vender of roast pumpkin”, and the “oriental fancy and splendor in the fruiterers who cried ... ‘Juicy pears that bathe your beard!’”, as well as the wails of countless others tradesmen (*VL* 1: 97-8).

Howells was evidently fascinated by the aural expression of the world of Venetian commerce. He suffered its excesses, rejoiced in its variety, and was subsequently prolific in the descriptions of its intricacies, unlike his compatriot Henry James, who took significantly less interest in it. In fact, one of the most notable mentions of trade in James’s writing concerns its most unsavoury practices, especially those that took place “in the whole precinct of St. Mark’s”, something which James considered to be nothing short of sacrilegious. Irrespective of the sacredness of this “ancient sanctuary”, many “pedlars and commissioners ply their trade – often a very unclean one – at the very door of the temple”, and did not hesitate to “follow you across the threshold, into the sacred dusk, and pull your sleeve, and hiss into your ear, scuffling with each other for customers” (*IT* 11). This predatory behaviour found its near match in that of the *valet-de-place* which also operated in the Piazza and spoke with his foreign clientele “in a terrible brassy voice” which had “whatever language he be speaking, the accent of some other idiom” (*IT* 11). Both figures loudly tried to secure the business of the tourist hoards that lingered there, who contributed to the general confusion by filling both “the Ducal Palace and the Academy with their uproar” (*IT* 10). What James witnessed was hardly a new trend: Venetians had accumulated centuries of experience in handling foreign visitors, and in the last section of this chapter their capacity as hosts will be discussed in further detail.



I would here argue that James' resentment in finding Venice so densely populated by touring masses had ultimately less to do with their increasing numbers, and more to do with the fact that these raucous multitudes were unopposed by the uproar of larger market crowds. Tourism at its core, in its loud negotiations and bargained transactions, had always run parallel to the noise of the market, but in the nineteenth century its voice was the only one that survived. In fact, "under the French and Austrian occupations, most of this sort of commercial activity and its attendant trash and disorder were swept out of the Piazza and Piazzetta" just as the "various festive and ritual manifestations staged there by the republican regime" (Davis and Marvin 62). We must remember that James's experience is heir to the radical repurposing of the Piazza operated by the French and the Austrian occupants, whose bands and cafés had served to transform it into the "most beautiful drawing-room in Europe" as Napoleon described it (Davis and Marvin 58). Trade had been wholly shifted towards Rialto, and St. Mark's Square, as nineteenth century visitors came to know it, was entirely deprived of its commercial vocation. This is why the image of Venice as a portentous mercantile force, benefiting from centuries of profitable contact with the Oriental markets, is seen by James as a hindrance to the quiet, museum-like sacredness of its Basilica, which leads him to conclude that "if Venice, as I say, has become a great bazaar, this exquisite edifice is now the biggest booth" (*IT* 11).

The summoning of the Oriental scenes and imagery in connection with Venetian markets was slow to fade from modern-day conscience. When in the 1970s Jan Morris stumbled upon a small, bubbling market on the Strada Nuova, he had only to lean against a pillar and close his eyes to imagine before him a place where "west turns to east, Christian to Muslim, Italian to Arabic" and he can picture himself "back in some dust-ridden, flyblown, golden market of the Middle East" (169). "I can all but hear the soft suck of a hubble-bubble in the cafe next door," he continues, "and if I half-open my eyes and look at the tower of the Apostoli, along the street, I swear I can see the muezzin up there in the belfry, taking a deep dogmatic breath before summoning us to prayer". Morris' remarks also bring attention to the fact that smaller markets still carried out – as they had throughout Venetian history – the same functions of the bigger hubs of commerce, servicing their districts with their own selection of local produce. Their existence had largely gone unsung, but with the gradual downsizing of the Rialto food market, smaller commercial enterprises lately enjoyed a renaissance of sorts. In contemporary chronicles, the foreigner is afforded many options for his grocery shopping, such as "open stands in squares, parked vegetable boats, a handful of so-

called supermarkets in town, and stores in the mainland where you can buy in bulk” (Martin 72). This variety speaks to the scattered, centrifugal experience that characterizes their modern purchasing, to the detriment of large, coalesced markets. It also hints to a distinct lack of human sounds, and while the passing tourist might suffer to hear a cry of two from the local greengrocer, this is hardly the case with supermarket chains, where all prices are fixed and the need for haggling is moot.

Under the pressures of mass tourism, Venetian markets have undoubtedly undergone significant change and the very act of shopping had acquired new meanings. The continued survival of Rialto fish market in particular has cemented its status as a mark of ‘true Venetianness’, which is why, just like the knowledge of dialect, a familiarity with the language and the rituals of its sellers allows the Venetophile (to use Martin’s wording) unfettered access into a truer layer of Venetian existence. “Serious shoppers get up early and go to the Rialto” she assures us, and the Venetophile, which is perhaps the most serious of them all, prides himself on getting food “where Venetians have gotten it since the fourteenth century” (72), so it is no wonder that the “oohing and aahing” (Weideger 297) of tourists marvelling at the picturesque stands (without making any purchase) are not awarded any acceptance, and do not ultimately share in the aural traditions that defined the experience of the market in the first place.

Still, despite external linguistic pressure and modernization, in some puzzling accident of aural resilience “the old man at the Rialto fish market ... sings every day” and the “young man selling his vegetables there still shouts out their virtues to entice passersby” (Frangipane 237) just as “the voice of cheap bargains” reverberated in the neighbouring San Bartolomeo one hundred-and-fifty years before (Howells, *VL* 1: 130). If anything, the “clamour of marketmen and shrill-voiced women” and the “housemaid singing adenoidally at her chores” echoing through the modern-day stalls of Rialto, have a new opponent to shout out, that is the “roar of boat-engines on the Grand Canal” and the occasional “wet thud of a steam-hammer driving a pile into the mud” (Morris 25), whose noisy contribution to Venice’s aural landscape will be discussed in the second chapter.

### **1.2.2. Guiding through language: Venetian hosts**

As we have seen, Venetians had collectively gathered a wealth of experience in dealing with outsiders over the centuries, and had built a reputation for themselves as “being among Europe’s shrewdest traders, entrepreneurs, and hustlers” (Davis and

Marvin 12), so it comes as no surprise that their chequered record of integrity in commercial dealing with foreign visitors also extended to the business of welcoming them, and could be considered an integral part of their history.

In the Middle Ages, when large numbers of incoming pilgrims passed through Venice on their way to the Holy Land, Venetians quickly seized the chance to assist them and facilitate their journey – at a price. Upon their arrival, these unsuspecting men and women were often “set upon by contending packs of *tolomazi* (as such guides were called) offering to escort them about the city, assist in changing money, act as translators, arrange lodgings, and book their passage to the Holy Land” (Davis and Marvin 24). While it is hardly surprising that some Venetians might try to capitalize on the needs of these newcomers, it is startling to learn just how widespread this behaviour was, and how soon it had led to sweeping regulations. As early as 1229, in fact, the Senate had to intervene in order to regulate the reckless actions of the *tolomazi*, by limiting their numbers and forcing them to obtain an official license. Once these criteria were met, they were “ordered to wait every morning and afternoon by the Ducal Palace and the Basilica of San Marco and at the Rialto” in groups of two at a time, and “each pair of men were not only meant to know the city’s sights and facilities, but they also were supposed to speak, between them, at least two foreign languages” (Davis and Marvin 25). This testifies to the fact that the linguistic fluency was every bit as vital for aspiring cicerones as was the knowledge of Venetian sights. The law was certainly not the last intervention on the part of the Venetian government, and in the centuries to come parameters would be set to regulate aspects such as tourist lodgings (25) and rates for gondola rides (148), to name but a few.

The zeal of Venice’s volunteer guides and gondoliers routinely inspired new ways of circumventing regulations, but it could do little to preserve their primary function in the oligarchy of tourism services against the spreading of a new travelling tool: the modern guidebook. Introduced in the late 1800s, the guidebook found favour with an increasing number of visitors to the lagoon, and would soon become a ubiquitous presence in many a traveller’s hand. After all, foreigners who intended to visit Venice, or the rest of Italy for that matter, often had very little in the way of linguistic preparation to help them weather the obstacles of international travel. In this regard, the guidebook played a key role: it escorted its readers through Venice’s complex history; encouraged them along fixed paths and provided them with rudiments of the language – all without pestering them for supplementary fees. A case could even be made to argue that ‘Handbook Venice’ was as much a product of historical and

pragmatic research as it was of Anglophone fiction, considering that guidebooks often banked on the voices and works of foreign authors whose well-established authority was closely linked with the city/country in question. Thus, there existed a symbiotic relationship between guidebooks and literature – whereby one validated and canonized the other.

It was with all these demands of the travelling public in mind that London publisher John Murray that, in addition to his vast series of *Handbooks for Travellers*, devoted an entire separate volume to ‘travel talk’, in aid of those who would find themselves depending on French, German or Italian-speaking crowds for the length of their stay abroad. German publisher Karl Baedeker, another authority in the field, followed suit and peppered his *Baedeker's Italy from the Alps to Naples* with Italian sentences and formulas, so that the hypothetical newcomer to Venice would not suffer a linguistic disadvantage in the negotiations with an astute gondolier: “*For a second rower double the ordinary fare is charged, but a bargain may be made. One, however, suffices for trips in the town ('basta uno')*” (70).

While Baedeker might have hoped to boost sales by promising its readers that “with ‘the aid of the Handbook, coupled with a slight acquaintance of the Italian language,’ they could ‘*entirely ... dispense with a guide*’” (Baedeker 1877, 207 in Davis and Marvin 138), the guidebook never truly stifled the will of native hosts to infuse the outsiders’ experience of Venice with their own personal touch. Howells’ accounts provide many emblematic examples in this sense, as he benefited from the linguistic initiative of Venetians on more than one occasion, a selection of which I have elected to feature in this section.

Two articles published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* give space to Howells’ reminiscences about his friendship with two Venetian men, whose identity is hidden behind a pseudonym. The first, Pastorelli, “began going about together at once” with Howells, who did not at all mind him “largely seeking my company because ... he wished to practice his English with me” (“An Old Venetian Friend” 634). On the contrary, he found himself experiencing gratitude and relief, for “Pastorelli wished always to speak English, and this suited my indolent humor, when the obligation to speak Italian with almost every one else was stressful” (640). Interestingly enough, Pastorelli’s knowledge of English, as well as his attitude towards the language, seems to have been spurred by an exoticising thrust that was not entirely dissimilar from that of those nineteenth-century authors discussed at the beginning of this chapter. As a matter of fact, Howells explained that “it was a peculiarity of my friend's study of English that the only English books which he seemed to have read besides Webster's Unabridged

Dictionary were some little tales and sketches which an Italian had written in our language” (637). Pastorelli’s eccentricity had won Howells over, thanks to the latter’s “own ... affection for all Latin peoples”, and although he knew that it was the Venetian’s “romantic interest in my language which first drew him to me” Howells admitted that he liked “being a bit of his poetry, a color of the enthusiasm which endeared Webster's Unabridged Dictionary to him” (640). Though Pastorelli’s formal linguistic education left something to be desired, his command of the English language was indeed robust enough to sustain meaningful conversations. Howells himself deemed it “very fair” (634), and cherished the memory of their friendship for years to come, describing Pastorelli as “a friend nearer my own age who was still more constantly my companion, and with whom I exchanged our language in a more equal use of English and Italian” (640).

Young Biondini, on the other hand, was eager to offer his expertise as an amateur guide to those foreigners who found themselves out of their linguistic depth, in which capacity Howells came to know him. He was described as being “very much in earnest about learning English”, and in Howells’ memories there is a lingering perception of Biondini “stooping toward me from his greater height to make sure of the meaning of my very tired Italian” (“A Young Venetian Friend” 829).

When Howells himself had been approached by an unnamed friend, proclaiming, in his unpolished English, that he had fallen “in love”, Howells had done little except to humorously enquire: “It is a blonde again?” (*VL* 2: 60); Biondini, on the other hand, proved to be much more versatile in his self-appointed career of translator. On a similar occasion, he not only put his knowledge of languages, but also his grasp on marital etiquette to the task of matchmaking, by guiding an English-speaking sculptor, who had fallen in love with a Venetian girl, through the appropriate steps of courtship. Howells later informs us that his talents were to take him much further, to the point where “eventually, in the succession of the consuls who were appointed after me, he was able to advise them in their duties, and became himself consul in everything but Presidential appointment” (830). Biondini also professed that his influence exceeded the confines of the lagoon, and that “everybody loved him in Verona, where he seemed to know ... all the strangers within their gates who spoke English”. There, too, “he used to lie in wait for the English and American travelers, and help them out of their difficulties with his language” (832).

When Howells ventured into touristic feats by himself, he was marginally less lucky, and did not encounter the same cosmopolite enthusiasm which marked his

previous experiences. The following is an early example of how a Venetian family suffered the pressure of having their house marked as a site of interest, as it purportedly occupied the original location of Titian's house. "These unreasonable people" lamented Howells, "think it an intolerable bore that the enlightened traveling public should break in upon their privacy". They satiated the visitors' curiosity about its interiors by repeatedly assuring them that "the house is as utterly restored within as they behold it without ... and that there is nothing whatever to see in it" (VL 1: 212). Two years after his first visit, Howells returned to the house, but the situation had not improved. On the contrary, "the inmates had been apparently goaded into madness" and had immediately seen through Howells' curiosity. It was at that moment that a

plasterer's boy, with a fine sense of humor, stood clapping his trowel on his board, inside the house, while we debated retreat, and derisively invited us to enter "*Suoni pure, O signore! Questa è la famosa casa del gran pittore, l'immortale Tiziano — suoni signore!*" ("Ring, by all means, sir. This is the famous house of the great painter, the immortal Titian! Ring!"). *Da capo*. (VL 1: 213-4)

Howells and his party were forced to retreat "amid the scorn of the populace", conceding that the "enlightened travelling public" had in fact caused the place to become "flushed and insolent with travel" (1: 212-4). This incident did not discourage Howells, who travelled the length and breadth of the Veneto with aid from the words of sour custodians (*Journeys* 204), helpful louts (202) and destitute Venetian counts (231), to name but a few. The latter in particular had assisted Howells in his journey to the town of Fozza, in the area of the Sette Comuni, where the Cimbrian population lived. Linguistic and ethnographic curiosity had motivated Howells' journey, who wanted to acquire first-hand experience of the Cimbrian dialect (a German patois with Italian influences) and make sense of their jumbled history, made up of deeply contrasting accounts. Count Giovanni Bonato, as Howells had come to know him at the end of their trip, had nonchalantly confessed to being the nephew of "a nobleman of a certain rich family in Venice" and a former soldier whom the Austrians had allowed back inland, at Oliero, where he was living his days as a guardian to its famous cave, an occasional guide, and a social anomaly (*Journeys* 231).

