

“Something terrible had happened” in Venice: Queer Reflection in *A Friend from England*

Mitoko Hirabayashi

A Friend from England, concerned with a “female friendship as an undervalued and underfictionalized topic” according to author Anita Brookner, ends with a painful separation in Venice (Kenyon 23). 32 year old unmarried Rachel Kennedy, first person narrator, realises “something terrible” had happened in her final meeting of Heather, but does not explain exactly what (Brookner 203).

Heather is the 27 year old unsocialised daughter of the Livingstones, and her relationship with Rachel dominates the narrative. However, Rachel's self-righteous opinion and obsessive concern with Heather soon proves frustrating to the reader; the mood generated by an unreliable narrator's secrecy and silence certainly makes her “a female version ... of John Marcher in Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle*” (Lynn Sadler 135). When Heather, having divorced her first husband due to his transvestitism, moves to Venice to marry an Italian lover, Rachel follows to bring her home, ostensibly acting for Heather's parents. Rachel's obsessive emotions toward Heather – supervisory concern, envy, anger and hatred – culminates in the rupture in Venice.

Rachel's repressed desire is visible in her schizophrenic emotion, which Patricia Julian Smith pertinently calls *lesbian panic*. This paper elaborates on Smith's observation: Combining Rachel's unspoken or suggestive disposition – for example, fear of water, hunger for the image of mother – with Venetian topography, culturally *the Other* of England shows Rachel's queer reflection.

It is significant that Brookner chooses Venice as the place of dramatic culmination. Venice, as a historically self-governing city, has its own characteristics. As Tony Tanner remarks, “Venice is inextricably associated with desire: Desire of Venice, desire for Venice, desire in Venice” (Tanner 4). Many European writers have been seduced to the city as spectacle, as art, or as a *topos* for their imagination. Venice, a place of duplicity and desire, with its labyrinthine little streets and canals and the uncanny silence, is saturated with secretive sexuality. Certainly the city has evoked those writers' repressed desires. Venice is also a city of decay and decline which is

suggestive of death. As Cheryl Alexander Malcolm points out, *A Friend from England* truly deals with homoerotic elements and death which build dramatic tension, in common with other Venice texts such as Henry James's *The Wings of a Dove* or Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (Malcolm 87).

The story begins with "humdrum circumstance" (Brookner 9) in London told by a placid narrator, Rachel. She "long time ago decided to live on the surface, avoiding entanglements, confrontations, situations that cannot quickly be resolved, friendships that lead to passion" (62). Rachel's inclination to "avoid introspection" (62) and suppress her past imply that she closets her inner self. Her unspecified fear of water – perhaps the fear of being drowned in passion – is related to this inner self. As if awakening her repressed self, her narrative of the life in London is full of water imagery. Because of a hydrophobic complex, she is "repelled yet fascinated by water" (117). In contrast, Heather seems in sympathy with water. She is described as "a swimmer in calm and protected waters" (28). On the metaphorical level, it is quite natural that Heather should come to live in the watery city and Rachel follow her.

Through the narrative, Rachel is very vague about her sexual life. Although she professes her decision to remain single after her past bitter experience of adultery, Rachel never explicitly mentions her heterosexual relations except those with married men like Oscar and a gay co-owner of the bookstore, Robin. She only hints at her secret life, such as her frequent wandering in the evenings (67), her other activities after-hours (123), her habitual adventures (148) or her search for companions to bear them home (131). She sheds "her daily persona" (128) at night and enjoys "amorous evenings" (82), or an "odd hypnotic walk" (85). The indescribable nature of her pleasure-seeking is fully open to the reader's desire for validation. The reader soon suspects that Rachel is so frustrated a woman that she is seeking some outlet for her excessive emotions. Whether she is heterosexual or homosexual is not clear. Once she discloses her homoerotic inclination to *feminine* women: "it pleases me, in some obscure way, to conceive of women as timorous, delicate, in need of special treatment, of deference, waves of sympathy and praise lapping at their feet as they perform some quite ordinary task, or simply preside at their tables, family acquiescent around them" (171). But, on the plane to Venice in quest for Heather, she lightly mentions her exchanging addresses with "an amusing man" (188). Rachel seems only to present the credential of heterosexuality. Thus, her silence proliferates possible meanings.

