

L'immagine dell'Italia  
nelle letterature angloamericane  
e postcoloniali

*a cura di Paolo Bertinetti*

Trauben

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*Volume pubblicato con i fondi PRIN 2012*

In copertina: Il golfo di Napoli in un acquarello dallo *Sketchbook* di Lady Augusta Gregory (1900

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via Plana 1 – 10123 Torino  
[www.trauben.it](http://www.trauben.it)

ISBN 978 88 66980476

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THE PHOENIX AND THE MOCK TURTLE:  
TRAGEDY AND CARNIVAL  
IN JOHN BERENDT'S VENICE

*Lucia Folena*

“That’s absurd”, I said.  
“It’s worse than absurd”, said Dr. Scattolin. “It’s  
contradictory, hypocritical, irresponsible, dangerous,  
dishonest, corrupt, unfair, and completely mad”. He  
leaned back in his chair. “Welcome to Venice”<sup>1</sup>.

Stepping into John Berendt’s Venice is very much like entering a separate reality, a sort of looking-glass world, as if the *Ponte della Libertà* – the long bridge which connects the city to the mainland – provided access to a sphere where many of the conventions, rules, and laws from which “normal” everyday life elsewhere takes its shape are suddenly suspended, reversed, or altogether abolished. The disproportion between the two sides of this mirror is in fact only a matter of perspective: for, in the words of one of Berendt’s Venetian characters, poet Mario Stefani, “If Venice didn’t have a bridge, Europe would be an island”<sup>2</sup>.

*The City of Falling Angels* was first published in 2005 and achieved immediate success in the US, to the point where it rapidly gained the top

<sup>1</sup> J. BERENDT, *The City of Falling Angels*, London, Penguin, 2006, p. 72. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition. The title of the book is explained thus: “After part of a marble angel fell from a parapet of the ornate but sadly dilapidated Santa Maria della Salute Church [in the early 1970s], Arrigo Cipriani, the owner of Harry’s Bar, posted a sign outside the church warning, ‘Beware of Falling Angels’” (298). The “fallenness” which has been an essential constituent of the city’s appeal to intellectuals and artists from Byron onwards, is here, somewhat simplistically, traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the glorious republic of the past, once “the world’s supreme maritime power [...] had given itself over to hedonism and dissipation – masked balls, gaming tables, prostitution, and corruption. The ruling class abandoned its responsibilities, and the state became enfeebled, powerless to resist Napoleon’s approaching army” (41).

<sup>2</sup> “That line”, as Berend remarks, “was the title of one of his books of poetry” (338). Stefani’s *Se Venezia non avesse il ponte, l’Europa sarebbe un’isola* was actually published in 1994.

position on the *New York Times* bestseller list<sup>3</sup>, largely thanks to the renown its author had conquered with his previous non-fiction narrative, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1994), which had broken all previous records by spending over four years on the same list<sup>4</sup>. Both works are constructed as true-to-fact crime stories in the style of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, but in both the main plot – the aftermath of a supposed murder in Savannah, Georgia, in the first, and that of the fire which destroyed the Fenice opera house in 1996 in the second – also functions as a frame for a series of unrelated tales sharing the same backdrop as it and presumably aimed at articulating and enriching the reader's sense of the tangled, impenetrable complexity of a microcosm full of dark corners, dead ends and passageways into the Unexpected and the Preposterous.

Rather than a protagonist in its own right, the Venice of *Falling Angels* is just a scenery, a decaying and fascinating place where peculiar things happen and real people act and interact in ways which are often unpredictable to say the least<sup>5</sup>. “Nothing”, after all, “can be said [about Venice itself] (including this statement) that has not been said before”, Berendt remarks citing Mary McCarthy, who was in turn citing Henry James (44); and he goes on to explain that the object of his interest “was not Venice per se but people who live in Venice, which is not the same thing”, and that the large majority of the numerous novels and movies set in the city “tended to be about people who were just passing through” and to choose “neither Venetians nor resident expatriates” but mere “transients” as their “main characters” (45). In assembling his gallery of Venetian portraits Berendt establishes no essential differences between the “old” inhabitants of long standing – whether descendants of the ancient nobility that governed the republic or of numberless generations of glass-blowers, merchants and artisans ennobled by the pride of their traditional crafts – and the former expatriates (mostly from the US and Britain) whose choice of a home on the Laguna is in itself a clear manifestation of their sharing

<sup>3</sup> It also made Amazon.com's Top Ten Bestsellers list (“*The City of Falling Angels*”, [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org), Aug. 2014).