It was another count, though admittedly, a fictional one, who lacked the honesty, the good will, or indeed the aristocratic title which Count Bonato possessed, and whose sole focus in Edith Wharton's story "A Venetian Night's Entertainment" was to

circumvent a gullible American sailor, who had fallen for Count Rialto's seemingly genuine offer of guidance. When Tony Bracknell had first arrived in St. Mark's Square, he had been immediately surrounded by a "bawling, laughing, jostling, sweating mob, parti-coloured, parti-speeched, crackling and sputtering under the hot sun like a dish of fritters over a kitchen fire", and in a haze of excitement had mistakenly awarded a sherbet-seller the wrong coin, effectively giving him enough to "retire from his business and open a gaming-house over the arcade" (*The descent of man and other stories* 320). Count Rialto had witnessed the exchange and amiably put him wise to his error, so that Tony could not help but feel lucky "to have run across an English-speaking companion who was good-natured enough to give him a clue to the labyrinth" (320). The Count proceeded to give a full tour of the society that populated St. Mark's Square, pointing out to him "all the chief dignitaries of the state, the men of ton and ladies of fashion, as well as a number of other characters of a kind not openly mentioned in taking a census of Salem" (320); he then persuaded Tony to forswear his promise to return to his ship by the appointed time, and to follow him into the Basilica. Tony had foreshadowed the impending trap by remarking that the crowd around him moved with a "suavity which seemed to include everybody in the circumference of one huge joke" (319), and the scenes which ensue *do* appear to engage every English speaker, every road and every faceless member of a crowd in an attempt to strip the protagonist of his money. A mysterious Venetian lady with whom Tony will soon become acquainted stumbles upon him in the church and addresses him in her "broken English" (322); immediately after, a secret missive is placed into his hand by her disguised maid, spelling the words "I am in dreadful trouble and implore your help" (323). Tony has already fallen under the spell of the beautiful Polixena Cador, and the Count is quick to brush aside his bewilderment, explaining that the lady had learned English "at the Court of Saint James, where her father, the Senator, was formerly accredited as Ambassador," and where as a child she played with none other than "the royal princes of England" (322).

No sooner has Tony opened the letter in public – a scandalous action, as he will soon learn – than he is forcefully seized by a "stern-looking man", as the Count bids him avoid confrontation, "keep quiet and do as I tell you" (323). Tony manages to escape, but his dash through the labyrinth of streets is useless, until the same maid he had met in church rescues him from his pursuers by ushering him into Polixena's home. Upon seeing Tony, the lady explains the misunderstanding in her "pretty broken English" (327): the letter was of course meant for the English Ambassador, to elicit his help so as to escape her arranged marriage, and the maid had understandably been

misled by Polixena's own instructions, which were to hand the missive to the handsomest foreigner in the church" (329). When the pursuers burst into the room, together with Polixena's angry father, Count Rialto "luckily" appears alongside them, ready, once again, to be of service to Tony and guide him through this unfamiliar situation (330). He translates the conditions: seen as Polixena's husband-to-be has repudiated her on account of the letter, Tony must now marry her in his stead and mend her honour or, at Polixena's own suggestion, pay a high price for his freedom. When Tony agrees to marry her instead of giving up his money, the farce collapses and the truth is laid bare for him to see, and when his captain and the ship crew arrive at the scene to save him, Count Rialto offers his eloquence and his guidance one last time, as he explains the misunderstanding "in his best English," (344) alas, to no avail.

In this short story, Count Rialto represents the sort of huckster who was able to tune his knowledge of English and of the social maze of Venice to the plotting of fraudulent schemes. He adopted the name and the apparent good will of a gentleman guide, when in reality his greed resembled more closely that of the aforementioned *tolomazi*, who preyed on unsuspecting newcomers. His methods – and those of the entire ensemble – are especially damnable because they clash with the American innocence embodied by Tony, who is virtuously ignorant of the corrupt costumes of Venice and is at no point reprimanded for his naïveté. Tony's is the same blessed ignorance which gives the title to Twain's humorous work *The Innocents Abroad, Or the New Pilgrim's Progress*, which mocks his own "Pleasure Excursion" (19) through Europe in 1867.

Twain's experience in Venice soon ticks everything off the thorough traveller's to-do list: gondola-riding, church-hopping and landmark-hunting, as well as rigorous picture-admiring, which is why Twain is so soon prompted to remark: "yes, I think we have seen all of Venice" (236). A confessed incompetence in matters of high art, however, forced him to rely on the expertise of a rather unusual guide: a "cultivated negro, the offspring of a South Carolina slave" (240) who had come to Venice as a child and had grown up in the city, where, Twain asserted "negroes are deemed as good as white people ... so this man feels no desire to go back to his native land. His judgement is correct" (241-2). He was the "only guide who knew anything" and could boast an impressive resume:

He is well-educated. He reads, writes and speaks English, Italian, Spanish and French with perfect facility; is a worshipper of art and thoroughly conversant with it; knows the



history of Venice by heart and never tires of talking of her illustrious career. He dresses better than any of us, I think, and is daintily polite. (240-1)

This unnamed man seems to embody all the flair and the competence of a professional guide, much like the kind we would expect to find in a modern-day museum or art gallery, playing an official, regulated role within the well-oiled tourism mechanism, with linguistic skills designed to cater to target demographics. Yet, as I have already observed, in contemporary literature significant emphasis is placed on the matter of ‘authenticity’, so that the expertise of professional cicerones is hardly sought after, whereas a much higher value is given to civilian insight on Venetian life, which possesses the added quality of being free of charge.

Many of the key aspects which characterise the dialogue between the Venetian people and the English-speaking authors whose writings I have analysed, have already been touched on in different sections of this chapter, and, in truth, I found there to be little evidence of a modern-day counterpart to the kind of self-appointed guide we have seen flourish over the centuries. Disproportionate tourism has undoubtedly soured the approach to foreigners, and “while it is true that many Venetians speak English, many others cannot go much beyond the terms needed for dealing commercially with tourists...” (Martin 247), while the most uncooperative among them resolve to seethe and mutter behind their back “for having the gall to be there at all” (Coles 62). After all, contemporary social militancy on the part of Venetians often verges on the xenophobic, so it is not surprising that a foreigner might yearn for the approval of a native and treasure their cultural, gastronomic and linguistic advice, but it is important to note that such advice often appears to be given *in lieu* of the historical and the artistic knowledge which professional guides are specifically tasked with transmitting. Ultimately, it appears that, while Venetians’ function as cultural interpreters of their city used to be mainly fuelled by popular thrust, in modern-day society the role has bifurcated. With the Venetian populace often intent on keeping their surroundings from foreign presence, their knowledge of the city is shared parsimoniously, while the task of catering to the artistic and historical queries of curious outsiders is outsourced to professional hosts, trained to cater to tourists on a much larger scale.

## 2. The musical expression of Venice: Songs, concerts and opera

### 2.1. The aural myth of the gondolier

There is no other symbol that the mention of Venice can conjure up more swiftly than that of the rowing gondolier, gliding across the silent waters and filling the still air with his cries and his songs. As Davis and Marvin correctly point out, the gondolier is the “master icon” of a city which “has the distinction of being the archetype of itself,” and his visual representation on varying scraps of tourist paraphernalia, even when “reduced to a few sketchy lines, floating on a neutral background”, is still able to evoke “such touristic ideals as graceful servility, relaxed luxury, arcane skills, and unobtrusive knowledge” (135-6).

As a visual and aural ambassador to Venice, the gondolier often left a deep mark on the experience of American and British visitors, and took root in their literature on the city. In these works, he fulfils a wide variety of functions: he is a liveried servant to prominent families, a hired coachman paid by the hour or day, an inventive guide for curious tourists, or a willing accomplice to covert romantic endeavours. An early example of the intensity with which his voice sustained and nourished the outsider’s imagination is provided by Samuel Rogers’ “The Gondola”, a fragment of which is here reported. In the poem, two lovers, embarked on an otherwise quiet and uneventful boat-ride through Venice, are stirred by the sudden sound of a lute – a signal, they discover, uttered by a girl sitting longingly at her window – followed by the voice of a lone gondolier. He is singing,

As in the time when VENICE was herself,  
Of Tancred and Erminia. On our oars  
We rested; and the verse was verse divine!  
We could not err – Perhaps he was the last –  
For none took up the strain, none answered him;  
And when he ceased, he left upon my ear  
A something like the dying voice of VENICE!  
The moon went down; and nothing now was seen  
Save here and there the lamp of a Madonna,

Glimmering – or heard, but when he spoke, who stood,  
Over the lantern at the prow and cried,  
Turning the corner of some reverend pile,  
Some school or hospital of old renown,  
Tho' haply none were coming, none were near  
'Hasten or slacken.' (*Italy: A Poem* 89-91)

The protagonist of the poem is quick to attach a fatalistic meaning to the voice of the gondolier, as he hears it standing alone against the gloomy, sterile silence that surrounds him. Roger's gondolier is indeed a tragic figure, left behind by his fellows to live as the last breathing relic in a city deserted by sounds, which is why his voice unknowingly takes on yet another role, that of an aural barometer of Venice's conditions. In the poem, the gondolier's is the swansong of Venice, its dying wail, and both his declamation of Tasso and his cries ("Hasten or slacken") remain unanswered, signifying a perceived demographic, cultural and aural void. As well as offering us a glimpse into the prophetic and intellectual relevance attributed to the gondolier, this short passage has the added merit of encompassing two of the key vocal manifestations associated with this figure: his peculiar cries, which aided his navigation in the narrow Venetian canals, and his singing, both of which will be discussed in further detail.

Rogers' poems about Venice, and Italy in general, were widely known, and were often quoted in guidebooks (Murray 301, 454), as well as other literature on the city (Twain 241). His contribution on the subject on Venice is doubly useful if we remember that a first edition of his book *Italy: A Poem* was gifted to a young John Ruskin by a family friend, and, in Ruskin's own words, would determine "the entire direction of my life's energies" (*Praeterita* 26). Admittedly, such rapture was caused by the presence of Turner's illustrations – a key influence on his artistic growth, – rather than by Rogers' poetic merits, but the gondolier's utterances which the latter mentioned, *do* make an appearance in Ruskin's landmark work *The Stones of Venice*, a series of volumes by an author who "beyond any one helps us to enjoy [Venice]" (James, *IT* 4) and was "undoubtedly the best guide you can have in your study of the Venetian painters" (Howells, *VL* 1: 141).

In the book, despite the evident lack of focus on the aural dimension of the city, Ruskin nevertheless devotes a section of the appendix to a detailed analysis of the unduly dismissed gondolier's cries. While "most persons are now well acquainted with the general aspect of the Venetian gondola," he writes, "few have taken the pains to understand the cries of warning uttered by its boatmen, although those cries are

peculiarly characteristic, and very impressive to a stranger” (*The Stones of Venice 2*: 375). He proceeds to detail, to an almost exaggerate degree, the meaning of *Premi* and *Stali* within the practical context in which they are employed, that is, when two rowing gondoliers approaching a turn in a canal try to determine the side on which they should pass each other, to avoid collision. In this scenario:

It is of course presumed that the boat which gives the warning will be nearer the turn than the one which receives and answers it; and therefore will not have so much time to check itself or alter its course. Hence the advantage of the turn ... is always yielded to the boat which gives warning. (*The Stones of Venice 2*: 376)

If said boat wishes to keep the right while turning,

the cry of warning is therefore ‘Premi,’ twice given; first as soon as it can be heard round the angle, prolonged and loud, with the accent on the e, and another strongly accented e added, a kind of question, ‘Premi-é,’ followed at the instant of turning, with ‘Ah Premi,’ with the accent sharp on the final i. If, on the other hand, the warning boat is going to turn to the left, it will pass with its left-hand side to the one it meets; and the warning cry is, ‘Stali-é, Ah Stali’. (*The Stones of Venice 2*: 376-7)

The description continues, with Ruskin vainly trying to put many future authors to rights regarding the simplistic equation of *Stali* and *Premi* with ‘to the left’ and ‘to the right’ respectively, as well as acknowledging that there are “several other cries necessary in the management of a gondola”, the most notable being “sciar”, which signals an order to the other gondolier to stop the boat in its tracks with the oars, with an effect “being much like that of stopping a horse at speed by pulling him on his haunches” (*The Stones of Venice 2*: 377). The vocal element appears once more in the opening chapter of *The Stones*, this time poignantly framed within a haunting description of the Grand Canal’s “green pavement” and of the Rialto’s “strange curve ... graceful as a bow just bent”, under which the rowing gondolier’s cry “Ah! Stali” reverberates dramatically, contributing to the illusion and the “visionary charm” of the scene (*The Stones of Venice 2*: 3).

It is safe to say that not everyone drew pleasure or inspiration from the cries of their gondoliers and the following examples have little in common with Ruskin’s poetic descriptions or his sober analysis; on the contrary, Howells’ very first nocturnal gondola ride, which he experienced upon his arrival, was far more reminiscent of the ominous

premonitions which haunted the journey of Rogers' protagonists in the aforementioned poem. Howells' initiation into the emblematic sounds of the city was in fact less than auspicious. He remembered how other "dark, funereal barges like my own had flitted by" and how "the gondoliers had warned each other at every turning with hoarse, lugubrious cries" (VL 1: 21). Ill at ease in an unfamiliar setting, unnerved by the infamous Venetian "association with bravoos and unexpected dagger-thrusts", Howells "could not resist a vague feeling of anxiety, in these strait and solitary passages, which was ... referable to the novelty, the hush, the darkness, and the piratical appearance and unaccountable pauses of the gondoliers. (VL 1: 21).

If their cries were heard from a safe distance and in the reassuring light of day, they could still be cause for annoyance, instead of the blood-curdling fear they inspired at night. When Vernon Lee's protagonist Jervaise Marion – a not-so-veiled imitation of Henry James in her short story "Lady Tal" – was forced to reckon with the variety and the volume of Venetian sounds coming through his windows on the Riva to "distract his brain, weaken his will, and generally render him incapable of coping with his own detestable weakness", the gondoliers were the first in a long list of aural distractions, and their cry was "only the more worrying for its comparative rareness", foreboding imminent – and noisy – collisions (79).