At first, Rachel is attracted to the Livingstones' home. Her admiring envy for it leads her to imagine living there. In contrast, she describes her own flat with

depreciation as "unheimlich," adding "'unhomely' was too mild a translation to convey the effect of alienation that the German original possessed (123)." Rachel's parents are long dead and she is soon attracted to the Livingstones, particularly to Dorrie as mother. Rachel's unnatural reticence about her own parents implies a traumatic past. She seems to embrace a pre-oedipal haven and rapture of "a dreamy, vulnerable childish state"(63) at the Livingstones. After all, Rachel holds the image of mother as nurturer. Dorrie is almost always described in relation to foods. Dorrie is indeed one of the "parents [who worry] about their children's diet"(22), while Rachel's mother was not.

It is noticeable that a frequent recollection of Rachel is Oscar's "where's your mother" with a look of real anguish. Although she has actually never seen his anguished face, such a transformation reveals Rachel's own yearning for mother and fear of loss. It can be said that she hears her own voice in Oscar's, but Rachel's interest is soon turned to Heather, who "would duplicate her mother" (47). A strong attachment to one's mother is easily transformed into homoerotic desire for a woman. But Rachel's attraction to Heather actually stems from her obsession with a mother. As Rachel frequents the Livingstones, Heather becomes the lure of Rachel's gaze. In terms of a gender-asymmetrical way of looking, Rachel assumes the male position, trying to subject Heather to a controlling gaze. However, Heather cannot be pinned down to the erotic gaze but remains elusive.

Rachel's queer interest in Heather, combined with her hunger for a mother, gradually becomes associated with Venice. When Heather tells Rachel about her intention to marry Marco and live in Venice, Rachel opposes to this marriage by referring to "his widowed mother in Venice." Later, Rachel imagines Heather being served a plate of soup by her prospective mother-in-law in Venice (186). Furthermore, the painting Rachel wishes to see in Venice is not Bellini's *Madonna* but Giorgione's *Tempest*¹. In the painting, a woman suckling her baby-child "has a heavy face, immanent with meaning, but from [her face] all explanation had been withdrawn" (191). Rachel sees Giorgione's woman's same moody distant expression in Heather (201). This shows that Rachel's obsession with Heather is deeply connected with her hunger for a mother.

Voluble discussion on Heather's sexuality and Rachel's prudishness would embark on Foucauldian "queer" reading. Since Heather's first fiancé Michael appears, Rachel's fury or irritation becomes conspicuous. Rachel mentions the couple with terms of "children" or "childish." She conjectures their sexless relation: "I could see

that this Michael, this child-husband, was not the sort of man to rouse a woman from the slumbers of virginity... (51)"; "The curious thing about this almost sexless arrangement was that it would probably work.... I did not fully trust this marriage as a true marriage" (47). She envisions Heather as one of women who "exist quite happily in their original child-like state, apparently deaf to the demands of the body, or unable to interpret them, to pursue the path that leads to satisfaction" (100). Moreover, she is imbued with an idea that Heather's marriage is "as protection," "as alibi," "as camouflage," and then "as a continuation of her virgin life" (105). She even calls their honeymoon to Venice "a nice holiday."

Venice becomes a place of "a nice holiday" not for the married couple but for the two women, Heather and the Venetian girl, Chiara. Rachel "suspects this Chiara" (150) probably because Chiara has taken Heather away from London. When Heather informs Rachel of her plan to marry Chiara's brother Marco, Venice arouses Rachel's repressed desire and consequently her anger. The idea of losing Heather excites Rachel's exasperation: "[Heather]... had made me uneasy in a way which I did not fully understand, had made driven me to a pitch of opposition which had something murderous about it" (181). She suggests to Dorrie and Oscar that she should go to Venice in search for Heather as their delegation. It is true that Rachel is "repelled yet fascinated" by Heather.