<sup>4</sup> A. GOODHEART, “*The City of Falling Angels*: There's Life after Lady Chablis”, *The New York Times*, Sep. 25, 2005 ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), Aug. 2014).

<sup>5</sup> In his introductory note Berendt declares that “all the people” in his narrative “are real and are identified by their real names”, and that there “are no composite characters” in it (ix).

the city's general penchant for quirkiness and for the creative rejection of accepted procedures and strictures.

This inclination is foregrounded in some of the subplots, where one encounters oddballs such as the Plant Man, who “appeared at first to be a shrub that moved” (65); or the Rat Man of Treviso, who sounds as if he comes straight from a Lear limerick and has made a fortune by concocting customized rat poisons to suit the diverse tastes of rodents living in different parts of the world (114-121; 393-394); or “Capitano Mario”, who wears all sorts of military and paramilitary uniforms and each time loses his sense of himself to become the officer whose role he is playing at the moment (74-78); or Ralph Curtis, the Mars-obsessed descendant of the Bostonian owners of Palazzo Barbaro, where the likes of Henry James and John Singer Sargent, among others, were guests. Venetian aristocrats appear as no less eccentric than their untitled fellow-citizens. Suffice it to mention Count Alvise Loredan, inflated with dynastic self-importance – later unmasked as grounded on a half-truth (402) – and a combination of classism and intellectual pretensions so overblown as to sound ludicrous or purely nonsensical:

I have written a book about democracy [Loredan tells the narrator at a Carnival party]. It's called *Democracy: A Fraud?* Democracy disgusts me. It makes me sick! [...] A far better course is to put the government in the hands of an elite aristocracy – people who have inherited an aptitude for justice and good government from their noble ancestors. [...] You would find my book *Nobility and Government* interesting. I am now writing a book proving the existence of reality! It is already two thousand pages long<sup>6</sup>.

Berendt comments that a “book on the subject of reality written by a Venetian had curious possibilities”, but adds that further explanations were cut short by the nobleman's wife, who dragged him elsewhere. To be sure, both the city and its inhabitants have a relationship with factual reality, and with truth, which is far more problematic than elsewhere. Venice itself is a place of false appearances, an Oriental maze of enigmas and delusions where things are not what they seem and their inner

<sup>6</sup> 109-110. There are no traces of either the book on democracy or that on reality among Loredan's published works, which are devoted to the history of Venice (*I Dandolo*, 1983; *La nobiltà del governo. Grandezza e decadenza del patriziato veneziano*, 1994).

substances seldom, if ever, correspond to their outer shells<sup>7</sup>. In this sense the flame-devoured opera house is its best symbolic representation:

At first glance, the Fenice looked just as it always had – the formal portico, the Corinthian columns, the ornamental iron gates, the windows and balustrades – all completely intact. But of course this was just the façade, and façade was all there was. The Fenice had become a mask of itself. Behind the mask, the interior had been reduced to a pile of rubble. (36)

In fact the Fenice is doubly symbolical, for the whole of Venice is a theater. Its denizens pass along canals “like actors crossing a stage” (63), well aware that they are performing their parts under the constant gaze of others<sup>8</sup>, and they are not ashamed of admitting that the faces and masks they wear are simple devices for social interaction with no bearing on their “true” inner selves. Or, as another of Berendt’s patrician interlocutors, Count Girolamo Marcello, puts it,

Everyone in Venice is acting. Everyone plays a role, and the role changes. The key to understanding Venetians is rhythm [...]. In Venice the rhythm flows along with the tide, and the tide changes every six hours. [...] To us bridges are transitions. We go over them very slowly. They are part of the rhythm. They are the links between two parts of a theater, like changes in scenery, or like the progression from Act One of a play to Act Two. Our role changes as we go over bridges. We cross from one reality ... to another reality. [...] A trompe-l’œil painting is a painting that is so lifelike it doesn’t look like a painting at all. It looks like real life, but of course it is not. It is reality once removed. What, then, is a trompe-l’œil painting when it is reflected in a mirror? Reality twice removed? [...] What is true? What is not true? The answer is not so simple, because the truth can change. I can change, You can change. That is the Venice effect. (1-2)

<sup>7</sup> “I understood why so many stories set in Venice were mysteries. Sinister moods could easily be conjured by shadowy back canals and labyrinthine passageways, where even the initiates sometimes lost their way. Reflections, mirrors, and masks suggested that things were not what they seemed. Hidden gardens, shuttered windows, and unseen voices spoke of secrets and possibly the occult. Moorish-style arches were reminders that, after all, the unfathomable mind of the East had had a hand in all this” (42-43).