Gondoliers shouted to warn approaching boatmen, but also to attract the attention, and the business, of potential clients. Though there are conflicting reports regarding the exact number of gondoliers which operated as modern taxi drivers in centuries past, their presence was always accounted for by the thousands (Davis and Marvin 314-5), which made it significantly easier on the visitor to seek out their service at the *stazi* where they gathered. Davis and Marvin relate the experience of foreign newcomers to Venice informing that, in order to secure a ride, "you need but cry out *Gondola*, and you have them lanch [sic] out presently to you" (Gailhard 1669, in Davis and Marvin 137), just as you would shout "*Coach* at London or Paris" (De Blainville, 1707, in Davis and Marvin 137). The contemporary imbalance between the tourist and the gondolier population, however, has in more than one instance occasioned a reversal of roles, whereby the shouting of "Gondola! Gondola!" comes from the gondoliers themselves, and follows you "like an improper suggestion down the quays" (Morris 191), in the same manner of an unrelenting sacristan who "plucks at your sleeve" and urges you back into the church to examine Tintoretto's canvases with the attention he believes they deserve, as McCarthy points out in a pictorial comparison (270).

All in all, modern communication between gondoliers appears to have been largely simplified, and little variation is detected in their address. The cumbersome interpretation of *Premi* and *Stali*, which Ruskin had painstakingly tried to unravel, is now redundant, and has left the stage to concise, entirely vocalic warnings, where the only change seems to be determined by one's preferred choice of vowels. Morris was still able to witness what he referred to as the "old calls", but he noted a linguistic shift whereby "generally ... the modern gondolier merely shouts 'Oi!'", and a particularly "modernist" one goes as far as simply raising "his fingers to his teeth for a raucous but effective whistle" (Morris 121). In a brief summary of 19<sup>th</sup> century descriptions of gondoliers' cries, Morris singles out Baedeker's "unpronounceable exclamation 'A-Oel!'" as the closest correspondent to their contemporary "throaty and distraught" shouts, resembling the "call of an elderly and world-weary sea-bird" (Morris 121). Judith Martin's transliteration of the cry is marginally more adventurous, as she bestows upon it a somewhat military flair, so that it rings closer to a battle cry than an exclamation conducive to traffic safety. Whenever her gossiping gondolier is dangerously close to sounding "like a mere aquatic tattler", he is able to redeem himself at the intersection, where he "issues the primal cry 'Oy-aa!' as a warning to other boatmen" (62-63). These words were so deeply embedded in the gondoliers' vernacular (and the gondoliers themselves so vital a part of Venetian life), that during "the black-outs of the two world wars", they transcended their sea-bound function for a more 'amphibian' use, in that even "pedestrians adopted them ... and sang them out as warnings at awkward street corners" (Morris 121).

The "vocal race" (James, *IT* 21) of the gondoliers certainly commanded the attention of foreign ears, but their famous cries were far from being the only feature in the creation of their aural myth. Music and song were closely intertwined with the perceived role of the gondolier, and one poignant example of this correlation is offered by British author Monckton Milnes in his short poem "The Venetian Serenade", where the figure of the gondolier serves as an intermediary between love-struck youths. His dialogue with a "passionate maid", stirred in the middle of the night by the sound of the serenade, is cleverly articulated through the three exemplary calls mentioned above. At first, the girl is roused to hope when the approaching gondolier says "I am coming – Stali – but you know not for whom!"; she later becomes distraught as the cry changes to "I am passing – Premì – but I pass not for you"; and she is finally told to look forward to the day in which she shall hear "I am coming – Sciàr – and for you and to you!" (*The Poems of Richard Monckton Milnes* 39-40). Milnes' poem thus succeeds in

accentuating the seamless intermingling of voice and song, suggesting that the overall impact of the gondolier's expression was due to words and music in equal measure (39).

Since Milnes' time, many significant changes have affected gondoliers: their numbers have decreased, their function has been altered, but their singing still remains a key component of their near-legendary status, and a uniquely appealing asset of their trade. While many modern commentators take issue with the gondoliers' less than authentically Venetian repertoire, few preoccupy themselves with determining where this seemingly immemorial practice came from. All in all, it would seem that the bulk of historical evidence in support of this tradition hardly predates nineteenth century accounts. "Indeed, it should be kept in mind" Davis and Marvin note, "that the whole notion of the singing gondolier crooning to a loving pair of passengers by moonlight is at best a fictive tradition", and that "already over a century ago singing had been put on a staged, commercial footing, with the gondoliers rowing semiprofessionals under the balconies of the major hotels after dark to serenade the tourists above", and even then brazenly steering clear of the Venetian songbook (157-8). "The singer, the accordionist, and indeed ... the *carovana* itself" are to be considered "genuine creations of postwar Venetian mass tourism, with only the most tenuous structural links to the gondola and gondolier of past centuries" (Davis and Marvin 158). Thus the modern craving for the paramount romantic experience of riding in a gondola is heir to literary scenes such as the one described in Lee's "Lady Tal", where the formal distance between the inner and the outer life of Venice is bridged by the gondolier's song, his serenade adding to the already romantic setting:

The smoke of the cigarettes mingled with the heavy scent of the flowers; the splash of oar and snatch of song rose from the canal; the murmur and laughter entered from the balcony. ... A singing boat came under the windows of Palazzo Bragadin, and as much of the company as could, squeezed on to the cushioned gothic balconies, much to the annoyance of such as were flirting outside, and to the satisfaction of such as were flirting within. (63)

The same wonder at the spectacle of lights and sounds unravelling before a Venetian balcony could rapidly escalate into aggravation, as Henry James learned in those summer evenings where the atmosphere of the Grand Canal was saturated with "too many gondolas, too many lanterns, too many serenades in front of the hotels" leaving the apartment behind him as the only viable refuge, where "more good company" and "more cigarettes" awaited him (*IT* 39-40). For his part, Howells was

“quite satisfied” with the gondoliers’ cries of warning, but underwhelmed by their musical talent, and went so far as suggesting that they were “not the only class of Venetians who have not good voices” (VL 2: 79). His experience is decidedly lacking in romantic flair, and he appears immune to these “idle illusions” as well as to Byron’s *Don Juan* verses in praise of the song “of Adria’s gondolier”, having often witnessed their stunningly uninspired conversations about “polenta or soldi” (VL 2: 80).

Contrarily, Byron himself had described their singing within a far more flattering context, perhaps due to his acquaintance with Toni Toscan, his “erstwhile gondolier” (Laven 25), who was not only “one of the few who can still sing a stanza from Tasso”, and often did so at Byron’s request, but also confessed to being “a little given to rhyme” himself, having dedicated to his employer a “*Soneto a la Veneziana*” which he had composed in his honour (Longfellow, *History of the Italian Dialects* 323-5). It might have been Toscan’s very absence which was hinted at in the fourth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, when a rather gloomy portrait of the present state of Venice is contrasted with her dazzling, glorious past. In the poem, the physical decay of Venice matches the aural decadence so that “Tasso’s echoes are no more/And silent rows the songless gondolier” (197). Toscan’s association with Byron had prompted many admirers to seek him out in the hope of garnering information (and possibly, gossip) about the poet’s life in Venice, so much so that his reputation as a learned singer had reached an even wider audience and it was recommended that future visitors secure his services. When Longfellow visited Venice he was able to witness his talents in person, and his sketch of Toscan’s figure was accompanied by the latter’s own epigraphic inscription: “Poeta Natural che Venizian, /Ch’ el so nome xe un tal Toni Toscan.” (*Outre-mer: pilgrimage beyond the sea* 365). Longfellow praised him, and went on to address his readers, writing: “should you ever want a gondolier at Venice to sing to you a passage from Tasso by moonlight, inquire for Toni Toscan. He has a voice like a raven” (365).

Mark Twain’s was perhaps the most caustic commentary, poking fun at every conceivable aspect of the “storied gondola of Venice” and its equally celebrated gondolier. His riotous account dryly opens with him and his party reaching Venice in the evening and entering “a hearse belonging to the Grand Hotel d’Europe” (218). He then proceeds to counterpoint the overstated romance of the gondola against his own observations. Thus the “fairy boat in which the princely cavaliers of the olden time were wont to cleave the waters of the moonlit canals” with their lovers, and the “gay gondolier in silken doublet” who “touched his guitar and sang as only gondoliers can



sing!”, are unmasked: one is “an inky, rusty old canoe with a sable hearse-body clapped on to the middle of it, and the other a mangy, barefooted guttersnipe” (218). But the ultimate – and unparalleled – rejection is triggered when the gondolier turns the craft into a side canal and begins to sing, at which point Twain is no longer able to contain himself, and bursts:

Now, here, Roderigo Gonzales Michael Angelo, I’m a pilgrim, and I’m a stranger, but I am not going to have my feelings lacerated by any such caterwauling as that. If that goes on, one of use has got to take the water. It is enough that my cherished dreams of Venice have been blighted forever as to the romantic gondola and the gorgeous gondolier; this system of destruction shall go no farther; I will accept the hearse, under protest, and you may fly your flag of truth in peace, but here I register a dark and bloody oath that you shan’t sing. Another yelp, and overboard you go. (218)

Twain’s outburst is decidedly comical, but what is also comical is the discrepancy between his outrage at having his romantic fantasy disrupted by reality, and the eagerness of modern tourists (even ‘newer’ pilgrims than Twain) to play along with those very same fantasies, while remaining steadfastly undeterred by the reality around them. In their work, Davis and Marvin go to some length to explain the workings of the current gondola business, and simultaneously help illuminate the logic and the desires that motivate newcomers to participate in this anachronistic practice in the first place. They claim it is indeed a “safe bet ... that anyone seen in a gondola, alone or in a group, is a tourist, part of a by-now fictive Venetian waterscape that is no longer of interest to anyone except other tourists” (155), and that the Venetians’ once symbiotic relationship with the craft and its rower has long been replaced with obdurate indifference, if not the “mock horror” with which an aunt of their friend’s welcomed her nephew’s arrival in a bedecked gondola under her San Polo apartment, and cried “Sandrino! ... What in heaven’s name are you doing in *that thing?*” (159).

This radical change in the perception of the gondolier’s role within the Venetian social fabric is largely owed to the fact that his primary occupation – that of ferrying around noble employers and the general paying public around the lagoon – has been taken over by motorized taxis, while he overwhelmingly relies on the tourist trade as a source of livelihood, having learned to meet the rapid turnover of visitors with “industrial efficiency” (Davis and Marvin 173). The price enamoured tourists are currently willing to pay for a single outing is not only likely to make a dent in their finances, but the experience itself will be liable to deviate from their treasured fantasies

in more than one key aspect. To begin with, the uninformed may think the crafts free to roam the city at whim, thus allowing for *some* degree of landscape variety in the many fifty-minute rides that gondoliers perform in a single day, but in reality, the solitary “Jamesian wander” they envisioned, frequently consists in a cluster of six crafts, the aptly named *carovana*, “moving on as fixed and preset a course as if the boats were running on rails” offering a balanced combination of Grand Canal views, secluded waterways and a handful of architectural or religious landmarks (Davis and Marvin 151-2). Furthermore, the weather and the traffic conditions in which these journeys are often undertaken would have sent Twain in an even more justifiable fit of rage, but summertime jaunts under the scorching Grand Canal sun with gondolas “pitching about erratically from the continual waves of scores of passing taxis, supply boats, and *vaporetti*, and the salt air filled with diesel fumes and the roar of engines” (Davis and Marvin 153) are still sought-after by staggering numbers of tourists.

Some complain, some take the side of Venetians and avoid this “ritual obligation” (Davis and Marvin 154) altogether, but the majority turn a blind eye to the incongruity of it all, choosing instead to anchor the validation of their fantasy to one of the elements which still sustain it: the gondolier’s singing. These days, Davis and Marvin inform us, “the singer and his accompanist try to provide what their clients know and expect: a pleasurable, unifying, and (one might say) nonthreatening group experience”; tourists are accommodated in their musical whims and may even join in with the singing “with the accordionist backing them in everything from (we were told) pop songs to the Japanese national anthem” (158). In fact, if one lived in proximity to these tourist water-routes, or to the Grand Canal itself, they would likely be subjected to iterations of “‘O sole mio,’ ‘Torno a Sorrento,’ or sundry Las Vegas lounge hits” (157) multiple times a day. The most discerning tourist might quibble over this geographic absurdity, but in doing so they would ignore the fact that, as some natives pointed out to Martin, there are really “no love songs in the Venetian repertory – only witty exchanges between man and maiden” (271). Furthermore, they would be naively misinterpreting the ultimate aim and function of modern gondoliers, who are “certainly not there to create anything like an “authentic Venetian experience” (Davis and Marvin 157), and whose singing does not seek to encapsulate Venetian traditions, but rather offers a manufactured musical synopsis of Italy as a whole.

It is only natural that the matter of authenticity routinely come into play in the discourse on Venetian modernity, but it is fairly disorienting to engage in the same debate when the object in question are the many replicas of the city scattered around the

world. The example of Las Vegas, whose “lounge hits” Davis and Marvin had heard sung in Venetian canals, is perhaps the most poignant, and allows us to approach the subject of the singing gondolier from yet another angle. As imported cultural symbols operating within the hotel and casino complex which billionaire Sheldon Adelson started building in the late 1990s, Las Vegas gondoliers face the added challenge of having to inspire authenticity while surrounded by the opposite of a tranquil lagoon, and attempt to do so by strictly adhering to The Venetian’s “own terms of originality” portrayed below:

No trip to Venice—or to The Venetian—would be complete without a graceful and romantic glide down the Grand Canal in an authentic Venetian gondola. Float beneath bridges, beside cafes, under balconies and through the vibrant Venetian streetscape as your singing gondolier sweeps you down the Grand Canal for a “thrill ride” like no other. (Davis and Marvin 289-90)

These acting gondoliers must provide their audience with an aurally accurate impersonation of their Venetian counterparts, or at least, play into their preconceived ideas of what an authentic gondolier should sound like. For this purpose, the rowing employees of The Venetian are given “Italian stage names, and told always to speak to their passengers with something like an Italian (though not a Venetian) accent” (Davis and Marvin 287-8). They are forbidden from emulating the Venetian gondoliers’ worst habits, such as overcharging customers, “smoking, talking loudly on their cell phones, or cheerfully swapping insulting comments in dialect about the appearance and behavior of their passengers” (Davis and Marvin 153-4), and are endowed with the responsibility of “always singing” (278).

