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«She reminds us that while our memories are so often spatial, these memories are not always collective. Our biographies overlay the buildings and places we encounter along the way.»

THREE CITIES AND A VILLAGE WITH JAN MORRIS

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TRIESTE

The first book I read by the historian and travel writer Jan Morris was «Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere» (2001). I was an Australian living in Bologna, and felt the tug of the city she described at the end of the train line, like the impulse that pulls me to the edge of the room at parties. Morris' Trieste was an anachronism: an Adriatic port filled with middle-European cafes, left behind in Italy when the tides of the Austrian Empire withdrew. «For me,» she wrote, «Trieste is an allegory of Limbo, in the secular sense of an indefinite hiatus.» (1)

I did like Trieste. I sprawled in the corner of Caffè San Marco and tried conjuring the earnest glamour of James Joyce and Italo Svevo, scribbling still-unappreciated masterpieces under the arches. I rented a peeling room in the shadow of the karst: the limestone hinterland that Morris thought the spiritual source of the city's melancholy. Wandering along the coast to Miramare Castle, where the last Habsburgs holidayed, the baby-blue changerooms that line the promenade blurred away into the Adriatic. (fig. a) Then the haze lifted, this slab filled with bronzed bathers, and the rest of my memories of Trieste are vivid, hedonistic even, not sweetly melancholic.

I did not read the book again until I heard about Morris' death in November 2020. Nothing like an obituary for reassessing an artist. That melange of her best writing is still there: history and geography jostling beside the personal, the merely curious. This time, though, I saw what I had missed before, so caught up in my own holiday. Hidden within the story of a city are the contours of Morris' own improbable life. Morris scooped Hillary and Norgay's ascent of Everest as a young journalist in 1953. Twenty years later, she published «Conundrum» (1974): a pioneering and best-selling memoir of her gender transition. Trieste was there to witness her becoming «Jan».

Morris first spied the city over the karst, in the British army at the end of World War Two — showed a fellow officer to his first brothel, lingered at the door imagining «the stuffy smells inside, of scent, cheap powder and cigarettes... such sleazy sublimation» (2) — returned an already-famous foreign correspondent with wife and children in tow, sailed the harbour with a «lithe young bravo who clambered on board with the prosecco», (3) next time alone in the difficult years of hormone therapy — the family behind in Wales, still supportive — then middle aged and joyful, the woman she had always felt herself to be, a will-they-won't-they meet-cute with an opera singer in a narrow hotel doorway, one last time already planning to haunt Miramare. «For more than half a century,» Morris wrote at her most poetic, «the feelings it stirs in me have remained the same, and in those moments of sudden stillness I am not simply revisiting the place, I am re-examining myself». (4)

I have felt Morris examining me too, peering over my shoulder as I write, correcting me where she thinks I go astray. Over seventy years, her output has grown so prolific that when I go to characterise her views one way, a sentence in another book makes me double back. Her words invade my thoughts, destabilising any simple interpretation of her work. (5) She reminds me that she tried warning readers, back in 2001, that her nowhere-Trieste was already disappearing: «it had been given a course of Viagra, and rediscovered its lost virility at last — a vigour that has come too late for me». (6) I ponder her fondness for the aesthetics of empire. Morris retorts that unlearning the imperialism of her youth was as difficult as «one's own baffled efforts to appreciate electronic music.» (7) Besides, she adds, «few of us are consistent in our opinions and values... we are affected not only by experience and maturation, but by moods, fickle tastes, boredom and personal circumstances.» (8)

Morris' thoughts were always her own, beholden to no one. But I think she has something to reveal to the rest of us, architects in particular, about cities and architecture. She reminds us that while our memories are so often spatial, these memories are not always collective. Our biographies overlay the buildings and places we encounter along the way.

VENICE

Before «Trieste», there was «Venice» (1963): an idiosyncratic portrait of an impossibly famous city. Morris describes the composition of the façades along the Grand Canal, only to lead you around the side, for the «bits and pieces of decoration left behind by successive restorers, like seashells in a grotto.» (9) She spends nine pages cataloguing the city's animals and another twelve on the beasts rendered in sculpture. «I love the cats of Venice,» she confesses, «peering from their pedestals, sunning themselves on the feet of statues». (10) Legal processes and garbage collection are essential in her urban cosmology; the way, too, that timber foundations fail in the mud and buildings above subside. She is interested in cesspits and sewerage, in the labour of periodically draining canals to scrape away the «mountain of excrement», released from the «orifices» of older houses. (11) (fig. b)

For all the peculiarities of her Venetian observations, Morris passes them off as a universal experience that you too, the reader, could have, if only you visited with her book in hand. There is a map at the start, helpfully locating the airport. Chapter 21 provides an efficient itinerary of the important sights. I came late to «Venice» — after «Conundrum», published ten years later, after «Trieste», from the turn of the millennium — and I marked that passage about cats because it is one of only a few places where she drops a pompous «we» for the intimate «I» of her later work.

