

PUSHKIN PRESS



THE THIRD TOWER
JOURNEYS IN ITALY

—
ANTAL SZERB



THE THIRD TOWER

JOURNEYS IN ITALY

Translated from the Hungarian by Len Rix

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AUGUST 1936. The early-morning train is pulling into Venice, on time to the minute and crammed with happy, chattering people. Among them are the usual foreigners, mostly German, but today, as throughout this remarkable summer, they are overwhelmingly Italian, people of all ages and social classes, taking advantage of the cheap fares now available on the *treni popolari*. For this is Mussolini's Italy, things are on the rise, and the whole country is caught up in the restless, happy excitement of a new era, bonded in common purpose at home, delirious with military successes abroad. Abyssinia has been conquered; in Spain, Italian troops are triumphantly on the march; from Greece, Turkey and Africa, reporters pen ecstatic reminders of the extent of former Italian power. It is a country where, if you believe the papers, "only wonderful things" seem to happen.

The train has now come to a halt and stands steaming in the steadily rising heat. Among the disembarking throng, with their battered suitcases and endless excited chatter, is a diminutive, nervously smiling man in a large black hat. Sallow-skinned, he too could be Italian, possibly Jewish. He, too, should be moving along with the crowd, for he has yet to find somewhere to stay. His decision to come was made at the last minute, on a panic impulse, with no time to arrange anything. But to travel is one thing, to arrive another. He seems momentarily lost. Perhaps it is dawning on him, rather belatedly, that his reasons for coming had not been all they had seemed. For him Italy, Venice in particular, had never been a place of mere "travel". It had meant too much to him, for far too long; had possessed him, at times, like a narcotic. It lay at the epicentre of a long-standing spiritual crisis, begun in adolescence, unduly protracted, perhaps not quite over yet.

It should be over. He is now thirty-five years of age, an assimilated Hungarian of Jewish descent, and has done much to establish himself both as a man and in the eyes of his fellow countrymen. His star (not yet a yellow one) is in the ascendant. His scholarly works (various monographs, and a groundbreaking *History of Hungarian Literature*) have won him serious academic recognition, to which his first novel, *The Pendragon Legend* (set in England and Wales), has added a wide popularity; his finest work is still to come. But there are limits. He still teaches, on a modest salary, not in the university where he rightly belongs, but in a commercial secondary school, for which he is by temperament totally unsuited, and where his pupils adore him. For, despite his formidable erudition and rising reputation, he is the gentlest, kindest, most self-effacing of men.

But time is not on his side, in any sense of the term: not this morning, if he is to find somewhere to rest his head; not for all the things he so desperately wants to see and re-experience on this visit. In truth, not ever. Whenever he comes to Venice, he now remembers, he sees it with the intensity of a dying man setting eyes on it for the last time. This time, he already half knows, it will be.

A thirty-five-year-old Hungarian arriving on the train to Venice... Readers of *Journey by Moonlight* will sense what is coming next. In Venice, despite the teeming crowds and the oppressive heat, he is filled with an intense elation that rises, in the dark little back alleys, to an unspeakable "ecstasy". There he experiences once again the old, overwhelming "nostalgia"—too simple a word for the death-haunted, spiritual-erotic states of consciousness that had blighted his youth. Like Mihály, the hero of the novel (begun soon after his return home), he might reasonably have thought that having at last become a "serious person" he would now be safe from the "danger that Italy represented". In the novel, with casual, indifferent ease, Venice lays that fantasy to rest. The hero's painfully forged adult persona is stripped away, and his journey becomes an increasingly headlong descent into mental breakdown and spiritual despair.

The novel, undoubtedly, was written to exorcize those ghosts for ever, to purge its author once and for all of the follies, the “madness” of his youth. What raises it to the level of a masterpiece is not so much the subtlety of its language, or the elegant symmetry of its construction, but the unsparing intelligence, the relentless self-irony and the moments of wry humour that give it authority. None of that authority would have been possible without this difficult visit, made in 1936, at what should have been the midpoint of his life, amid war and rumours of war.