<sup>8</sup> For “everywhere in Venice the eyes are watching” (113).



He then adds, by way of conclusion: “Venetians never tell the truth. We mean precisely the opposite of what we say” (2). Some years later, when reminded of that statement, he confirms it making its intrinsic contradictoriness even more blatant: “True, and when I told you that, I meant the opposite of what I said” (320). Without going so far as to fall like Marcello into the age-old “Cretan” paradox<sup>9</sup>, other Serenissima-dwellers offer a similar perspective, as does Rose Lauritzen, Berendt’s British landlady: “no matter what you say, everyone will assume you’re lying. Venetians always embellish, and they take it for granted you will, too. So you might as well. Because, funnily enough, if they discover you’re someone who tells the truth all the time, they’ll simply write you off as a bore” (49). But Marcello’s words also offer a clue to another recurrent feature of this Venice – its strong links with the territory of Nonsense:

“Then you should say what you mean” the March Hare went on.

“I do”, Alice hastily replied; “at least – at least I mean what I say – that’s the same thing, you know”.

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “You might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see!’”<sup>10</sup>

One of the set pieces, recounting the feud between the two Seguso brothers, heirs to a renowned family of glassblowers and glass artists, takes up a chapter entitled “Glass Warfare” (125-140). Now in a universe governed by the regular laws of physics by which the fragility of glass is declared incompatible with the violence of a conflict – the universe on the other side of the *Ponte della Libertà* – this would sound like an oxymoron. In Venice, however, anything is possible, and the behaviors of the siblings, far from appearing absolutely irrational as they do when seen from the outside, or even when each is considered from the other’s perspective, are shown to be both perfectly logical if one embraces the two points of view simultaneously.

Incidentally, here, as happens in Carroll’s world<sup>11</sup>, one also runs into a White Knight. The man who, in the eyes of many though certainly not all of his fellow-citizens, plays this role is prosecutor Felice Casson, who

<sup>9</sup> “All Cretans are liars”, as the Cretan philosopher Epimenides is fabled to have said.

<sup>10</sup> L. CARROLL, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, London, Macmillan, 1866, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> *Through the Looking-glass*, London, Macmillan, 1872, Ch. 8 (pp. 157-184).

is in charge of the inquiry on the Fenice fire and from the start appears determined to redress wronged justice by establishing a definitive truth about the origin of the fire itself – whether arson or mere negligence – and the individual responsibilities involved. He is, as Rose Lauritzen declares, perhaps with a touch of irony, “one of the few honest, incorruptible prosecutors we’ve got left. A white *knights*”; and she adds: “I just pray he doesn’t suddenly self-destruct like all the others” (105). Long later, the Fenice trial – in which a number of prominent city administrators and officials are called on to defend themselves against charges of negligence for having omitted all elementary precautions aimed at preventing the dire event – also suddenly turns the tragedy into a farce:

The most novel defense was offered by the lawyer for Gianfranco Pontel, the Fenice’s general manager. Pontel’s attorney claimed, at great length and with a straight face, that his client was responsible for the safety and security of the Fenice theater and that when the Fenice was not putting on productions, it ceased to be a theater and became a mere complex of buildings for which his client had no legal obligations at all. The theater had vanished, at least where Gianfranco Pontel was concerned, and would reappear only when productions once again were mounted on its stage. The lawyer’s speech drew laughter from the gallery and could have fit seamlessly into *Alice in Wonderland* or any number of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. (380)

Actually the initial “tragedy of losing the Fenice” (53) has already given way to a completely different kind of show in the intricate, tormented vicissitudes of its reconstruction, at least according to surrealist painter Ludovico De Luigi, who some two years after the fire states:

The Fenice is putting on an opera. [...] An opera buffa – a comic opera. [...] No, a tragicomic opera. But this opera is not on the stage. It’s in the audience. The spectators have become the performers. Politicians, building executives, architects. Everybody says they want to build the theater. But nobody really wants to build it. They are only interested in the fees. They want this opera to go on and on. They come in, they get some money, they do nothing, then they leave, and on the way out, they get some more money. Then other people come in, and they get some more money, and so forth. They all make impressive designs, but you have to know what’s beneath. Ruthless people. Politicians. [...] They had to find somebody to

blame for the fire. [...] But not politicians, of course. First they accused the Mafia. It took two years for them to decide it was not the Mafia. And now they've found the two poor electricians. [...] They tell the electricians, "Listen, if you go to jail instead of me, you will have a big fat bank account when you get out". Whoever burned down the Fenice did not do it for political or philosophical reasons. It was for money. (284-285)