I wonder if it is related to what Morris wrote in «Conundrum», that her transition triggered a shift from places to people in her writing, (12) but she interrupts: «a constancy of love and personal happiness was far more influential upon my style than any simple change of sex.» (13)

Still, it seems to me that between «Venice» and «Trieste», Morris became more comfortable within herself and her work. From the start she knew that the processes and biographies of buildings were as consequential as their architect

(fig. a) The promenade to Miramare, Trieste, 2008.
Image: Wikimedia Commons

(fig. b) A canal in Venice being drained and cleaned using a Decauville railway and two camels, 1956. Image: Wikimedia Commons

or style. Over time, though, she stopped pretending that the way she saw cities — her interest in eccentrics and animals — was neutral. She dredges something fresh from the well-plumbed depths of the lagoon precisely because her interests were so intimately her own.

Writing and designing both put faith in some potential for shared knowledge and experience. Donna Haraway's insight was that we do not need to replace a common humanity with total subjectivity. By dropping the «God Trick» and acknowledging our own position — that our perspectives are partial and situated, not universal, the product of our biographies and bodies — we approach a stronger objectivity through collective discussion.[14] Morris arrived at something similar. It is easy to orientate yourself from above on her Venetian map, but by writing herself into «Trieste» I imagine my own body in Morris' place. I am left pondering the moments we saw the city differently, and where her prose captured emotions that mirrored mine.

LLANYSTUMDWY

«Conundrum» begins with an intensely situated experience. «I was three or perhaps four years old when I realized that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl.» This epiphany was spatial, not abstract or disembodied: «I was sitting beneath my mother's piano, and her music was falling around me like cataracts, enclosing me as if in a cave.»[15] As John Summerson wrote in «Heavenly Mansions» — on the origins of Gothic architecture — it is normal for children to sit under furniture: our first training in the aesthetics of architecture. Drawing on the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Jung, he related the feeling to inhabiting a miniature house, or aedicule: «The idea of neatness and serenity within, contrasting with wildness and confusion without.»[16] It was here, in this place of supreme comfort, that Morris realised she was uncomfortable in the body of a boy.

The home has reappeared in her work as a place of protection ever since. She became increasingly androgynous in a narrow Victorian terrace in Oxford, knowing that outside there were places, groups of friends, where she was accepted as a woman, and others where she was expected to act as a man. Before her surgery, she withdrew with her wife, Elizabeth, to their house in the Welsh village of Llanystumdwy. She was free to be herself there, secure in her knowledge of each room, every familiar turn of the garden path. For a time, the house shielded her from a capricious world — in control of her environment and appearance in a way she was not outside — until she was ready to emerge again on her own terms.

Morris, though, objects to all this psychoanalysis from afar, my clumsy attempts to diagnose her attachment to home through notions of comfort and power. «Freudian amateurs», she sniffs, «[might say] it shows a womb-longing... but I see my passion in a different way. I love the house not just as a thing, but as a concentration of emotions and sensations... I experience more than mere relief».[17]

The pleasures she felt returning to her house in Wales were more complex. Morris readily admitted that her house satisfies no conventional criteria for architectural quality. The facade is «gaunt, very Welsh... one floor too high for elegance, with a funny pillared porch in a manner more neo- than Classical».[18] She took a certain perverse enjoyment from the house's awkwardness. But its real worth was inseparable from the labour of the craftspeople who hewed its beams, the stable hands and horses who lived there, the fires her children lit in the abandoned building before its conversion, the tiny ecosystem of animals that still live in the roof. Morris' aesthetics, the architectural value of the house, insists on the interconnectedness of things: of perception, memory, family, animals, materials and a pleasure bordering on the erotic.