Mihály’s journey, though downwards and by “moonlight”, is ever towards self-knowledge though ending in defeat. But his author, even as he savours the old heady poison of nostalgia, finds that it need no longer be his master. As his narrative proceeds, the tone, always engagingly personal with this writer, grows increasingly relaxed and playful. But he leaves us with a last, sideways glimpse of the power Venice once held over him. Of the ubiquitous mask he writes, in farewell to the city: “In Casanova’s day the mask *was* Venice. The hideous, beaklike visor held some essence something demonic, some ancient principle of evil, that was so old and so refined that even today it stirs us no less powerfully than goodness and great acts of love.”

The route he follows, in successive packed and chattering *treni popolari* down to Ravenna remains many-layered, recapitulating the steps both of his own earlier self (or selves) and of the mythical heroes of his youth.

During his first stop, Palladio’s Vicenza, the broad question of Italy and what it stands for in the “Northern mind” is brought into focus. His thoughts turn naturally to his admired Goethe, who first “discovered” the great neo-classical architect, and who inspired Szerb with his vision of the interconnectedness of all European culture—the theme of his great literary histories. But here we see another effect of layering: when he talks of Palladio’s art working, in combination with the mystical “serenity” of Italy itself, to “quell the Furies in Goethe’s soul, cleansing and purifying it” does he allude to a process he feels beginning now in himself? If so, its precise workings, and quite where they might lead, remain unclear.

In Verona, despite its association with another of his mythical heroes, Szerb is forced to retreat. The pressure of modern Italy, and his increasingly uncertain place in it, suddenly become “too much”, and he flees to Lake Garda. The inner journey likewise takes a change of direction. Up in the hills he begins to muse on self and solitude—the preoccupation that will dominate the rest of the journey.

In this wandering and oblique passage towards ever-greater self-knowledge, his beloved Italy plays no small role. Chiefly, it forces a relentless series of disillusionments, sometimes gentle more often brutal, upon him. There is something touchingly comic in the thought of our mild-mannered, hypersensitive, introverted little author, locked in his musings on history and the “Northern soul”, being cheerfully jostled on crowded trains, slapped on the back (for our Hungarian friends are currently all the fashion), and tormented by the happy revellers who fill his “historic” little room above the famously picturesque square in Verona (specially recommended by Baedeker) with guffawing, singing and shouting long into the night. But there is a darker side to all this jollity. Events offstage—in Spain, Abyssinia and elsewhere—are never far from his mind. His journey continues, taking in new sights, revisiting “monuments from his private past”, but the eyes that view them become increasingly dispassionate.

Most venerated of all are the last items on the itinerary: the sacred mosaics of the San Vitale, in Ravenna. More than anything, they had represented the tortured spiritual yearnings of his adolescence—as so memorably evoked in *Journey by Moonlight*:

Elbows on the table, they studied the plates, whose gold backgrounds glittered up at them ~~like a mysterious fountain of light at the bottom of a mineshaft. Within the Byzantine~~ pictures there was something that stirred a sleeping horror in the depth of their souls. At a quarter to twelve they put on their overcoats, and, with ice in their hearts, set off for midnight mass... For a month afterwards it was all Ravenna, and for Mihály Ravenna had remained to that day an indefinable species of dread.

Like the sinister back alleys of Venice, they are another critical test for him. There is a world of buried anguish, but also of relief, as it slowly dawns on him: “So, this was the real goal of my travels, this run-down and evil-smelling town.”

It is almost the end of the road. His journey is effectively over, its purpose seemingly accomplished. The way home lies through Trieste, another historic city with a wealth of associations, should he still be in the mood.

But all Szerb’s writing contains an element of surprise, and though he doesn’t know it yet, the most important discovery is still to come. Italy has retained its greatest gift for him for the last. It is one that will sustain him in the difficult times ahead, just a short way down the road, when rumours of war are no longer just rumours, and all question of travel has, for him, finally come to an end.