The city whose inhabitants are constantly intent on carrying on their collective, endless theatrical performance thus becomes the setting of a play-within-the play. Once again, as in Count Marcello's presentation, the *trompe-l'œil* gets reflected in a mirror, and what one obtains is "reality twice removed". Afterwards, the verdict for the Fenice trial will prove to have an equally shaky relation with factual truth – despite Casson's efforts – in its fabricating a narrative of petty arson by two foolish young electricians worried about having to pay a small penalty for the delay in their work, thus tailoring the conclusion to the desire of the large majority of the big shots involved in the case:

"the trail goes cold, and the mystery lingers on," said Ludovico De Luigi with a chuckle, "It's all about money, as usual. Not love – money. The perfect ending, for Venice." [...] "Why a perfect ending?! I asked. "Things are left hanging". "Yes, but this is the sort of ending Venice can live with, happily and forever. [...] Look what the story offers: a great fire, a cultural calamity, the spectacle of public officials blaming each other, an unseemly rush for the money to rebuild the theater, the satisfaction of a trial with guilty verdicts and jail sentences, the pride of the Fenice's rebirth, and [...] an unsolved mystery. Money secretly changing hands. Unnamed culprits hiding in the shadows. It stimulates the imagination, gives people the freedom to make up any scenario they want. What more could anyone ask?" (382-383)

Stories of corruption, deceit and betrayal somewhat analogous to the *vicenda*<sup>12</sup> of the Fenice fire shape some of Berendt's subplots, notably

<sup>12</sup> The term is used by GOODHEART, cit.: "As for the opera house arson plotline, it can best be characterized with an Italian word that has no exact counterpart in English: *vicenda*. A *vicenda* is a story that combines elements of mystery, scandal and intrigue; it is often used by the Italian press in describing Mafia plots or political corruption cases.

those which regard two associations formed by Americans or Britons and based in the Serenissima. One is the Save Venice group – initially a well-meaning charity founded, and abundantly funded, by wealthy, snobbish US businessmen and professionals for the restoration of Venetian churches and monuments – which is gradually and irreparably torn by a destructive clash of personalities (291-334). Another, even darker, intrigue, revolves around the Ezra Pound Foundation, established by the English curator of the Peggy Guggenheim Museum and his wife presumably for the sole purpose of getting their hands on the innumerable boxes of letters and documents left by the poet, who died in 1972, to his long-time lover Olga Rudge, who survived him twenty-four years living in the Dorsoduro cottage she had previously shared with him<sup>13</sup>. And, “before anyone knew it, the papers were gone” (188). The story is recurrently shown to bear striking analogies to the plot of Henry James’ *Aspern Papers*<sup>14</sup>, as if, once again, in the Venetian scenario fiction became undistinguishable from truth, or rather preceded and created it.

Such a prevalence of representation over reality perhaps also explains why Venice is such a self-referential city, more interested in itself than in the rest of the universe: “It made sense to me”, Berendt remarks, “that people who lived in Venice would talk a lot about Venice, the business of Venice being, after all, Venice itself” (56). This literal insularity, however, has positive aspects, in terms of the sense of community and the cohesion it creates among citizens, regardless of their social standing.

Unfortunately, by its very nature, it also lacks any conventional climax or resolution, petering out in a flurry of speculation, dropped charges and contradictory accusations”.

<sup>13</sup> According to J. MORRIS (“Dirt in Venice”, *The Guardian*, Sep. 24, 2005), this “tale forms a centrepiece to *The City of Falling Angels*, perhaps because the author considers it emblematic of the whole, and it certainly contains all the elements of classic scandal. There is the dead fascist poet who spent much of his life in a lunatic asylum. There is his legendary mistress, once a celebrated violinist, later to decline into Alzheimer’s. There are whispers of exploitation, debatable contracts, legal chicanery and missing papers. There is a box not to be opened until 2016. It takes Berendt 40 pages to explore this crepuscular trail, and even he doesn’t venture upon conclusions” (www.theguardian.com, Aug. 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Berendt points this out, for example, in a phone call to Mary de Rachewiltz, Olga’s and Ezra’s daughter: “I was struck by the similarity between what happened to your mother and the story in *The Aspern Papers*. Are you familiar with this novel?’ ‘We’ve been living with *The Aspern Papers* for forty years’, she said” (221).