Rachel's voyeurism, with a lack of an erotic object, has association with sadistic imagination where she finds pleasure in asserting control and subjugating Heather through punishment. She highlights the "conqueror's boots" and raincoat as if they protect her against Heather/water. Rachel's fantastic projection progresses to the scene of arresting Heather: "I see myself sweeping [Marco] aside, taking her by the wrist, throwing her on to the plane" (186). This butch-like action opens the field of desire. Rachel regards her anger as "a talisman, [which] would protect [her] through the journey into the unknown" (186). The visit to Venice actually becomes a journey to her unknown self. "[Venice] is apparently sinking... Its ultimate demise will be accepted as a punishment for spiritual pride" (189). So is Rachel. Her drowning would be anticipated.

In their final meeting and confrontation in Venice, Heather hesitates to accept Rachel as a friend:

"... he [Marco] wasn't keen on my meeting you."

"Couldn't you just have said I was a friend from England?"

"A friend from England?" She looked doubtful. "I suppose I could. But, well, I tell him everything, you see. He knows about you and why you came here."

"I'm amazed he let you out, in that case." (202)

Heather hints that Rachel's friendship is not genuine but perverse. Hearing Heather's reply, Rachel is not only hurt but appalled by the fact that there is common knowledge between Heather and Marco about Rachel. Here is no female-female-male triangle which, Rachel wishes to have, could bring about "the most radical transformation of female bonding – that is, from homosocial to lesbian bonding" (Castle 73). Rachel suddenly becomes panicked, calling after Heather, "Come back," "running blindly and stumbling." Rachel's hysterical confusion represents a typical narrative manifestation of *lesbian panic*. Patricia Julian Smith says "lesbian panic is... the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character – or conceivably, an author – is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal their own lesbianism or lesbian desire." Here, too, Rachel, "fearing discovery of her covert or unarticulated lesbian desires" by Heather, "the object of her desires," results in emotional harm (Smith 2).

What counted was that I was guilty of an error. It was not Heather who was endangered, but myself. I feel shame, penury, and the shock of truth. Something terrible had happened. (Brookner 203)

Rachel does not explain any reason, but her devastation is evident.

In order to understand Rachel's reaction here, Eve Sedgwick's recent notion of *shame* in her argument of queer performativity is useful. Sedgwick argues "shame... is a bad feeling that does not attach to what one does, but to what one is" (Sedgwick 12). Shame, according to her, is a powerful affect because it "delineates [identity] without defining it or giving it a content" (12). Rachel feels shame not because of something done but because of her identificatory changes in self-perception. It is certain that she tries to avoid falling into the abyss of shame in order to survive the homophobic climate in England. In other words, she has to live on the surface without probing her sexual identity in order to protect her English middle class identity.

If Rachel represses her sexual identity in England, it is in Venice, the Other of England where she finally holds up a mirror to herself. In terms of both topography and transference of her complex, Venice represents Rachel's repressed desire. What

she sees there is her queer reflection of unarticulated desires. While after their breakup, Heather smoothly walks down the Calle de la Vida, the street of life, the watery city is literally a hindrance to Rachel because of her still unacknowledged sexual identity. Months later, Rachel sees Oscar who lost Dorrie. Significantly, Rachel who lost Heather, her desired mother figure, parallels Oscar: he is recalled by the stock expression "where's your mother." Oscar may be Rachel's "queer reflection" so that both disappear at the same time from the story according to the narrative logic.

Note:

1. John Skinner detects "a pattern of childhood regression" here, and pertinently connects it to Rachel's mental condition in the wet weather, whose debilitating effect she describes: "the weather put a stop to all my activities... It was as if I were travelling backwards, back into childhood" (Brookner 121, Skinner 127).

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