LEN RIX, 2013

~~INITIALLY~~ wanted to go to Spain, but Spain, in this most horrific summer in all its history, did not seem a very welcoming place, with its opposing radio stations taking turns to howl in triumph over the destruction of everything in the world for which one would want to visit that country. Perhaps I shall never get there now; and if I did, I would no longer find what I went to see. From time to time history seems to forget a particular city or citadel—a Nuremberg, an Oxford, a Toledo—tucked away behind its back. But this is mere absent-mindedness: a signal arrives, and amid wars, revolutions, catastrophic upheaval and the hammer blows of “progress”, its impermanence is laid bare.

Then it occurred to me that I simply must go to Italy—while Italy remains where it is, and while going there is still possible. Who knows for how much longer that will be; indeed, for how much longer I, or any of us, will be able to go anywhere? The way events are moving, no one will be allowed to set foot outside his own country. The Germans have long found it almost impossible to venture abroad, with a fine of a thousand marks for attempting to visit Austria. The Russians too have been denied this right for a great many years. Foreign travel is not one of life’s basic needs. No doubt the totalitarian state will sooner or later decree that the true patriot is the one who stays at home.

And this is why, whenever I travel to Italy, I go there as if for the very last time, and why, when I first set eyes on any of its towns, it is as if I am not just returning, but bidding it farewell. Dostoevsky writes that we should live as if our every minute were the last moments of a man condemned to death: that way, we would grasp the ineffable richness of life. My impressions of Italy always feel like the last visions of a dying man.

I TRAVELLED to Italy in a headlong rush, a blind panic, only half packed, without attending upon the deities of the National Bank's foreign exchange department, barely pausing for breath, straight to Venice. The heat was sweltering, the city bursting at the seams, and I was moved on, with varying degrees of brusqueness, from hotel to hotel. They say the city had never known such a season. The Spanish resorts were being bombed, and in the French ones the waiters were going on strike at every second mealtime. In the early morning, when the late-to-bed had finally retired and before the early risers were up, there was not a single lodging, of any description, to be had in the city—if we ignore the odd German dozing until dawn on the coffee-house terraces to save the expense of a hotel. It was certainly not pleasant to arrive in the heat, in this pampered city, crammed as it was with the world's fashionable riffraff, and be forced to wander for hours looking for somewhere to lay my head. But I drew enormous comfort from the simple fact that *I was there*. Whether things were going well or badly, whether I was miserable or happy, meant nothing beside the fact that it was *there*, in Venice, that I was happy or unhappy, that things were going well or badly. Life is not always and everywhere uniformly “real”. How wise were the great scholastics who distinguished between degrees of being, rising by regular gradations of reality towards perfection.

No, I didn't “enjoy myself” or “feel at home” in Venice, in the commonly accepted, physical-emotional sense of these terms. But, for the entire length of my stay, I was filled with elation by the mere fact that I was there, and that, by sharing in the life of that exalted sphere, I was more completely myself.

VENICE is the centre of the world. Or rather, one of its centres, for the world has several. It tilts on various axes, its prevailing truths are legion; the “one thing needful” takes many different forms. In St Mark’s Square you really have a sense of being at the centre of the world—just as you do in several places in Rome, or at the Place de l’Opéra in Paris. London has none of these sites. London may be the greatest city on Earth, and the most populous, but it remains somewhere out on the periphery, not at the centre. It has no St Mark’s Square. Following Valery Larbaud’s principle, one might describe it as village-like in its isolation. A man strolling around St Mark’s Square knows that by doing so he is performing a kind of function, just being there, at the centre of the world, letting the world revolve around him.