Even in other U.S. cities where the trade and the crafts of the gondoliers are replicated for tourist consumption, entertainment is always accounted for in the “embarrassingly named ‘packages’ (‘Il Bacio,’ ‘Romanza,’ ‘Gondamore’)” and mock-gondoliers avail themselves of the accompaniment of “accordion music” whether it be live or taped (Martin 300-1). Of course, the idea of a recreational facsimile of Venice had already been implemented with huge success over a hundred years before Adelson’s Las Vegas project had even begun, when in 1892 “the impresario Imré Kiralfy, who specialized in epic events that combined entertainment with education, had brought his own version of Venice to the people of London”, where a partial “replica ... in fibrous plaster, complete with palaces, cafés, canals, gondolas, gondoliers” was built at the

Olympia exhibition hall and served as “the setting for a spectacular show called ‘Venice the Bride of the Sea’”, running twice a day for the better part of the year (Pemble 177). The introduction in Kiralfy’s libretto accounts for the origins of his vision for the installation, in which gondoliers are once again charged with perpetuating the illusion. The high level of accuracy in the assemblage of Venetian surroundings is extended to the reconstruction of the canals, which have “Venetian gondolas floating on them, steered and propelled by expert native gondoliers, who here ply their vocation in the same manner as they have been accustomed to do on the palace-lined canals of their home” (Kiralfy 18) and who would gladly “for the small charge of Sixpence per person” offer the visitor “a trip through all the ways of Venice” (Kiralfy 70). The chief difference in this practice, whether it concerned the imitated or the imitating, seemed to be that “gondolas in Venice go around Venice” (Martin 300), but the ways in which foreign gondoliers are made to embrace and perpetuate a fabricated aural canon speaks volumes about the symbolic, self-referential existence of this modern-day icon and the use that is made of it, not only around the world, but in Venice itself.

From the 1930s onwards, vestigial variations in the appearance of the crafts and their rowers were gradually evened out (Davis and Marvin 145), in favour of an aesthetic uniformity that would facilitate the recognition of gondoliers as the symbols they already were, so that a New York Times reporter could “positively sigh with satisfaction and relief” in 1966 Venice, having had his doubts silenced and his suspicions confirmed at the discovery that ““yes, the gondoliers do wear striped jerseys and straw hats”” (Barnes, in David and Marvin 145).

The musical and the aesthetic consistency that we have come to expect from the gondolier has endured for nearly a hundred years, but there are more vocal elements to his lore which have enjoyed equal longevity and higher resistance to standardizing bids. Gondoliers provided their clients with transportation, but they were also famously generous with their knowledge of the city with regard to its history, its legends and its gossip. Conceding that something other than his travel book could be a source of reliable information after all, Baedeker notified his readers that gondoliers would “name the palaces and churches” (*Baedeker's Italy from the Alps to Naples* 73), and the “chief edifices” (83) of the Grand Canal as they passed them, though he made no mention of the folkloric touches with which they might flourish said data. Howells, too, deemed them “sufficiently versed to find the noted places for strangers” and even suggested that they preferred “to have a quiet chat at the tops of their voices ... than to tell stories”, but nevertheless sceptically relished the gondoliers’ tales.

In his journeys, he noted a partiality for three “tragic legends ... namely: Biasio, *luganegher*; the Innocent Baker-Boy, and Veneranda Porta” (VL 2: 146-7) and once bore witness to the passionate recounting of the plot of *Othello* by a gondolier who had rowed him to Casa Moro, the general’s supposed home and “edifice best calculated to give satisfaction to strangers in search of literary origins” (VL 2: 70). Howells’ party had proceeded to feign absolute ignorance about the tragedy that the general’s life inspired, and engaged the unsuspecting gondolier in a mock examination of his knowledge. When the latter was unable to recall the name of the author, he cleverly stifled their doubts by outsourcing authority to “any bookseller” they might care to address, and further assured them of “the authenticity of his story by showing ... the house of Cassio near the Rialto Bridge”, although Howells was confident in the knowledge that he would also have “pointed out [the house] of Iago if we had wished it” (VL 2: 144-5).

Gondoliers were doubtlessly willing to go to any lengths to impress the credulous visitors, which is why they often animated their tours of palaces by resorting to name-dropping and gossiping about their current and former occupants. In his *Italian Hours*, James envisioned a sceptic newcomer to Venice, impervious to its charm and its idiosyncrasies, and listed among the various (and obviously temporary) annoyances “the names of the palaces announced a dozen times by your gondolier, who brings them out almost as impressively as if he were an English butler bawling titles into a drawing-room” (8). By following this theatrical logic, the name of Lord Byron, a living legend in Venice, was liable to figure in many a gondolier’s tale. In the best case scenario, tales of his generosity and kindness were being perpetrated by Byron’s own gondolier, the aforementioned Toni Toscan, whose description matched the nameless rower Tuckerman met in his journey to Venice. In their conversation, Toscan had talked at length about his daily routine while in Byron’s service, and upon rowing Tuckerman to the Lido he had even pointed out the “little white house to which the curious repaired to see [Byron] mount his horse” (*Italian Sketchbook* 103). They eventually made their way back to the city, but not before Tuckerman had “induced the old man to sing a stanza of Tasso” (103), by then a trademark of Toscan’s.

However, as Byron’s own friend Percy Bysshe Shelley discovered to his great embarrassment, there were other gondoliers who had no affiliation with the poet, but were nonetheless more than willing to perpetuate the rumours they had heard. In a letter to a friend, Shelley recounts the awkward occasion in which a chatty gondolier started gossiping, “without any hint on our part”, about Lord Byron, describing him as “a

Giovanotto Inglese,' with a 'nome stravagante,' who lived very luxuriously, and spent great sums of money" (Moore 1: 382).

If, instead of simply having been hired to row Shelley's party back to Venice, the gondolier had been attached to them in a more permanent fashion, he might have garnered enough information about their life to know better than to gossip about their own acquaintances. After all, mutual camaraderie between gondoliers and their clients, Henry James thought, could blossom easily enough. "The gondolier at Venice is your very good friend if you choose him happily", he wrote, "and on the quality of the personage depends a good deal that of your impressions" (*IT* 20). The gondolier was prized with possessing the ability and the willingness to become "part of your daily life, your double, your shadow, your complement", and the love his employers came to bear for him often brought him long-term benefits after their departure, for they made a point of speaking of him as "the gem of gondoliers and tell their friends to be certain to 'secure' him" (21) upon their arrival in Venice.

This kinship was cherished by foreign visitors, and even more so by the British and American expatriates who had "found themselves a role in the world of the Venetians ... sustained traditions of hospitality, ceremony, and philanthropy" and, crucially, "patronized the gondolier" (Pemble 47). When the latter faced the competition of the steamers and the building of two more bridges across the Grand Canal, the help he received from "foreigners anxious to preserve a traditional and picturesque feature of the Venetian scene" (47) was often portentous enough to last him a lifetime, and there were even some rare instances in which gondoliers followed their foreign patrons abroad, to serve them in other capacities. This was the case of "Byron's one-time gondolier, Battista Falcieri, who was brought to England by Disraeli, employed as a valet in the family home, and provided with a government sinecure to ease his old age", and despite the fact that only a small percentage of gondoliers was able to secure this kind of patronage, there were "plenty of perks and favours to be had if, as was often the case, the employer became emotionally attached or sexually enthralled" (Pemble 47-8). As a matter of face, sexually ambiguous relationships entertained by other expatriates were quite poorly hidden, and came to be regarded as a "well-recognized characteristic of the Anglo-Venetians", earning them "more than a few sneers and gibes" (Pemble 48).

Naturally, there were instances of chaste, emotional attachment passing between the two figures. A rather touching letter of Ruskin's to his gondolier Pietro Mazzini (here reported in the Italian translation of Ugo Ojetti), offers an example of the philanthropic kind of help that a gondolier might expect to receive from a devoted

employer. In the letter, Ruskin expresses sincere regret for having failed to keep in touch with him and offer him financial support, and makes a special effort to right his wrongs in time for the Christmas festivities. He writes:

Caro Pietro, Mi dolgo e mi vergogno della mia crudeltà non avendoti più scritto e non avendoti più mandato alcun ajuto. Non trovo una scusa; eppure, credimi, ciò non vuol dire che io ti dimentichi. Pardonami, in cortesia; e se ci si insegna che a Natale dobbiamo perdonare i nostri nemici, tu almeno perdona un amico crudele. Ti mando qualche soldo perche a Natale non bisogna soffrire il bisogno, e spero veramente di non trascurarti mai più per tanto tempo. (*Works of John Ruskin* 332)

Widespread poverty amongst gondoliers was no mystery to 19<sup>th</sup> century observers. Before Venice was connected to the mainland via rail and the Austrians dominion had ended, there was a well-founded belief that “gondoliers were a fairly wretched lot—often really no more than beggars offering rides, like rickshaw drivers in the traditional East”, a fact which had continued to ring true “well past the fall of the Republic” (Davis and Marvin 138) and was still surviving, to some extent, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Morris’s pique at the “sometimes overbearing” manners of the gondoliers was placated by the knowledge that these men lived on a mere “four-months’ tourist season” and would “scrape the winter through as part-time fishermen and odd job workers” (Morris 27). The gondoliers’ relative destitution elicited Morris’ sympathy, and, overall, did very little to tarnish his admiration for their wit and their fraudulent charm. He described them as “highly intelligent ... tolerant, sardonic, and ... humorous” (Morris 27) and had he had the chance to share his opinions with Howells, he would have found the American in complete agreement. The latter had often engaged in Venetian repartees, one of them with a gondolier who, tired of their bargaining over a ride to the Lido, finally yelled “Somebody fetch the Bucintoro, and take this gentleman to the Lido for seventy-five soldi!” (VL 2: 77-8).

This combative spirit permeated their interactions with foreigners, but was never too far from flaring up in the conversations gondoliers entertained amongst themselves. In fact, thundering quarrels constituted a vital part of their aural reputation, and were naturally liable to attract the curiosity of foreign onlookers. Howells was a particularly enthusiastic observer of the gondoliers’ animated rows. In truth, he bore witness to so many of them as to be inspired to claim, rather daringly, that: “[Venice’s steamers] were not so noisy as the gondoliers, and with all their effect of exasperation not so

quarrelsome”, in fact “*nothing* could be so quarrelsome as the gondoliers” (emphasis added) (VL 2: 169).

Unlike their singing, which strove to put on a studiedly dramatic air, gondoliers’ squabbles effortlessly conveyed to the casual onlooker the sensation of having stumbled upon two opera singers in an open-air theatre, catching them in the middle of their passionate rehearsal. This was the case of a day-long row between two gondoliers, who happened to be arguing under Howells’ hotel window, in a rather poetic upheaval of their traditional serenading functions. To his immense regret, Howells was “not awake early enough to learn the cause of the quarrel, or late enough to learn the sequence”, but was a first-hand witness of its development, and was swayed to sympathy and to antagonism by their voices alone, one belonging to “a primo tenore, whose voice gave such proof of his insincerity that I would not have trusted him under oath” and the other to “a basso-profondo, whose word was evidently as good as his bond” (VL 2: 169). Even the policemen who repeatedly intervened could only subdue the brawlers for brief intervals before they inevitably went head-to-head again. At midnight “they were still quarrelling” and their shouts sparked the rather unintended consequence of lulling Howells “to a slumber of rich content in the certainty that Venice could never essentially change so long as there was a gondola or a gondolier in it” (VL 2: 170). Operatic inspiration was *actually* provided by the gondoliers’ voices in at least one recorded occasion. In fact, Morris, Martin and Vidal all relate the story of how the German composer Richard Wagner, who had resided in Ca’ Giustiniani on the Grand Canal, had been able to witness the “long drawn-out mournful call” (Vidal 137) and “the ritual warning shout of the gondoliers” (Martin 152), and all three authors are in agreement that such cries “may have suggested to him (so he himself thought) the wail of the shepherd’s horn at the opening of the third act of *Tristan*” (Morris 121).

Even in the eating houses where, on occasion, Howells brought his gondolier, the writer continued to be “spellbound by the drama” of the latter’s theatrical bargaining with the cook, in which, he wrote, “all the chords of the human heart are touched, from those that tremble at high tragedy, to those that are shaken by broad farce” (VL 1: 80-1). In his imagination, Howells could not help but picture the gondolier heading back to his station with his meal, and resume arguing with his fellows “across the Grand Canal” (VL 1: 81). Close and frequent observation taught him that quarrelling was so rooted a habit that even the spiritual silence of the San Michele cemetery could not put a damper on verbal fights. On that occasion it was two pall-bearers who first entered in a “lively dispute” with Howells’ gondolier “in the usual terms of Venetian chaff”, and when the



priest reached the bier to accompany it into the church, the gondoliers could still be heard quarrelling “volubly” in the background (*VL* 2: 66).

Another key similarity with the world of opera and theatre concerns the ultimate inconsequentiality of these quarrels. Whenever two gondoliers engaged in a war of words, the inexhaustible “vocabulary of Venetian abuse” (*VL* 1: 109) was their only true weapon, and just when it seemed that the fight had reached the apex of vehemence they were unexpectedly and irrevocably reconciled, much to the surprise – sometimes even the disappointment – of the witnessing crowds. It is hard to ascribe their newfound harmony to a specific event, and whether they owed this sudden desire for peace to their dwindling reserves of stamina or to the questioning of the stakes, it was a near-certain fact that their quarrels would be as entertaining as they were bloodless. “However loudly they quarrel among themselves”, Howells wrote, “they never pass from the defamation of their female relatives to blows” (*VL* 2: 77-8), and the same sentiment appeared to have endured up until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Morris described an essentially identical dynamic, suggestive of the fights he had seen in the Middle East and, again, evoking a somewhat musical progression:

They start in some niggling disagreement ... and they proceed ... in fits and starts, gradually increasing in warmth and invective, getting louder and shriller and more sustained and more ferocious, the eyes flashing, the voices trembling, the feet stamping, until at last the ultimate exchange seems upon us, the flow of insult is almost uninterrupted, the outbreak of actual physical assault seems inescapable - and suddenly all evaporates, the gondoliers are inexplicably reconciled, the expectant crowd laughingly disperses, and the disagreement trails away in a murmur of mingled self-justification and understanding. (Morris 175)

The role of the gondolier in Venetian history had always adapted to meet the challenges of an ever-changing society, and the function performed by his voice changed accordingly. He not only provided the foreigner with access to the city according to “the terms in which it was built” (Davis and Marvin 135), but did so by way of his cries, his songs, his quarrels and his guidance. “There spoke Venice” wrote McCarthy, “in the voice of her eternal gondolier” (277), a voice tasked with the social and cultural responsibility to make Venice heard by the rest of the world.

## 2.2. Politics at the café: The Austrian bands in St. Mark's Square

To hear Howells tell it, hatred was too uncomplicated a word to describe the relationship between the Venetian populace and the Austrian government during the years of the occupation. Not only did was their mutual distrust circumstantial, as the Austrians were “simply hated as the means by which an alien and despotic government is imposed upon a people believing themselves born for freedom and independence” (*VL* 1: 10), but they had inherited the burden of command from yet another foreign despot, who had left the city in their hands.

