

*Alice in Venice*, Ellis Sharp (Zoilus Press)

At the university where I work, I teach a module about writing back to, writing from, collaging, remix, writing prequels and sequels, collaboration and what one smart student called 'breaking the rules using different rules' (Oulipo games, processes and the like), so I am always interested to find new examples of texts I might be able to use. Ellis Sharp's novella offers an intertextual engagement with Nic Roeg's *Don't Look Now*, itself a version of a Daphne du Maurier short story. In 57 sections, most containing at least one photo as well as an often brief text, we follow Alice as she travels to Venice and visits Roeg's film locations, taking photographs to document each one as she does so, as well as some of the statues, courtyards and buildings she encounters.

Sharp also offers the reader facts about the film, the cast, the director and du Maurier, as well as asides, interludes and diversions, many of these arising from Alice's relationship to Alain, a Frenchman she encounters and has a relationship with. Alain (or is it Sharp or is it Alice?) presents himself as a spy, a drugs dealer, an assassin, a seller of erotic books; it remains unclear if we ever get the truth. In fact it is unclear if Alain even exists, because the final section informs us that on Alice's 'last day in the city they meet by chance, near the graves of Ezra Pound and Olga Rudge'. It is also the first time Alain is described, and having done so, Alice decides he is not her type and rebuffs his advances before taking a final snapshot.

In a kind of nod to the reader, the book closes with Alice listening to 'All the tracks from *Red*' (which I took to be the King Crimson album but am informed by my daughter is more likely to be Taylor Swift's; either way it's an unusually specific reference) although 'Her finger presses down on her favourite option: random shuffle.' Is this an instruction to the reader that might help untangle the story or non-story they have just read through? Am I not noticing the kind of colour coding and web of associative connections and connotations that Roeg used to underpin his film? Water, photography, red and blue, glass, bridges, Venice itself, even the title of the wife's book in the opening montage – *The Fragile Geometry of Space*, are filmed (according to Mark Sanderson's BFI study of *Don't Look Now*) in a way that 'creates a restless atmosphere of perpetual motion which is occasionally broken up by deliberate fragmentation: jagged editing and fractured time.'

Careful re-reading suggests that Sharp is not working in such a way, although he is interested in moments, place(s) and people's responses to and memories of them. Also how Roeg's film, Alice's trip, her imaginary (?) relationship with Alain, and Sharp's and the reader's own depictions and knowledge of Venice intersect. There is a kind of absence throughout the book, perhaps highlighting missing rather than fractured time. In addition to Alain's insubstantiality, or maybe through his ventriloquised and disembodied voice, we are informed that "'William Shakespeare. Jane Austen. Joseph Conrad. William Faulkner Malcolm Lowry. George Orwell. Jim Thompson. So many great writers never went to Venice. Not even once.'"

And? What is the reader, let alone Alice, who I assume to be the unnamed recipient of this spoken statement, to make of this? How many hundreds or thousands of other great writers didn't go to Venice? Sharp's apparent justification for this kind of digression, irrelevancy or

provocation appears at the end of the same section: "'Improvisation. A narrative shaped like life itself by chance. The intrusion of the random.'" "Collage. All that we have lost." "We?" "Oui."

Alice is aware of other things that are lost. She 'feels as if she's wandered into Roeg's film, with everyone having just left the scene'. They have not just left, and the film – itself a mediated and constructed fiction – remains as a trace of their presence, even if 'the differences are small' when she finds the locations she is looking for. She is also aware that 'The presentation of the facts [...] is made in terms of textual references, signatures upon documents, their dates, and the idiom in which the documents were written.' She is discussing Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, but it is another idea that may help the reader understand what is going on; elsewhere, 'Alice wonders: what did Nic Roeg read about Venice, beforehand? Did he dip into James Morris's book?' Is this a genuine question about Roeg and the research he undertook, or a hint to the reader that Morris' book is a key text for understanding Venice? Is the strangely out-of-context exclamation "'Mind the volcano!'" a nod to Malcolm Lowry, who is namechecked in that list of authors who didn't visit Venice?

Perhaps I am over-thinking the whole thing? Or perhaps if I don't pursue these lines of thought I may end up in 'The Museum of Extinguished Possibilities' that is mentioned in an earlier chapter, which cleverly presents the end, or at least an end, to Alice's story a third of the way into the book. Perhaps there is a 'right sequence' according to the norms of chronology and narrative for this book's sections? I think I prefer it as it is: after all, parataxis, chance and fragmentation are how many of us experience the world, and like our reading to reflect that.

There is something else puzzling though. On the strength of *Alice in Venice* I bought Sharp's *Sharply Critical*, a book of selected reviews and essays previously published on his blogs. I haven't read it all yet, but as well as seemingly being obsessed by Ian McEwan and Zionist/Israeli politics, Sharp is surprisingly dismissive of the experimental lineage I would have expected him to acknowledge and claim for his own. But no, Kurt Vonnegut, Angela Carter and Ann Quin all get a good critical kicking, with the last's superb novel, *Tripticks*, being written off as 'a novel of image and information overload, but the images and the information lack depth or meaning.'

This either means Sharp is confident that *Alice in Venice* is full of depth and meaning, and/or that what the blurb calls a 'strange work' which 'is as complex as a reconstructed mosaic' is working differently with image and information. Or maybe Sharp is convinced that he presents enough information to the reader for them to construct a story or narrative? After all, the book tells us on page 94, 'Nothing has happened yet', and that 'what happens – has happened – can never be known.' Perhaps it never will be, although even as 'Everything changes, Venice endures.'

Rupert Loydell

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