Rose Lauritzen depicts the Serenissima as “terribly democratic” because “whether you’re a countess or a shopkeeper”, you move about it in the same way—you have to walk or take the *vaporetto* (56); Daniel Curtis, whose father is a native Venetian and who therefore sees himself as “the only [true] Venetian” in his Bostonian family, describes the society of which he feels part as follows:

Do you know what it is to be a Venetian? Venetians are very tough, they are very quarrelsome. They argue seriously for honor, and the vocabulary of the ancient dialect is very earthy. Venetians have expressions that are so incredibly vulgar they cannot possibly be taken literally, because if you took them literally, you would have to kill the person who said it to you. But what Venetians have that is very good is that they don’t get excited about whether you are a king, a queen, the president, or *la comtesse* or *le comte*. Venetians are very democratic. They are all brothers. They all help each other. And it is the same for me, because I am Venetian. To me the baker is my brother. But for my mother and my aunt and my uncle, the baker is the baker. (179-180)

The solidarity established within this closed microcosm is so strong that “no lawyer in Venice would take a case against another Venetian lawyer or notary” (228), which constitutes one of the problems—though by no means the worst—that need to be resolved when one is faced with a judiciary or bureaucratic issue. “The Anglo-Saxon mentality simply does not exist in Venice [...]. The Venetian concept of law, for example, is certainly not Anglo-Saxon” (55), says Peter Lauritzen, Rose’s husband, stressing the difficulty for an outsider to adapt to this way of going about things. Speaking shortly after the fire, he envisages the eventual reconstruction of the Fenice as a very unlikely event:

In Venice, if you want to fix a crack in a wall, you must get twenty-seven signatures from twenty-four offices, and then it takes six years to fill the crack. I’m not exaggerating. How can anyone build an opera house with that sort of foolishness going on? No, no, Venice’s real Achilles’ heel is not fire and is not high water. It’s bureaucracy. (53)

Municipal administrators maneuver bureaucratic intricacies so as to keep residents in a situation of inescapable paradox, a sort of Kafkaesque catch:

Venice is a very Byzantine city. That explains a lot of things. For example, if you are a property owner, you are responsible for making certain repairs to your property. But before you make those repairs, you must get a permit, and permits are very difficult to come by. You find yourself having to bribe city officials to give you a permit so you can make repairs that those very officials would fine you for not making, or for making without a permit<sup>15</sup>.

“Bribery”, after all, as Rose comments, “is a way of life in Venice. But you can’t really call it bribery. It’s accepted as a legitimate part of the economy” (54). Likewise, “one of the great secrets of Venice [is] the discount – *lo sconto!* [...] Everything is negotiable in Venice [...]: prices, rents, doctors’ fees, lawyers’ fees, taxes, fines, even jail terms” (51). Rules and laws here seem to exist only in order to be broken, as becomes manifest along the tortuous itinerary leading to the reconstruction of the Fenice. Some time after the Impregilo consortium has obtained the contract and begun working on the site, the State Council stops everything because of the incompleteness of the project. The contract thus goes to the Holzmann-Romagnoli group, which has Aldo Rossi as its chief architect. At that point, however, “upon close inspection, Rossi’s architectural plan was found to be in violation of certain Venetian building codes. In order for the construction to go forward, either the laws would have to be changed or exceptions granted. The relevant officials, however, promptly declared it would not be a problem” (283).

In sum, most of the vices which are generally ascribed by foreign observers, as well as self-attributed by Italian opinion makers, to the county as a whole – corruption, illegality, disregard for appointed procedures and regulations, unreliability, a proclivity to double standards,

<sup>15</sup> 54. The adjective “Byzantine”, in reference to Venice, recurs in a speech pronounced a few years later before the Save Venice board by Count Marcello, whose wife has just been a victim of the rift within the organization and has thus been unreasonably dismissed from her position as director of its local office: “To be Venetian [...] and to know how to live in Venice is an art. It is our way of living, so different from the rest of the world. Venice is built not only of stone but of a very thin web of words, spoken and remembered, of stories and legends, of eyewitness accounts and hearsay. To work and operate in Venice means first of all to understand its differences and its fragile equilibrium. In Venice we move delicately and in silence. And with great subtlety. We are a very Byzantine people, and that is certainly not easy to understand” (319).