The historical roots of the Venetians' animosity could be dated from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Venice was handed to the Austrians by Napoleon. The city had subsequently been “confirmed in the subjection into which she fell a second time after Napoleon's ruin, by the treaties of the Holy Alliance, defeated in several attempts to throw off her yoke” and had lastly been “loaded with heavier servitude after the fall of the short-lived Republic of 1849” (Howells, *VL* 1: 9). In more recent years, Venice had greatly suffered “from the defeat of patriotic hopes of union with Italy in 1859, when Napoleon found the Adriatic at Peschiera, and the peace of Villafranca was concluded” (Howells, *VL* 1: 9).

Conscious as he was of the delicate balance that existed between the foreign government and the natives, Howells was especially hesitant to foment political unrest, and the knowledge that his position as consul was entirely dependent on the “permission and trust” (*VL* 1: 8) of the Austrians meant he felt constrained from expressing a more unbiased description of the Venetians' discontent and, certainly, from taking their side. Nevertheless, despite outsourcing the responsibility of the “perpetual tension” to an unspecified “political machinery” (*VL* 1: 11), Howells did not bury *all* evidence of Venetian protesting in his work. Even as he attributed contingent historical importance to the Austrians and suggested they merely happened to be reaping the accumulation of Venetian grievances against all their invaders – grievances which were worsened “by each remove from the hope of independence” (*VL* 1: 9) – Howells refused, on more than one instance, to turn a blind eye to their subtle remonstrations against Austrian dominion.

As an American with a temporary, if official, relationship with the Austrian government, Howells himself was largely excused from adhering to the unspoken rules that presided over the Austro-Venetian social rift and enjoyed a “greater allowance” in these matters (*VL* 1: 9). Other foreign inhabitants of Venice were not endowed with the

same freedom of consular appointees to cultivate a neutral relationship with either party, and were sooner or later forced to take sides. Howells noted with some amusement a peculiar phenomenon whereby even “the few English residents” of the city, who had no patriotic obligations to either country, swore political allegiance to Austria or Venice, and identified as *Austriacanti*, i.e. “people of Austrian politics, though not of Austrian birth” or *Italianissimi*, meaning “those who favor union with Italy at any cost” (VL 1: 17).

Neutrality and partisanship of third parties notwithstanding, the intermingling and communion between the two opposing factions – given the “fifteen thousand troops” (Davis and Marvin 63) of Austrian officials stationed in the city – was almost inevitable, but in the tense political climate of the time both were often interpreted by the natives as an unequivocal sign of “enmity to Venetian freedom” (VL 1: 9). In Howells’ experience, nowhere was this social and political divide more evident to the observer than in St. Mark’s Square. In the cafés of the Piazza, for example, he observed a “perfectly understood system” whereby political sentiment was expressed non-verbally by the mere affiliation with one locale or the other. Italians exclusively frequented the café Specchi, Austrians lounged at the Quadri, and only at Florian’s was the affluence of “foreigners of all nations” so preponderant as to blur political perimeters and allow the presence of both parties at its tables (VL 1: 14). Even then, there were “shades of division” at play within Florian’s itself: while the Austrians and their sympathisers gathered in a “red-velvet room”, the Italians and their *Italianissimi* chose to congregate in another room, “furnished with green velvet” (1: 24). It is undeniable that the Venetians’ “tacit demonstration of hatred and discontent” (VL 1: 15) took many different shapes, but the following examples will focus on the Austrians’ musical presence in the Piazza, where they had “introduced the custom of staging regular evening band concerts” (Davis and Marvin 63). Under their influence, St. Mark’s had been “turned almost exclusively into a hub for socializing”, so that the Venetian tradition of the *listón* or “evening promenade” (Davis and Marvin 63) was forced to reckon with the “exquisite music for which the Austrians are famous”, as well as with various selections from Italian operas themselves (Howells, VL 1: 15), which were conceivably performed in a bid to win over the native population by gentler means.

The concerts of the Austrian military band in St. Mark’s Square were a regular affair, and Baedeker had made a point of meticulously relating their schedule in his guidebooks, describing summer (and winter) evenings in the Piazza as an appealing

combination of lively society and music. The scene he painted, of people from all walks of life “enjoying their sorbetto in front of the cafés,” was perfected by the band’s accompaniment, and the Piazza itself – the “promenade of the fashionable world” – was accordingly bedecked and “brilliantly lighted” for these three weekly concerts, with crowds animating the premises “until after midnight” (*Baedeker's Northern Italy* 236). Baedeker’s rightful claim that the St. Mark’s was “the heart of Venice” (*Baedeker's Italy from the Alps to Naples* 75) collaterally inferred that the condition of Venice’s social and political body might be measured in the Piazza, and the concerts which took place there might help to identify the symptoms of larger issues pervading the city.

Hence it is no surprise that, even as the “concerts and the *listòn* became quite popular with foreigners” (Davis and Marvin 63), they encountered strenuous resistance from the natives. Even though the attraction was supposedly “the hardest ... for the music-loving Italian to resist”, Venetians boycotted these events all the same, and did so with enduring resolve, to the point where “some noble ladies” had refused to enter the Piazza during the performances “since the fall of the Republic of 1849”, and “none of good standing for patriotism [had] attended the concerts since the treaty of Villafranca in '59” (*VL* 1: 15). Even Howells’ friend Biondini, “as a very good Venetian”, could never follow Howells in St. Mark’s Square “till the Austrian band had stopped playing at night” (“A Young Venetian Friend” 829). If, by accident, a group of ardent patriots had suffered the misfortune of finding themselves in the Piazza when the band started playing, then the protocol they must follow in order to defend their political principles and metaphorically rebel was the following:

As a general thing ... they pass from the Piazza when the music begins, and walk upon the long quay at the sea-side of the Ducal Palace; or if they remain in the Piazza they pace up and down under the arcades on either side; for Venetian patriotism makes a delicate distinction between listening to the Austrian band in the Piazza and hearing it under the Procuratie ... As soon as the music ceases the Austrians disappear, and the Italians return to the Piazza. (*VL* 1: 15-6)

The presence of the military band had furthered the notion of St. Mark’s Square as an open-air drawing-room (an approach which had endured to this day), and was as foreign an import as the music the Austrians themselves often played, so much so that, when Venetians returned to the tables at Florian’s after their silent protest, they were wont to listen to “such bands of strolling singers and minstrels as chose to give them a concord of sweet sounds without foreign admixture” (*VL* 1: 142-3). Unbound by the

obligations which weighed on Howells, Ruskin had reported an even harsher reaction to the Austrians' music, which he saw embedded in the unspoken thoughts of the Venetians, rather than in their actions. In the centre of the Piazza, he witnessed the Austrian bands playing "during the time of vespers, their martial music jarring with the organ notes, –the march drowning the miserere", and saw a "sullen crowd thickening round them, a crowd, which, if it had its will, would stiletto every soldier that pipes to it" (*The Stones of Venice 2: 67*).

The Venetians' scorn was abundantly clear to their oppressors, but it should be noted that theirs were not the only eyes and ears in St. Mark's Square, or indeed, in Venice, and that while many natives still mourned the end of the Republic, others (especially foreigners) were ready to be lenient towards the more pleasurable cultural changes brought by the Austrians. The "heavenly music" (*VL 2: 142*) played by the bands was one of them, and was quickly becoming part of the Venetian status quo, having successfully blended with the already well-established social function of the Piazza, so that authors like Twain could stumble onto the following scene with great ease and pleasure:

Everybody goes to the vast square in the evening. The military band plays in the centre of it and countless couples of ladies and gentlemen promenade up and down on either side ... the air is filled with music and merry voices, and altogether the scene is as bright and spirited and full of cheerfulness as any man could desire. (Twain 232)

Any leisure-bound observer with no interest in the Venetian political background would have been justified in their uncritical enjoyment of the bands' concerts, but there were many foreigners who thought Venice was better off under non-Italian rule (Pemble 23), and were sorry to see the city rid of the Austrians' enlightened yoke. Even Howells, in his self-attempted neutrality, lamented the eventual removal of the bands from the Piazza, and believed that they were "not the only charm which [Venice had] lost in exchanging Austrian servitude for Italian freedom" (*VL 2: 142*), especially considering how rapidly Venetian cultural and social life had dwindled under the Austrian occupation, out of spite for the hated foreign government and out of fear "from patriotic reprisals" (Pemble 24). "Intellectuals boycotted public events, and the aristocracy moved to the mainland ... *palazzi* were desolate, churches empty, and the theatres abandoned to the petty bourgeoisie and artisans" and, all in all "Venice refused to be gay" (Pemble 24). "For decades after the demise, society went dead", and when

“at the first oompah-pah-pah from an Austrian band, Venetians stalked out of the piazza” (Martin 38) they were effectively segregating the enjoyment of the only thriving form of popular entertainment.

Austrians rule came to an end in 1866, but the notion of having bands entertain the crowds in St. Mark’s Square survived their departure, and became an integral part of the newly Italian Venice. After the liberation, “such musical evenings became a social focus of Venetian life” and “by any given late afternoon in the spring or fall, six or seven thousand strollers had typically poured into the Piazza to promenade to selected patriotic tunes and airs from Verdi and Rossini” (Davis and Marvin 63). The boycotting of the Austrians’ performances had not ultimately stifled the bands’ influence in shaping the overall perception of the Piazza, so much so that the absence of musical entertainment from St. Mark’s in our day and age would be unfathomable.

While the music itself had been a collateral victim of the hatred for the foreign occupation, the Austrians’ hostilities with the Venetians did not end with the unification of Italy, and there is another interesting example of the vestiges of political enmity being resuscitated by music, in the aftermath of the Second World War Pemble relates the testimony of Ugo Ojetti, whose translations of Ruskin’s letters have been mentioned in the first chapter, and who

In the spring of 1924 ... watching [Germans and Austrians] in the Piazza and hearing Viennese music coming from the cafés, found it difficult to believe that since that fateful night in 1916 when an Austrian bomb had exploded only yards from the main door of San Marco, less than eight years had elapsed. (Pemble 188)

Political neutrality is thus a rather recent addition to the musical landscape of the Piazza, and modern commentary on the café bands largely focuses on the artistic value of their repertoire, with no residual hint of patriotic partisanship left. If Wagner’s judgement of the music scene in Venice had spared the Piazza bands – “which occasionally played his own work” (Martin 152) – contemporary authors are less forgiving. McCarthy asserted that the overall quality of “the music played in the Piazza cafés” was, in fact, “rather poor” (272). She saw that American visitors were quite content to be serenaded by reprises of “*A rivederci, Roma*”; German tourists continued to be entertained by the café Quadri “with Viennese waltzes and ‘*Ach du lieber Augustin*’”, seemingly out of historical inertia, and the “municipal band” played “the usual classical repertory on a stand in the Piazza several nights a week during the

summer and fall” (272). Morris’ own description verged on the farcical instead. Venice’s former glory as he saw it had transformed into a ridiculous imitation of itself, a costume the city put on as a way of tricking the observer into thinking that history had had little effect on it. Venice’s was an “old essence of power, a pomade of consequence, an echo of trumpet-calls (provided by the string orchestra at the Quadri, stringing away irrepressibly, its rigid smiles tinged with despair, at the rhythms of Colonel Bogey)” (Morris 98). The orchestras at Florian’s and the Quadri played in “blithe disharmony”, and while the former specialized “in the sicklier musical comedy melodies, now and then graced with a popular classic”, you will sometimes hear from the latter a “drummer indulging in something precariously approaching jazz” (Morris 193).

At present, all the cafés in St. Mark’s are the nearly exclusive province of tourists, as are the “show tunes that are cranked out” by their orchestras, who daily serenade their ever-changing clientele (Davis and Marvin 65), and even accompany the celebrating multitudes into the new year (Frangipane, *The Venice Experiment* 216). The social function of the Piazza cafés and their orchestras has fundamentally changed, having internalized the expectations and tastes of the visiting crowds. The musical entertainment is, in the present day, entirely shorn of political significance, though there are still those who would fain frequent Florian’s, and avoid the dreaded Quadri, “because it was the Austrian officers’ hangout” (Martin 87).

### **2.3. Operatic traditions**

Margaret Fuller’s experience of Venice in the mid-nineteenth century had led her to say: “of Venice and its enchanted life I could not speak; it should only be echoed back in music” (*At Home and Abroad* 233). In a bid to explain just how influential the role of music had been in the city, Jan Morris had chosen to quote Nietzsche, who “of all people, once said that if he searched for a synonym for music, he found ‘always and only Venice’” (300). The singing gondoliers and the waltzing Piazza bands, whose significance was analysed in the previous subchapters, represent only two notable examples in the vast array of musical expressions associated with Venice, of which I will provide a brief overview in this conclusion to the second chapter.

Many authors commented on the natural proclivity for song that seemed innate in all Venetians, and it is hard to find a single commentary which does not relate the words and the origin of some of the most popular songs. Howells mentioned the rhymes

Venetians composed in honour of the so-called 'Year of the Ice', when the winter cold was so harsh that even the Grand Canal froze up, and they were able to walk on the water (VL 1: 41). McCarthy reported a "gay little jingle in Venetian dialect" which told the story of Bajamonte Tiepolo, a revolutionary who aspired to topple the government in 1310, and miserably failed (McCarthy 202). Coles witness the St Martin jingle, sung by Venetian children on the hunt for sweets and treats on an early November afternoon (82). Music and singing appeared to be an important feature of Venetian life. They accompanied traditional feasts, rites, and celebrations, such as the Carnival, when "dance, and song, and serenade, and ball" (Byron, *Beppo* 6); marriage, when the bride and groom of old went to the church "preceded by musicians and followed by relatives and friends" (Howells, VL 2: 53); or the enduring customs surrounding the "installation of a new parish priest", when "the new parroco, preceded by a band of military music, visited all the streets and courts of his parish" (Howells, VL 2: 117-8). There is scarcely an event of Venetian social life which is not accompanied by the uproar of music and singing:

Indeed, almost every occurrence — a boy's success at school, an advocate's triumphal passage of the perils of examination at Padua, a priest's first mass, a nun's novitiate, a birth, an amputation — is the subject of tuneful effusion, and no less the occasion of a visit from the *facchini* of the neighboring campo, who assemble with a blare of trumpets and tumult of voices around the victim's door, and proclaim his skill or good fortune, and break into *vivas* that never end till he bribes their enthusiasm into silence. (Howells, VL 2: 61)

Even when there was no social celebration to observe, the call for music was no less felt, and the city "at all times voiceful" continued to sing and dance, whether it be on the waters of the Grand Canal, where "the music of the parties of young girls as they ... sing the glories of the lagoons and the loves of fishermen and gondoliers" echoed, or in the Public Gardens, where the "wandering minstrels come forth before the *caffè*, and it is hard to get beyond the tinkling of guitars and the scraping of fiddles" (Howells, VL 1: 26), especially on the popular "*Lunedì dei Giardini*" where "the hand-organ ... brays to a peculiarly beautiful purpose. For no sooner does it sound than the young girls of the people wreath themselves into dances, and improvise the poetry of motion" (Howells, VL 2: 35-6).