Venice is the city of intimate closeness. The most human-scale of all cities. Here Western culture’s Faustian rush to infinite expansion comes to a halt. Venice cannot “develop”. It cannot become any larger than it already is, because every square inch of available dry land has long been crammed full. Nor is there very much of it. Wherever you set out from, the city can be traversed from one end to the other in half an hour, almost all of it on foot. Everything is to hand, and distant objects are brought close enough to touch. Great seafaring ships make their way between the rows of houses, for here the wide ocean comes home. That is perhaps why Venice is more of a city than any other. It holds more. It is more of a home.

Darkness is gathering over the lagoon where it touches St Mark’s Square, bringing the silhouette of San Giorgio Maggiore, the Giudecca Island and Santa Maria della Salute into sharp relief, and making them more than ever the standard schoolroom example—a paradigm of inflection, like *amo-amas-amat*—of the beauty of landscape and the works of man. And the soft radiance of its brick-pink serenity spills out over the city—this city that exists in the spontaneous sense of nostalgia experienced by everyone who feels, on arrival, that he must have been here before, though he has never previously set eyes on it.

AND ONCE AGAIN, with the same expectation and excitement, I wander through the back alleys of Venice. These streets are wonderfully narrow. There are some so narrow that two overweight men cannot pass through them walking side by side. Even the broader ones are only wide enough for the traffic of a bygone age. One Easter Sunday I saw for myself how one of these passageways can become so crowded that the flow comes to a complete stop, unable to move forward or go back. Only very slowly, step by step, after a good half-hour's wriggling and squeezing, could you fight your way free from a street just one hundred metres long.

If I were compelled to speak with total candour, I would say that it is for these back alleys that I love Italy. For me, they represent what gardens were to the age of Goethe, and what "Nature" was to the Romantics. No snow-covered peak, no glacier, mountain lake or stream, no sea or parkland could ever move me like the back alleys of an old Italian city. My dreams, my moods of nostalgia lead me thither. The first time I set eyes on an Italian hilltop town with these same tiny streets I felt the deepest ecstasy I had ever known.

What this is in me I do not know. Under the influence of these little passageways I experience an altered state so deep I simply cannot regard it as the sort of emotion you would expect from a historically minded person; it is so much more intense and instinctive. I am aware of the usual Freudian explanation, and it bores me. It is so plausible I no longer believe it.

IN THE FIRST HOTEL that promised an available room, the waiter spoke French. I panicked. Instinct told me, as the event confirmed, that the French language would not come cheap there. Where they address you in German, it is because they know you have no money; where the language is French, they take you for a member of the aristocracy. I did not linger in that particular establishment. Eventually I came to anchor in a little *pensione* that nestled, in the most historical way imaginable (embedded, as it were, in world history), in a building right beside the Clock Tower, the Torre dell'Orologio, in St Mark's Square, by the entrance to the Merceria. From my window I can study some of the more intimate details of the Basilica. Directly above my head the two bronze men bong out the hours. I feel as a mouse would in a slipper of the great Doge Morosini.

The food here is tolerable. The tiny window of the dining room opens onto St Mark's Square. The guests speak various dialects of French and German. A French family: two mothers (or, rather, one of them must be a mother, though I can't work out which) and two daughters. You would think that *gaucherie* was the preserve of the Northern races, but from my observation of these two French ladies and other French guests they offer strong competition to the Germans. It's just that theirs is a different sort of *gaucherie*: more gracious. Or is this just my prejudice?

THE ITALIANS adore Hungary. Every day you read in the papers: “Family house on Lake Balaton” or “Nostalgie di Halászbástya”. (For them, as I see it, “nostalgia” signifies “ambience” or “atmosphere”—what a wise language!) And people respond most warmly when they hear the word “Ungheria”. I get the impression that the name implies almost as much for Italians as “Italy” does for us—a friendly, romantic and fundamentally different country. What attracts us to them is that everything there is so old, and what attracts them to us is that everything we have is so new—a closely related thing. I once watched a group of Italian tourists gazing in reverence at the Pasarét Church: they had never before seen such a new one.

I was once asked in England how I could possibly have left my own highly romantic country for such a grey, petty-bourgeois place. Naturally my questioners were Italian.

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