falsehood and deceit, a “carnavalesque” use of justice<sup>16</sup> and the pervasive, overwhelming presence of bureaucracy – tend in Berendt’s narrative to become Venetian peculiarities<sup>17</sup>, strengthening the image of the Serenissima as a self-enclosed, completely autonomous realm where the Ordinary loses its hold on reality and the Extraordinary becomes the dominant modality of existence. For this is “a Dionysian city” whose quintessential spirit manifests itself most powerfully during Carnival, which stages “a celebration of the magic, the mystery, and the decadence of Venice” (103) in a ritual as sacred as the mystical experience of reaching the Dionysian through the Apollonian that was created for theatergoers by G. B. Meduna in his 1837 *Fenice* (100-103).

In Carnival time, while the opera house is being rebuilt, Ludovico De Luigi rows a gondola to the plywood enclosure set on a platform in the Grand Canal and containing cement mixers and the other gear used in the construction. The outside is decorated by a mural representing the Fenice itself, on which he starts painting flames. A police boat comes.

“What are you doing?” one of the policemen shouted.

De Luigi turned around, the incriminating paintbrush in one hand, the paint can in the other. “I am telling the truth”, he said with triumphant defiance. “The architect’s commission for the new Fenice came out of the flames. I am turning his rendering into an honest statement”.

“Oh, it’s you, maestro”, the policeman said.

“Well, are you going to arrest me?” De Luigi asked.

“Arrest you? Again?”

“I have vandalized this mural”, said de Luigi.

“I’m not sure I’d call it that”.

“Am I not a public nuisance?” De Luigi looked bewildered.

“During Carnival, maestro, everyone is a public nuisance. The rules are different. Come back and do this again next week. Then maybe we’ll arrest you”. (289)

<sup>16</sup> O. KHAZAN, for instance, describes “Italy’s carnivalesque judicial process, where there is never order in the court, the lawyers and defendants constantly interrupting the proceedings with groans and catcalls and wild gesticulations, while the press in the gallery yammers away like the kids in the back of the classroom” (“Amanda Knox and Italy’s Carnavalesque Justice System”, *The Atlantic*, Jan, 30, 2014 ([www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com), Feb. 2014).

<sup>17</sup> The only relevant exception is an allusion to “the famously nonmilitary Italians” in relation to “Capitano Mario” (75).

But here in the looking-glass world the rules are always and invariably different from those on the other side of the mirror, so that a further, carnivalesque reversal is unthinkable because it would paradoxically amount to a step toward the restoration of the “Apollonian” rationality which humans elsewhere strive to impose on their interactions. Unable to turn Venice’s life upside down, Carnival therefore merely magnifies temporarily its connatural, inescapable tendency to (relative) disorder, its proud collective espousal of (a form of) deviance. Yet in all this there remains a note of playfulness and levity. Dionysian excess rarely gives way to frenzied anarchy or absolute unruliness, but is rather toned down and subdued, so that contemporary celebrations of Carnival are essentially jocose bouts of merrymaking where the ritual of turning the world upside down loses its aggressiveness and its implications of social upheaval: “As reinvented in the twentieth century, it seemed, Carnival was a tamer version of its former self. Lacking the context of pervasive decadence, even depravity, Carnival was little more than a comparatively chaste celebration of a long-gone historic phenomenon” (122).

Thus, if Venice is literally a labyrinth, there is no life-threatening Minotaur in the middle of this maze, which leads visitors astray thanks to mere reflections in mirrors and to largely harmless deceptions: “Ernest Hemingway described Venice as ‘a strange, tricky town’ and walking in it as ‘better than working crossword puzzles’. To me [Berendt states] it occasionally felt like walking through a funhouse, especially at times when, twenty minutes after having set out on a course that I had thought was a straight line, I discovered I was right back where I started” (65). In the city where angels always seem on the point of collapsing but have not actually fallen down as yet, potential tragedy almost invariably gets defused into *opera buffa*, Carnavalesque subversion into the containment offered by the comparative innocence of role- and game-playing<sup>18</sup>, Kafka into Lewis Carroll, and the sublimity of the Absurd into the weirdness of Nonsense.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. M. BAKHTIN, *Rabelais and His World* [1941-1965] (trans. H. Iswolsky, Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1984); on “containment” vs. “subversion” see for instance P. STALLYBRASS & A. WHITE, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, London, Methuen, 1986.