Singing even aided those girls born in most unfortunate circumstances to earn a role in the religious, social and musical life of the city. Because the Venetian



government had “piously” forbidden the “representation of Mysteries, and, as the theatre advanced, even prohibited plays containing characters from the Old or New Testament”, such task had been transferred to the religious institutes who cared for and raised the many foundlings of the city (Howells, *VL* 1: 62-3). “The young girls in these institutions were taught to play on instruments, and to sing” and they became so popular that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they became an attraction in and of themselves and sang for the public, so that the “Latin oratorios ... were among the most fashionable diversions in Venice” and “the conservatories of the Incurables, the Foundlings, and the Mendicants were famous throughout Europe for their dramatic concerts, and noted for those pupils who found the transition from oratorio to opera natural and easy” (Howells, *VL* 1: 62-3). “Some of these orphan soloists” noted McCarthy, even became “famous as *artistes* while they were still children” (McCarthy 271).

The most significant musical import of Venice, however, is the opera, the development of which is often credited to the lagoon city. Though Martin disputed this widespread notion, claiming that Monteverdi’s *La Favola d’Orfeo* was not “the first, but only the first surviving opera”, she nevertheless pointed out that “many viable operas had their premieres in Venice” (Martin 237), and their success rippled throughout Europe in decades to come. “Invented precisely for the Venetian Carnival at the beginning of the seventeenth century”, Davis and Marvin found, the opera “was for the first time staged for the paying public in 1637 for the same occasion” and “by the mid-1600s, as many six or seven houses in the city ran nothing but operas throughout the Carnival session” (40). Venetian theatres had, quite literally, been the echo chamber for the diffusion and the development of the opera, as John Berendt recalled in his book, through the eyes of celebrated Venetian glassblower Archimede Seguso, who was witness to the fire which destroyed the “Gran Teatro La Fenice” in 1996. The theatre, Berendt writes:

was one of the splendors of Venice; it was arguably the most beautiful opera house in the world, and one of the most significant. The Fenice had commissioned dozens of operas that had premiered on its stage – Verdi’s *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*, Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*, Benjamin Britten’s *The Turn of the Screw*. For two hundred years, audiences had delighted in the sumptuous clarity of the Fenice’s acoustics, the magnificence of its five tiers of gilt-encrusted boxes, and the baroque fantasy of it all. (7)

The earlier, popular years of the opera were hardly characterized by the same amount of formality and reverence than the experience seems to command today, and its

audiences were not deterred by what, at the time, could reasonably be defined as an “expensive and somewhat rough experience”, where a seat in the stalls could “cost eight times as much for an opera as for a regular theatrical comedy”, and where one may even run the risk of being “spit or even urinated on by nobles ensconced in their boxes above” (Davis and Marvin 40). All the same, foreign spectators marvelled at the scenic variety and at the “finest vocal talent in Italy” that the operas offered, so that the vast majority of the “broad and discriminating audience, ranging from the Grand Tourists themselves to the socializing Venetian lords and ladies to the large claue of gondoliers” could derive tremendous enjoyment from a night at the opera (Davis and Marvin 40), to the point where even the attitudes of the general paying public became an object of curiosity themselves. In her book, Martin relates the judgement of one Dr. Charles Burney, who having travelled to Venice in the 1770s and attended an opera there, painted a rather unflattering picture of the audiences of his time, deeming them incapable of remaining focused on the music and of showing polite appreciation even during the concerts of the aforementioned foundling choirs, where they resolved to “cough, hem and blow their noses” in a rather unconventional way to express their approval (211-2). Morris maintained the same opinion of the opera audiences of today, whom he described as “coarse and inattentive”, sparing only the galleries, and framing their levels of attendance within a rather bleak frame, in which “not one genuine fulltime theatre in the city” existed and where “concerts, except in the tourist season, are generally second-rate and expensive” (17).

The opera eventually fell out of favour in Venice in the late 1600s, when it could “no longer compare to the shows produced in the great European courts”, and was also facing competition with the successful *ridotti*, i.e. the “licensed gaming houses” that operated only during the Venetian Carnival (Davis and Marvin 41), but its success was a testament to the musical inventiveness of the Venetians, which had a long and proud history in not only in the performance of the opera, but also in the composition of musical pieces, in the manufacture of instruments and in the development of new musical styles. As McCarthy eloquently reminds us:

The organ was developed in Venice; a native son of the Veneto made the first violin. ... Galuppi was born in Burano; the Gabrielis, Vivaldi, the Benedetto Marcello were born in Venice. Monteverdi was *maestro di cappella* for many years at St Mark’s – one of the great choirs of Italy ... During the sixteenth century, the most ordinary parish church had its choir and its organ; flutes were peddled in the street, like today’s glass beads and pigeon food. Sir Henry Wotton sent a lord of the Privy Council ‘a set of glasses of my

own choosing at Murano and some lutes and strings for your music'. Indeed, Venetian music had the delicate, fragile sound of a fork struck on glass. (McCarthy 271-2)

Howells had heard "the airs of opera sung as commonly upon the streets in Venice as our own colored melodies at home" (*VL* 1: 62), and McCarthy still heard the music of "Cimarosa, Galuppi, Cavalli, Monteverdi, Benedetto Marcello ... on summer and fall evening at concerts given in the court of the tall Ca' Pisani" (McCarthy 271-2). Even though Venice has not retained the title of "supreme city of music", earned in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it still continues to be pervaded by music, whether it come from "the strains of great symphonies" rising from "breathless floodlit courtyards", or from "the noble choir of St Mark's, once trained by Monteverdi" singing "seraphically from its eyrie among the high mosaics of the Basilica" (Morris 177). The gondoliers may "no longer quote Tasso to one another, or sing old Venetian love songs (most of the popular tunes nowadays are from Naples or New York)" but sometimes, unexpectedly, "an ebullient young man will open his heart and his lungs together, and float down the canal on the wings of a throaty aria" (Morris 178).

In conclusion, music and song have enjoyed a prominent function in the expression of Venetian individuality. Its gondoliers, its orchestras and its choirs have contributed to cementing a unique reputation, where political sentiment and romanticizing tendencies often mingled with the very songs and music which were being performed, all retaining a quality of lasting, all-encompassing "gossamer virtuosity" (McCarthy 273).

### **3. The sound of the waves: The aural impact of navigation**

#### **3.1. The threat of the motor**

We have already touched on the impressions that the “storied gondola of Venice” (Twain 218) and her singing gondolier had left in the writings of many a foreign expatriate, but in this chapter the focus will shift on the aural and cultural consequences brought about by a series of changes to the modes of transportation which Venice underwent from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The *vaporetti* that we know today are in fact the result of a long process of modernization, which challenged the mythicised perception of the lagoon city after centuries of un-motorized naval craftsmanship had aided Venice’s war efforts, sustained its livelihood, and provided the easiest, most natural way of navigating around its many islets.

I will analyze the evolution of Venetian transports, with special attention to the ways in which such modernizing effort affected the well-established category of the gondoliers from a practical *and* cultural standpoint, with an eye to the varied opinions of the foreign press. I will then focus more closely on the modern instances of sound-pollution that characterize the Venice of today, and on how much has changed since James’ Venice simply “glowed and plashed and called and chimed” (*The Wings of the Dove* 605).

##### **3.1.1. From oars to engines: The evolution of transports**

Rowed crafts had been Venice’s trademark mode of transportation throughout its history, and in the earlier days of the water-bound city the “uncertain connections” offered by the first wooden bridges, “reinforced by the near ubiquity of gondolas, *sandoli*, *peote*, *caorli*, and many larger craft” emphasized a natural hierarchy that placed primary importance to travel by water (Davis and Marvin 60). Of course, walking on the unpaved *calli* had always been an option (one mainly chosen by the poorest in the city), and before they were entirely given up, even “horses and mules” were used to roam those very streets in such high numbers that “in the fourteenth century that they were compelled by law to wear warning bells”, and their presence was so widespread as to prompt “some theorists” to justify the otherwise mysterious toponym for the famous

“Bridge of Straw”, which, as they saw it, must have been the place “where [the Venetian patricians] used to tether their mounts with a comforting nosebag during legislative sessions” in the nearby Ducal Palace (Morris 55).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the adventurous visitors who, imbibed with the newcomer’s hubris, chose to walk around Venice without the aid of Baedeker’s maps, were confronted with the disorienting feeling of having to find their way in a haphazardly built city, so that taking a gondola seemed the only logical way of getting around. In fact, “from the first days of the pilgrim tourists until the time of Henry James, one took a gondola for any jaunt of more than a few hundred meters” (Davis and Marvin 88), and many outsiders justifiably came to the conclusion that the maze-like *calli* of Venice gave one “the feeling of being an afterthought”, when several of them *were* “no more than back entrances to palaces whose main facade was on a canal” (Davis and Marvin 60). Defeated by Venice’s topography, visitors thus chose to travel by gondola for reasons of necessity, as well to enjoy the much recommended company of its gondolier, who was promised to fulfil their romantic expectations, as well as provide them with insider knowledge of the city and its gossip.

We have already seen that large numbers of gondoliers prior to the blossoming of the tourism era did not rely on rowing gondolas as their main (or sole) source of income, with the exception of those who were employed by the families of the Venetian aristocracy. As self-employed men, many gondoliers had proved capable of refashioning themselves “from the lackeys of the patriciate to the private escorts of Grand Tourists”, and adapt once again to the “new brand of visitor” which started to flood Venice after the end of the Austrian occupation. They had realised that there was more money to be made in charging their clients “on an hourly basis” rather than in hiring themselves out “by the day or by the trip”, and many had started to cater to tourists directly, waiting for the new arrivals outside the train station and rowing them to their hotels (Davis and Marvin 138-40).

Gondoliers only enjoyed this monopoly for a relatively short period of time, and started rioting when Venice’s “bigger hotels”, having noticed this budding trend, started sending their own “private squads of boatmen” dressed “in pastiche liveries” to welcome the clients at the station with “special gondolas” (Davis and Marvin 140). They were marginally less outraged at the introduction of the “*battelli* or omnibus boats” travelling on the same routes, secure as they were in the cultural superiority of their own trade, praised by Baedeker himself as “far preferable” to the “very slow conveyance” of the omnibus, which was “often crowded and affording no view”

(*Northern Italy* 227). Unlike gondoliers, however, the business of the *battelli* benefited from a regular travel schedule “timed to the train arrivals and departures”, cheaper fares and the ability to carry “up to eight tourists” at a time together with their luggage, commodities which in time elected the omnibus as the “mainstay for those coming in on package tours” (Davis and Marvin 140).

All in all, the gondoliers’ trade was surviving both the competition of the hotels and that of the omnibus, but when the first “*vaporetto*, or ‘little steamer’” was introduced to the Grand Canal in 1881 – it had served the outer lagoon since 1872 (Pemble 144) – they were hard-pressed to find a solution, even as they went on a collective strike and had the foreign press passionately rally against these “motorized versions of the omnibuses” (Davis and Marvin 140). On the one hand of the conflict, there were those who welcomed the modernization of Venice *and* its transports. This type of visitor heartily welcomed the cheaper fares and the faster travel, agreeing with Mark Twain that “by the late nineteenth century the gondolier was little more than a sham anachronism anyway, and that his disappearance ... was an inevitable expression of progress in a modernizing world” (Davis and Marvin 141). On the opposite hand of the spectrum

were the traditionalists, the lovers of things old and honoured, who wished to keep their Venice as close to virginity as was physically possible, and who argued on a spectacular variety of premises, from the danger that a second bridge would stifle the flow of tides and kill the city by malaria, to the possibility that the rumble of cart-wheels would weaken the foundations of its buildings. (Morris 107)

As I mentioned, the opponents of the *vaporetti* had the near-unconditional support of the British and the American press, who prophesied that the downfall of the gondolier would bring the entire city of Venice with it, along with all that it stood for. Davis and Marvin offered an interesting selection of these catastrophic articles in their work, one of them being a New York Times report claiming that “with the advent of steam launches in the lagoons the genuine romance and songs of the gondolier passed away”, and that the canals of “the Queen of the Adriatic”, resounding with “uncouth noises” were “no longer the inspiration of poets and artists” (Davis and Marvin 142). After all, the *London Standard* asked, “who can quote Byron with the smell of train-oil in his nostrils?”, though the question of what the “properly constituted mind” of Mr. Ruskin, by then very much alive, might think of the news was left unanswered (Davis and Marvin 140-1). At the time, the paper may have valued the prophetic nightmare

Ruskin had described in 1845 in letter to his father, where he had seen “his gondola [turn] into a steamboat”, a vision which, Pemble wrote, “was to torture him in later years” (131). Had reporters asked for the opinion of Henry James, however, they would have found him in agreement with the catastrophic predictions of British and American papers. The *vaporetti* had, in James’ mind, not only “contributed to the ruin of the gondoliers ... and to that of the palaces, whose foundations their waves undermine”, but they had “robbed the Grand Canal of the supreme distinction of its tranquillity” by abruptly bestowing on Venice the unfamiliar benefit of travel efficiency, and placing “‘rapid transit,’ in the New York phrase, in everybody s reach, and [enabling] everybody – save indeed those who wouldn’t for the world – to rush about Venice as furiously as people rush about New York” (*IT* 67). The “churning of the screw of the vaporetto” thus pervaded the whole length of the Grand Canal, and caused particular commotion to the already chaotic market scene at Rialto, where “the little piers of the resented steamer are particularly near together, and it seems somehow to be always kicking up the water” (*IT* 66).

It should be noted that the international debate sparked by the introduction of the *vaporetti* also extended to the ways in which the entirety of Venice’s cultural and architectural patrimony ought to be managed, something which the foreign press frequently discussed. The British journal *The Athenaeum*, amongst many others, took issue with the fact that a city so indebted to tourism “should not only take every occasion to destroy the ancient monuments which are its attraction, but must insist offending the taste by erecting iron bridges and allowing steam launches to ply” (Pemble 144-5), while another paper, the *Builder*, chose a less popular angle and “warned the British public that they had ‘no right to require [of] the inhabitants of any old city that they should be content to reduce themselves to the condition of the custodians of the museum’”(Pemble 177).