The poet Stephanie Burt wrote recently that «there is no one trans story: Morris' memoir remains one of many.» Burt did not always see her own journey reflected in Morris', bristling at her occasional gender essentialism and insistence that surgery was the only way to become a woman.[19] With the pleasures and protections of home so central to Morris' life, it is difficult not to think of those other stories, of trans women who never enjoyed her privileges. The activist Sylvia Rivera, for instance, who co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) and lived at Pier 45 until the New York Slum Clearance Commission demolished her home in 1996: «it's called a sweep. Not even a fucking eviction. A sweep, like we're trash.»[20]

Yet Morris deliberately chose to write an optimistic memoir. She softens the indignities of her ejection from all-male London clubs and the acquaintances who treat her, post-transition, as empty-headed and frivolous. Unlike the trans stories she had read before, she wanted to show that happiness was still possible, even essential. It is this «trans joy», Burt suggests, that has kept «Conundrum» relevant. And we cannot ignore the real, revelatory joy that transition and surgery brought Morris herself.

CASABLANCA

In a typical act of rebellion, Morris went to Casablanca for surgery. The British government would pay for it at home, but only if she divorced Elizabeth first. Morris arrives at an outpatient clinic in a modern part of the city. She waits in an ordinary anteroom. Sometimes she hears the murmurs of other patients she cannot see. Sometimes, the silence is total. She is called into a consulting room, lined with dark bookshelves, where the surgeon presses her flesh here and there, telling her to return in the evening. This time she is lead «along corridors and up staircases» dragging her suitcase through «rooms becoming more heavily curtained, more velvety, more voluptuous.»[21] In the depths of the surgeon's private apartments, she pays his wife and is allowed to descend a tight spiral to the clinical suites, abruptly austere except for a flower painted on each door. After surgery, she awakes alone, her arms strapped to a gurney in an empty ward. The sun creeps into the room. Indistinct voices waft up from the floors below. She is deliriously happy.

Floors do not align here; rooms open onto rooms without much circulatory logic. Morris climbs all the way upstairs, only to go down somewhere else. These are uncanny spaces, both everyday and extraordinary. Her recollections have a hallucinatory quality which only heightens the sense that what happened to her is in some way transcendent.

This intermingling of experience and architecture is typical Morris. Buildings are never autonomous in her writing, forming part of a web of relations. Architects are increasingly conscious of the ecology of what they design: of neglected issues of maintenance, pollution, material cycles and the interactions of humans, other animals and plants. Morris shows us how artificial it was to separate these concerns from the culture of architecture in the first place. They are as important to the story as the name of the designer or patron and, as Morris knows, often much more interesting. The choreography of her writing leads us from Casablanca's first sensorial assault, «modern, noisy and ugly in a pompous French colonial way» (22) to the poetry of the same streets after her operation: «[o]utside, above the traffic roar... every evening the man with the flute came by, to leave his melody on the air behind him like a lullaby.» (23)

I had never read about these recovery suites and surgical theatres before, devoted to transition. By turns sensual and sterile. If I am honest, I had never thought of them at all. Morris' generation was the first to seek out specialised clinics for a procedure only recently medically respectable, before it became more routine in hospitals near home. These clinics are foundational sites of trans architecture — so central in Morris' life, so peripheral to most others — but they have gone unnoticed in architectural history and theory.

Although architecture today might feel comfortable using transness as a metaphor or a theory, there are still very few stories of trans people flourishing in the field. (24) The clinic was hardly metaphoric. It was real and tangible, even while Morris' description lent it a certain magic. Morris shows us, too, that her home meant something particular, and that her experience of Venice and Trieste was not like others.

Yet Morris is not interested in offering architecture some monolithic trans perspective. «I'm sick to death of talking about the experience itself, as you can imagine» she reprimands me. (25)

I have found Morris interjecting so often because her writing was richly contradictory, shifting between her own experience and what we hold in common. I think what she offers architects, then, is not just some insight into these overlooked trans spaces, or how trans bodies feel in space generally. That would be too simple. Rather, she shows us all how to see buildings and cities afresh, in all their interconnectedness and complexity.

I am left with the memories that Morris' work stirred in me. A childhood flirtation with gender, both specific and banal. Crawling into the depths of a walk-in-closet, wrapped in dusty winter coats, the Australian summer beating down through a grimy skylight, slipping into the cool leather of my mother's shoes, pearls already around my neck. Hearing the clop of heals on the timber floor, my mother turned, «oh darling,» she laughed, «you'll break them.» Because, in reading Morris, I have been returning to the places of my own life all along.