– Introduction –

Here are two essays about what it means to be a foreigner. The first is set in Venice at the dawn of the sixteenth century, as the city became the seat of a global trading empire; many of the strangers necessary to run that empire were unwanted in the city itself: Germans, Greeks, Turks, and Jews – Jews were the least wanted. What was it like to carve out a life in a hostile place? I asked myself this question when I first visited the Jewish ghetto of Venice in the 1960s. The silent, empty islands which compose the ghetto were still haunted by the expulsions and mass murders of the Second World War, their houses crumbling, their synagogues defaced. But long before, at the height of the Renaissance, Jews exiled from Spain had managed to make a home here. The ways they did so show something, I think, about how other exiles and migrants, forced to live in isolation, can create a community for themselves.

The second essay is about foreigners, and foreignness, closer in time to us. The essay revolves around the life of Alexander Herzen, the great nineteenth-century Russian reformer who spent much of his life in exile in Britain, or in drifting from city to city on the Continent. Isaiah Berlin recounted to me

Herzen's story one night – an evening that stretched out as the philosopher became absorbed in Herzen's circumstances, survival strategies, and sentiments. Berlin, too, was a Russian in exile, but his fortunes could not have been more different, Berlin making a place for himself at the heart of the British Establishment, Herzen remaining an outsider wherever he lived.

Rather than succumb to nostalgia or self-pity, Herzen sought to make sense of displacement, and indeed embraced it as a way of life. That embrace makes him modern. Displacement and dislocation have become emblems for modern art, as well as driving facts in economics and politics. As Berlin unfolded Herzen's story, I wondered about how his life related to creation of dislocation in the arts; the second essay explores that connection.

Though related in theme, these two essays proceed in different ways. The first is a straightforward historical account, the second is more an experiment in how to connect a one man's life – a life devoted to politics – with artistic practices. The study of Venice printed here is a longer version of the history of the ghetto which appeared in my book *Flesh and Stone*; the account of Herzen is, again, a longer version of an essay I wrote for a Festschrift honouring my friend Joseph Rykwert. I'm grateful to Lucasta Miller for asking me to make this very short book, and for her editorial suggestions.

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– The Jewish Ghetto in Venice –

EXILES MAKE A HOME

The Jewish people have historically been skilled in the ways of exile. For over three thousand years in Western Europe, Jews survived in small cells mixed among alien, oppressive peoples, a people frequently displaced but sustained in their faith no matter where they lived. They have also created communities wherever they've lived, small, segregated communities, segregation inseparable from their sense of themselves. We tend to think of segregation as power's imposition, which makes of the segregated passive victims. Yet the formation of the Jewish ghetto in Renaissance Venice suggests a more complicated story. It is the story of exiles who were indeed segregated against their will, but who then made new forms of community from their separateness and who acquired an interest, as social actors, in being segregated.

The Jews of Renaissance Venice, and the Jews of Renaissance Rome who followed in their footsteps, gained a certain degree of self-determination in isolated ghettoes. But this segregation increased their Otherness; no longer mixed in urban space, their lives became increasingly enigmatic to the dominant powers beyond the ghetto walls. Fantasies about the

Jews took the place of everyday knowledge about their lives, and those fantasies would in the end overwhelm the ghetto. For the Jews themselves, the ghetto raised the stakes of contact with the outside world: their own Jewishness seemed at risk when they ventured outside ghetto walls. Exposure to others threatened a loss of identity.

This is in a way the story of most groups of displaced persons forced into isolation, but Renaissance Venice made it at once a special story and also something larger: the experience of Jews in the Venetian ghetto traced an enduring way of tying culture and political rights together. Venice was undoubtedly the most international city of the Renaissance, due to its trade; it was the gatepost between Europe and the East, as well as between Europe and Africa – a city largely of foreigners. But unlike ancient Rome, it was not a territorial power; the vast number of foreigners who came and went in Venice were not members of a common empire or nation-state. Moreover, the resident foreigners in the city – Germans, Greeks, Turks, Dalmatians, as well as Jews – were barred from official citizenship in the city. They were permanent immigrants. From this historical frame, among non-citizens, came a conflicting set of codes of rights.

On the one hand, human rights were conceived as placeless: these were rights of contract which applied to all parties, no matter where they came from, where they lived in the city, or who they were.

In this, the Venetian right of contract differed from that of contemporary London. In London, the validity of a contract was restricted to people who belonged to the same Commonwealth, which meant geographic, political, and, after the Reformation, religious commonality. In Venice, economic rights operated on a different principle; the very act of contracting was thought to generate rights, whereas rights of contract in Elizabethan England were rights given to the contracting parties by the state.

In one way, the Venetians did tie place to right in the execution of contracts. In Venice, the area around the Rialto bridge developed a set of cultural practices, much like those which later developed in the City of London based on the Venetian example, so that verbal contracts could be effectively binding. For the Venetians, the sanctity of contract derived from rituals of negotiation as well as from the desire of the parties to be trusted in future negotiations; moreover, verbal trust was tied to the use of untaxed or unregistered capital which the parties contracting wished to keep from the eyes of the state, something they achieved by putting as little as possible on paper. These verbal bonds set the sanctity of contract apart from the written law practised in the Doge's Palace in the Piazza San Marco; Venetian law was famous for its elaborate records, its attempt to put everything down on paper – a consequence of its highly bureaucratized state.