Ultimately, the debate over the role of the gondola had more to do “with the iconic function that both boat and oarsman were beginning to assume in a Venice completely consumed by mass tourism” (Davis and Marvin 143), and its competition with the *vaporetti* only amplified the larger, more existential conflict regarding the identity of the city itself, and how it could be protected and preserved over time. In the 1920s, after the *vaporetti* had been operating in the city for close to forty years, the question of “whether the archaic duo should be replaced once and for all by motorboats and steamers” was posed yet again, and then even Mussolini himself weighed in on the issue, claiming that, “Fascist passion for modernization” notwithstanding, “gondola and

gondolier would remain protected, since ‘there are some things so holy, that no material gain can justify their sacrifice’” (Davis and Marvin 143).

Thus, in spite of tradition and foreign aesthetic outrage, the number of *vaporetti* multiplied and their scheduled trips soon exceeded the early imposition of twelve Grand Canal stops, limited to the sole hours of daylight (Davis and Marvin 142). Despite their commercial success, the *vaporetti* never truly suppressed the function of the gondolier, on the contrary, the threat of competition worked as an incentive towards the protection and crystallization of the gondoliers’ ranks. If their three-day strike in 1881 could not stop motorized transport from reaching the Grand Canal, it *did* earn them permission to “close their corporate ranks and henceforth enroll only sons and grandsons of active members”. Their numbers would dwindle in the decades to come, but this decision also meant that gondoliers were finally part of a recognized corporation, and that they could “never again [be] the sorts of abject, boat-wielding beggars that Twain and James had encountered” (Davis and Marvin 142).

The predictions of the press were simultaneously proved wrong and right. Both gondolas and *vaporetti* were there to stay, though the gondoliers did never truly retrieve their former function as the primary interlocutors between the city and its visitors. Venice’s narrow side-canal are still largely the gondoliers’ province, while waterbuses alone provide public transportation to the outer reaches of the lagoon. However, both crafts lead a simultaneous – if not always harmonious – existence on the Grand Canal, complicated by the proliferation of water-taxis, “*lancioni di granturismo*” (Davis and Marvin 197) and privately-owned motorboats. Water-taxis in particular “have stolen [the gondoliers’] transport business and continue to ruin their sight-seeing enterprise by habitually speeding along the canals and throwing up an excessive bow wave (the notorious *moto ondosso*)” (Davis and Marvin 147). This is particularly troublesome for the gondoliers, who are damaged by the coexistence with motorized boats in more than one way. Firstly, in their opinion, “the continual buffeting of powerboat wakes has reduced the effective life of the gondolas themselves” to ten instead of forty, causing some to resort to the forbidden “fibreglass resin paint” in order to protect the hulls of their crafts. Secondly, their ability to navigate the canals with their oars in relative peace has been impaired by the “sheer number of motor vessels now crowding Venetian waters”, drastically worsening the rowing conditions “well beyond the worst nightmares of their ancestors who went on strike back in 1881”. Thirdly, gondoliers place the original blame on the “‘eat and run’ tourists ...whose need to see Venice in five hours



or less supposedly has them racing about the city in high-powered taxis and launches” to the detriment of the traditional gondola (Davis and Marvin 200).

While rowed crafts have not entirely disappeared from the lagoon, and gondolas continue their business, it is true that motorized transport has audibly taken over the city, so that that sound of the speeding water-taxis, the produce motorboats and the waterbuses, churning down the “long straight stretch of its Grand Canal ... like stern-wheelers sweeping past Natchez on their way to New Orleans” (Morris 285) have been entirely assimilated into the background of modern Venice. I will now further explore the aural implications connected with their presence in the city.

### 3.1.2. Modern instances of sound pollution

Venice’s primary selling point in modern-day guidebooks, chronicles and reviews is that its all-encompassing silence is sure to work as a balm for the noise-weary tourists. Many come to the city expecting an aural break from cars, sirens, horns and all the artificial sounds of traffic and are surprised to encounter a lot more noise and modernity than they bargained for. If at first they had been drawn to Venice by the promise of a “little scenario of fantasy made all the more romantic just for being so unlikely” (Davis and Marvin 272), they soon have to reckon with the all-too-familiar reality of sound pollution. While some show a far higher tolerance than their 19<sup>th</sup> century counterparts and are still struck by Venice as “the most tranquil [city] in Italy” (Davis and Marvin 199-00), others continue to struggle with the notion that their jaunts in the proverbially silent gondolas might easily be disrupted by “scores of passing taxis, supply boats, and *vaporetti*, and the salt air filled with diesel fumes and the roar of engines (and sometimes sirens) of every description” (153). Those shunning the overly-priced gondola rides might find public transport to be just as noisy in experience, in that modern *vaporetti* constantly “hum with the sound of people talking”, and when a passenger is left with “nobody on the boat to chat with, he often claps a mobile phone to his ear so that this opportunity for conversation doesn’t go to waste” (Weideger 52).

Part of the problem can be attributed to the loosely followed traffic regulations, with the speed limit for motorized boats often being “genially ignored”, and if the rowed gondola – the “queen of the canals” – still caused other crafts to “merely curtsey and stand aside” to ease her passing in Morris’ time (115), nowadays the traffic is so heavy, and the Venetians so violation-savvy that some wonder whether regulation can have any positive affect at all on the current traffic predicament of the Grand Canal

(Davis and Marvin 202). Another source of aural distress can of course be traced to the type of fuel which propels modern-day boats forward. If the steamboats of old “used to ease their way down the Grand Canal with the gentle chugging, thumping and hissing that went with polished brass and oiled pistons”, modern taxis and barges rely on petrol-run engines, as well as being endowed with the same noise-making tools afforded to street vehicles, so that the sirens, “the throbbing of engines” and “the blowing of horns” could lead Morris to declare that Venice was “at least as noisy as any mainland city” (176). Additionally, the peculiar topography of the city does little to ease these uncouth sounds from rippling across the canals, and the noises are all “hideously magnified and distorted by the surface of the water and the high walls that surround it, and reverberate around the houses as from a taut drum-skin” (Morris 177).

One of the main causes for this commotion, however, lies with the disproportionate demand for fast travel in the lagoon city, with tourists financially supporting the bulk of Venetian naval traffic, both rowed and motorized. The weight of this demand is especially felt in the public transport system, and though the service provided by *vaporetti* in the few canals wide enough to accommodate them is regular, these waterbuses are often defeated by the large crowds attempting to board them, causing “lengthy delays in the delicately balanced schedule” as well as frequent fighting (Davis and Marvin 254). These delays often lead to traffic jams, “especially around Piazzale Roma and the Rialto area”, so that the clamour of the diesel engines “is further enhanced by angry shouts and piercing boat horns as pilots jockey fiercely for right of way” (197). Commercial and construction barges also contribute to canal traffic, and increase the risk of frequent gridlocks even in the smaller waterways. The “deafening blare” coming from the horn of a cement-carrying boat and the clinking of Coca-Cola bottles heard over the noise of a delivery *mototopo* (Morris 114) were as common an occurrence in the 1970s as they are today, and the early mornings, which Morris designated as the only moment of true aural peace, likewise yield to the din and the hum of boats in modern Venice (301), when the “dustbin convoy” (176-8) loudly enters the city and begins scattering amongst its canals. When the trash collectors have rid the streets of Venices’ discarded items and bin bags, they can finally hurry “towards a rendezvous with their barges”; then “the engines whirr; the rubbish is stacked automatically deep in the hold; and away the barge chugs, no dirtier than a vegetable boat, or smellier than a fish-cart” (Morris 139).

Modern respite from canal noise is so rarefied as to prompt some to wonder “how much longer the hotels that front on the Grand Canal will be able to demand their

customary (huge) markup for rooms overlooking the water”, given that the “constant drumming of motorboats chugging back and forth ... have made a *camera con vista* overlooking the Canal about as alluring as a room adjoining a freeway overpass” (Davis and Marvin 197). The “din of Venice”, which started to appear “positively diabolic” (Morris 277) if contrasted with the relatively undisturbed islands of the lagoon, is extended to the meeting point between the Grand Canal and the Giudecca canal, the Basin of St. Mark’s, where boats of all kinds traverse the choppy waters, at times bickering for a first-row glance of the namesake Piazza. Coming from the relatively narrow Grand Canal into a wider space, drivers feel incentivised (though they are not necessarily allowed), to take full advantage of the horse-power of their boat engines, which is why the leisurely cruiser passing by St. Mark’s may frequently “hear an ear-splitting roar” coming from a torpedo-boat heading at full-speed toward the open sea, “with a noble plume of spray streaming from her stern, and a shattering bellow of diesels ... echoing among the old towers and ramparts of the place” (Morris 247).

Another poignant issue affecting the aural landscape of the city is that of the large cruise ships, which in recent years have added Venice to their long list of tourist destinations. These gargantuan ships usually traverse the city from side to side, starting from their docking station near Piazzale Roma to the Bocca del Lido and into the open sea again, mandatorily passing by St. Mark’s Square. As Davis and Marvin have noted, these ships not only carry considerable environmental impact in their actual traversals of the Giudecca canals, but can also disturb the peace while they are docked. Quoting from a 2002 article in the Italian newspaper the *Gazzettino*, they reported that “the noise from these ships can exceed the legally permitted night-time limits by six or seven decibels, a level ‘that would be acceptable in an industrial zone’” (324). Additionally, “thanks to the massive engines that drive such ships’ air-conditioning and power systems, residents living several hundred meters from dockside are tormented” by unrelenting noise, which disturbs their days as well as their nights, and “those who have the misfortune to actually live facing out onto the Riva [dei Martiri, where the ships sometimes docked]” also endure a continuous racket (206).

Though much of Venice’s sound pollution is due to motorized boats, barges and ships cruising its canals at daring speed, the city is no stranger to other sources of noise. For example, airplanes can be seen – and heard – landing in the nearby airport on the mainland (Morris 247); the “reassuring echoes” of the train reverberate “above the hubbub of the motor-boat engines” (Morris 106); and cars, motorbikes and buses have “brought a bridgehead of the machine age to the fringe of Venice” by crowding Piazzale

Roma, where the silence of the “ineffable small squares of Dorsoduro” is starkly contrasted with the “diesel fumes, blinding lights, myriad cars and petrol pumps of the Piazzale” (Morris 225).

Finally, sound pollution has taken its toll on Venetian domestic life as well. Loud music blasting from the bars of the once quiet Campo Santa Margherita, has often “produced a continual clash between the more elderly residents of the area and noisy students who want to hang around the campo until nearly dawn” (Davis and Marvin 102). The “stridently blaring” radios and the “enormous television sets”, Morris noted (124) dominated Venetian cafés and wine shops, hurling “their melodies after you down the back-streets” (176). Donna Leon was herself witness to the damage a single television could inflict on a single Venetian neighbourhood. In her collection of stories *My Venice and Other Essays*, Leon reminisced about a real-life experience in a newly-rented apartment, when she was first woken in the middle of a summer night by the supremely un-Venetian sounds of a “violent automobile chase, complete with the *rat-tat-tat* of machine-gun fire and the squeal of tires on pavement” (44), predictably followed by a crash and by the survivors’ “agonized shouts” as well as a “man’s voice, speaking in the patently false tones peculiar to films dubbed into Italian, said, “How could anyone survive?” (44-5). The noises, she soon realised, were coming from a television in the house of her aged, morbidly obese neighbour opposite. When she learned that the racket would become a nightly occurrence she resorted to a variety of schemes in order to restore silence in the beleaguered neighbourhood. First, she had her Venetian friends vainly plague her neighbour with complaint calls, then she tried to jam the her doorbell in an attempt at aural revenge (45), and the hope of having sound technicians support her “official *denuncia*” with proof of the peace-defying noise was undermined by the fact that they did not work at night (46). Leon finally resorted to calling the firemen, having feigned concern for the health and safety of her neighbour, only to be rewarded with her screams upon seeing a fireman appear at her window (47), a temporary solution which she welcomed nevertheless.

The only true revenge upon the polluting, nightly racket endured by Leon during that Venetian summer was carried out in her fiction. Her novel *Doctored Evidence* opens with thinly veiled hate, as a doctor lets himself in the apartment of the despised “old cow”, only to find that buzz of flies circling around her dead body could be heard “above the voices on the television” (47).

## 4. The silence of Venice: Romanticizing absence

After having delved into the wealth of aural manifestations of Venice, I will finally focus on the silence which has become synonymous with the city ever since it was built. Firstly, I will concentrate on how the articulation of this aural idiosyncrasy was often presented in 19<sup>th</sup> century British and American literature as inextricable from the natural element of water; and subsequently talk of how these same descriptions drew from an oneiric imaginary, attributing to the silence the same qualities as dreams and nightmares. Lastly, I will discuss the ways in which, in recent decades, silence has been advertised to the newer generations of tourists, ushering them into modern Venice by way of the same dichotomies mentioned above.

### 4.1. Dreams and nightmares of Venetian silence

Having been spared from the later stages in the cacophonous evolution of Venetian means of transport, its 19<sup>th</sup> century inhabitants and visitors had had the chance to rejoice in its silence in a truer, all-pervading form. The most remarkable sounds before the advent of the steamers would have been caused by the clash of wooden produce boats, or by the splash of a boatman's oars against the tranquil lagoon water, and though human voices might have imposed themselves from time to time on the un-belligerent tranquillity of the city, they always returned it to its most natural state, that of profound silence. The association of Venice and its silence was instinctive, to the point where Howells suggested that a prolonged residence in the city might sow doubts as to the existence of sound itself outside its lagoon, insisting that "the will must be strong and the faith indomitable in him who can long keep, amid the influences of her stagnant quiet, a practical belief in the great moving, anxious, toiling, aspiring world outside" (*VL* 1: 29). This In fact, the description of Venetian silence is often filtered through the medium of a dream, and the primary reaction of its witnesses is one of profound disbelief at their surroundings. It is furthermore worth noting that, in the vast majority of cases, the gondola is a key component of the experience, and that the descriptions are heavily dependent on the contact with the natural element of the water, so that Venice's "beautiful silence" often goes hand in hand with the "star-silvered dip

of the oars” (Howells, *VL* 1: 20). Visitors quickly endeared themselves to the silent gondola because of the stark aural contrast with their noisy, familiar means of transportation. “Grand Tourists in the days of the Serenissima” were relieved from the racket of their “iron-banded carriage wheels running on cobbles”, and the Victorians were particularly favourable towards the city, and thought it a “haven from all that was aggressively modern and strident about their own hometowns” (Davis and Marvin 95).

For example, Dickens’ tale of the “Venice is entirely encompassed within an oneiric sequence, where a gondola ride across the “ghostly city” took the imaginary party “floating towards the heart of this strange place—with water all about us where never water was elsewhere—clusters of houses, churches, heaps of stately buildings ... and, everywhere, the same extraordinary silence” (110). Howells’ real-life experience was no less dream-like than Dickens’. He too had witnessed a supremely unreal city, which alternatively came into – and disappeared from – both view and touch:

The towers of the island churches loomed faint and far away in the dimness; the sailors in the rigging of the ships that lay in the Basin wrought like phantoms among the shrouds; the gondolas stole in and out of the opaque distance more noiselessly and dreamily than ever; and a silence, almost palpable, lay upon the mutest city in the world. (*Venetian Life* 1:29)

Rogers himself had transposed the same disorienting feeling in his poetry, where Venice shares in the physical dimension of the world only in part, and is devoid of weight and visibility:

The path lies o'er the Sea,  
Invisible; and from the land we went,  
As to a floating City – steering in,  
And gliding up her streets as in a dream,  
So smoothly, silently – by many a dome,  
Mosque-like, and many a stately portico,  
The statues ranged along an azure sky. (59-60)

The description of unknown or unspecified corners of Venice, identified only by a passing reference to a *calle* or a *portico*, helped de-personalize the city and add to the ethereal façade of Venice as a city of fantasy and improbability, so that when Dickens rowed away from the (unnamed) Piazza he could not stumble upon a single person who

was awake to contextualize his journey, as he travelled “abreast the silent quays”, and the only imposing presence was that of the “noiseless and watchful” water, “coiled round and round [Venice], in its many folds, like an old serpent” (118).

In James’ Venice, “human noise” alone could at times rival the overpowering silence: carried by the compliant water, voices could “travel far”, then enter your windows and mingle even with your dreams” (*IT* 59). The gondolier’s voice in particular was “the dominant or rather the only note” in a city where there was “scarcely another heard sound”, although such lack formed “part of the interest of the place” (*IT* 21). Additionally, James’ rhapsodies centred on very specific locations, such as the beautiful Palazzo Barbaro, where silence was a welcome, and sometimes a preferred, companion. “Exquisite hours, enveloped in light and silence” (*IT* 26) were spent in its painted rooms, and James’ “most thrilling of ... experiences” was his 36-hour long stay at the palazzo in the temporary absence of its owners, enjoyed “with a grand usurped sense of its being my own” (*Letters from the Palazzo Barbaro* 115-6). “The quiet of this place” James wrote, “is comfortable to me after the lively bustle of Florence” (92), and when he later had to travel back to the Tuscan city, he “was rowed [from the palazzo] through the delicious half-stirred place and the imbroglio of little silent plashing waterways to the station”, savouring the early morning trip before he must “come out into the dust and *banalité* of the rest of the world” (113).

Thus the “vernal silence of the city” (Howells, *VL* 1: 29) was largely perceived as a benign, soothing force, freeing the mind from the ties of verbal interaction and breathing life into the dream-like perception of a uniquely placed city, with the aid of the natural element of water. According to Howells, silence almost fulfilled a moral purpose, pervading the listener

not with sadness, not with melancholy, but with a deep sense of the sweetness of doing nothing, and an indifference to all purposes and chances. If ever you cared to have your name on men’s tongues, behold! that old yearning for applause is dead. Praise would strike like pain through this delicious calm. And blame? It is a wild and frantic thing to dare it by any effort. Repose takes you to her inmost heart, and you learn her secrets – arcana unintelligible to you in the new-world life of bustle and struggle. (*Venetian Life* 1:29)

If Venetian silence could be endowed with all the qualities of an uplifting dream, it could also precipitate into a nightmare and leave the mind free to roam the most mysterious recesses of possibility. James had enjoyed countless hours of blissful

silence in the rooms of the Palazzo Barbaro, praising the “charm of its haunted stillness” and unable to forget “the way the old ghosts seemed to pass on tiptoe on the marble floors. (*Letters from the Palazzo Barbaro* 26). Merton Densher, one of his characters in *The Wings of the Dove*, enjoyed a significantly less pleasurable experience during his “late strolls ... through labyrinthine alleys”, where “the sound of a rare footstep on the enclosed pavement was like that of a retarded dancer in a banquet-hall deserted”, something which quickly endeared him to the idea of an “immediate departure as not only possible, but indicated” (499-500). After all, the same unrelenting lack of sound had lingered over Venice’s “dark and silent” canals, when, at night “the secret vengeance of the Republic plunged its victims into the ungossiping depths of the Canalazzo!” (Howells, *Venetian Life* 1:2-3); and the surrounding “hush” and “stealthy sort of stillness” could be

suggestive of secret enterprises of bravoos and of lovers; and clad half in moonbeams and half in mysterious shadows, the grim old mansions of the Republic seemed to have an expression about them of having an eye out for just such enterprises as these at that same moment” (Twain 219)

In Byron’s tragedy, *Marino Faliero*, silence had even transformed into a harbinger of the Doge’s doom. Faliero’s desire for retribution after Michel Steno, “one of the three Capi of the Forty” (3), had slandered his young wife and suffered next to no punishment, was to take revenge against his enemies within Venice’s government itself. According to the plot, the Doge’s accomplices were to congregate in St. Mark’s Square and, upon the toll of its bell, begin the slaughter of his enemies, and win back both his dignity and undisputed sovereignty. Bertuccio Faliero, the Doge’s nephew, had rightly claimed that “deep vengeance” was “the daughter of deep silence” (14), and it was precisely a conspirator’s disregard for silence which caused details of the plot to reach the wrong ears, and ultimately prevent the Doge’s plans from coming to fruition.

St. Mark’s bell, the agreed-upon warning, *was* rung, but the complete silence that followed signalled the upheaval of the Doge’s fate. “The knell hath rung”, one of the officers proclaimed, “but it is not the senate’s!”, thus forcing the Doge to the ultimate realization: “All’s silent, and all’s lost!” (123). Defeated and imprisoned, Marino Faliero resolved to “die calmly”, asking the Chief of the Council of Ten for “silence for myself/And sentence from the court!” (142).



As we have seen, both in fiction and reality, Venice's silence had lent itself to a wealth of interpretations, but the exterior of gaiety and show which had established themselves as Venetian idiosyncrasies, appeared to eventually submit to an undercurrent of silence. At night, "Venice was ... so gay in her squares", but "the rest of the town was silent as the grave" (Cooper 42), and when Twain's "strange pageant" had left the theatres, he was left with "lonely stretches of glittering water – of stately buildings – of blotting shadows – of weird stone faces creeping into the moonlight – of deserted bridges – of motionless boats at anchor", all being encompassed by "that mysterious stillness, that stealthy quiet, that befits so well this old dreaming Venice" (232). After all, Cooper concluded, "a city in which the hoof of horse or the rolling of wheels is never heard, necessarily possesses a gloomy character" (42), so that society, no matter how loud or spectacular in its activity, could never truly subdue Venice's natural state.

#### **4.2. Modern silence: Advertising Venice**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century attitude surrounding Venetian silence has largely carried into the present day, the main difference being that the promise of dream-like peace and quiet, as well as the thrill of dangerous nightly escapades, have become useful advertising tools in the tourism industry, with the fantasies of the newcomers steadily resting upon well-established literary myths and travel-book advice, rather than from direct experience of the city. It is precisely because of this cultural background that today's tourists are "trained" to interpret the unfamiliar visual and aural imagery of Venice's "dark alleyways, unexpected dead ends" and "echoing footsteps" as frightening, whereas a native would be far more inclined to accept those same alleyways and sounds as "homey touches, rather than menacing ones" (Martin 233). In the mind of the impressionable newcomer, a late-night walk is thus sure to entail "the echoes of a stranger's footsteps approaching from behind", more likely to announce the arrival of a blood-thirsty bravo or a government official seeking to silence an enemy of the state, rather than the far more probable, and almost cartoonish occurrence described by Martin, that of footsteps belonging to a matron, "carrying home a pastry box by its ribbons, and pleasantly open to being of help if you have lost your way" (29). As a matter of fact, the notorious "hushed and sudden methods of the Venetian security agencies", which would "cast a chill across all Europe" and seep into the chronicles of foreign commentators far after the Venetian Republic had ceased to exist, have

nowadays left behind them only “an enjoyable aftermath of shudder”, now that the wandering tourist can consider himself “quite safe from the strangler’s cord” (Pemble 162). The unaccustomed ear of the foreign newcomers has nothing to fear from the legends of old, and though their imagination might be unleashed upon the quiet streets of Venice, the narrative of the nightmare carries no lethal weight behind it.

Silence as a balm for the ailing ears of visitors has proven much more enduring and effective as a selling point within the modern packaging of the Venetian experience. Decades after James had described his reluctant departure from his quiet Venice in order to reach the bustle and clamour of Florence, a Venetian acquaintance of McCarthy’s had marvelled at her tolerance for “the noise, the traffic, and the heat” (11) of the latter, just as 21<sup>st</sup> century tourists found Venice “a great relief after other Italian cities”, plagued by familiar sound pollution and less likely to give in to the feeling of being on “equal footing with the natives”, who, in Venice “walk the streets with tourists instead of trying to flatten them with cars” (Davis and Marvin 94). Venetian silence, in fact, has to compete against a fairly meagre list of modern sounds – “church bells, footsteps, the slapping of water in the wake of motorboats, the folkloric cries of boatmen, and the animated shouts made ... into mobile telephones” (28), so that once “cars are removed from the equation”, the urban hierarchies separating “public and private, interior and exterior” are definitely blurred (Davis and Marvin 94-5).

The notion of an “antimodern, dreamlike” (95) city is particularly dear to the tourist in the modern world, where silence is often the sole province of peripheral, out-of-reach or even unpopulated locations, so that a city of architectural and artistic relevance, combined with the relative lack of unpleasant noises and a steadily declining population, transforms Venice not only into a destination, but into a reward for the senses. This reasoning lies behind the guidebooks, the reviews and the advice of many a modern travel writer, whose work has strengthened the connection between the well-established reputation of Venice as the supreme city of romance with the “attraction of such unwordliness” as provided by silence. The initial “unsettling, almost eerie” feeling which some tourists might experience upon their first encounter with the “slow rhythms and silences of this unique environment” (Davis and Marvin 95) are soon overcome and in fact, according to the most recent shifts in mass tourism trends, such silence is advertised as symbolic of a ‘higher’ form of tourism, which stands opposed to the crowded must-see landmarks of Venice. Thus the sought-after “quiet part of town” (Frangipane 25) and the peripheral “backwater communities” of the lagoon city are marked as the depositaries of this precious aural resource and as privileged destinations

for the “more discriminating (and leisurely) tourist” looking to distance himself from the most pointed-at sights, and search for Venice’s hidden secrets and treasures (Davis and Marvin 175). Albeit, both are often conveniently listed by guidebooks themselves, a vast number of which mark an almost moral difference between crowded and deserted areas, herds of tourists and solitary travellers, clamour and silence.

Silence is actually so pivotal a feature in the modern image of Venice as to transcend the boundaries of aurality and seep into the visual representations of the city. In their work, Davis and Marvin had noted how the most common postcards featuring Venice were crucially devoid of people, both natives and tourists, choosing instead to represent Venice simply by way of “an empty canal, a solitary gondola and gondolier, or perhaps a line of unoccupied gondolas or their *ferri* in the sunset (sunrise?) on the Grand Canal” (175), thus visually readying the receiver for a soundless experience, unrivalled by either human or artificial sounds.

If reality found representation in those same postcards, it would betray the presence of bustling crowds of tourists and noisy supply boats (or at least of a demure Venetian matron, chatting with her equally demure companions,), but “such figuring of the city” appears to be supremely un-social, and far more indebted to the “solitary and somewhat narcotized” romanticism of Shelley and Byron (175) than to any reckoning with the present state of the city. In “postcard-speak”, the foreign visitor is transparently “invited into a miniature world rich in visual silence, slightly melancholy solitude, and floating comfort” (175), but the promised absence of sound is equally important in cementing the desirability of Venice as a destination. In a place that has routinely defied the parameters of what a city should be and look like, and continues to challenge the boundaries of believability, silence endures as one of its founding principles. If Venice is “of all the cities of the world ... the easiest to visit without going there” (James, *IT* 3), her silence is far harder to witness and believe, until it is heard.

## Conclusions

As has been seen, there is far more to be discovered in Venice's heritage than its undoubtedly imposing imagery. The evolution of its aural landscape in the past two centuries is fraught with substantial changes, contributing to the far-from-timeless legacy of Venetian auralness.

The sheer magnitude of this demographic, technological and cultural upheaval would have been an unpleasant surprise to a man like Henry James, who, devoted as he was to a fabricated idea of Venetian status quo, had lamented that it would have been "a sad day indeed when there should be something new to say" about Venice (*IT* 3), and was attached to the appearance of its St. Mark's Square to the point of asking forgiveness to the "shade of St. Theodore" for the (then) brand new café which had started to glare "electrically" in the Piazzetta (45). It would have been frighteningly easy for James, and for any one of his contemporaries, to notice the stark auditory differences between 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Venice. They would have heard, for example, that Venetian was no longer the dominant language, and that the previously undisputed dialect had had to give way not only to the relentless advance of Italian, but also to the overwhelming foreign presence of tourists in the city. Dialect would endure, but as a mark of Venetian identity and a necessary element for the aural preservation of a dwindling community, who operated a linguistic separation between private and public life, reserving Italian only for the latter. Additionally, they would have had a hard time coming into verbal contact with the natives, and while plenty of professional guides, linguistically trained to cater to their questions and curiosities, would have awaited them in galleries and museums, few Venetians would have volunteered their time and their language in order to show them around. The voices of the market would have changed as well. Not only had the markets themselves been moved away from the Piazza, but the Rialto alone had maintained the aural semblance of the square markets of old, now reduced to a modest sprawl of stalls in some Venetian *campi*.

They would have been heartened by their renewed friendship with the lasting class of the gondoliers, rejoiced in their cries, their arguments and (perhaps) in their songs, while bewilderment would have most likely ensued after they heard those same gondoliers talk loudly on their mobile phones and refuse to alter their preordained routes across the Venetian canals. If they had strolled around St. Mark's Square on any summer's night, they would have still been met by the music of orchestras playing their repertoires for the tourist crowds, albeit without a speck of political tension between

Venetian and Austrians left. Their choice of opera theatres would have been more limited, the audiences more-well behaved, but the music of Venetian masters would still have echoed across the walls of institutions such as the Fenice theatre or the Benedetto Marcello Conservatory. As far as modern naval traffic was concerned, it is very hard to imagine that the thrilling speed at which the water-taxis and the private motorboats now cruise around Venice would have made up for the problem of noise pollution currently plaguing Venice as well. Lastly, they would have still been able to witness Venice's supreme silence, not just in comparison with the rest of the world, but as an intrinsic Venetian quality which, despite the all-pervading aural revolutions undergone by the city in the past two centuries, had survived.

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