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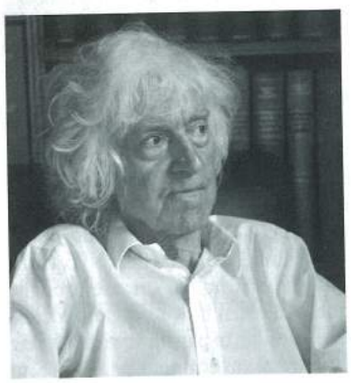
IRELAND'S BATTLE OVER ABORTION

As the country prepares for a divisive referendum, Orla Ryan talks to those on the front line

THE PHILOSOPHER IN THE DARKROOM

Every winter for two decades, the influential British philosopher Derek Parfit obsessively photographed the buildings of Venice, St Petersburg and Oxford, working on the pictures until they achieved his exacting level of perfection. Now exhibited for the first time, they are powerful, painterly expressions of a highly distinctive intellect, writes *Jonathan Derbyshire*



For more than 20 years, the English philosopher Derek Parfit would leave his home in Oxford and spend five weeks every winter in Venice and St Petersburg taking photographs. He returned obsessively to the same places: in Venice, Palladio's churches, the Doge's Palace and the Grand Canal; in St Petersburg, the Winter Palace and the General Staff Building. Parfit shot only at dawn and dusk, or else in foggy conditions or during snowstorms. He disliked the midday sun, preferring, he said, "the near-horizontal golden rays at the two ends of the day".

Although he believed that most buildings and cities (and most people's faces, for that matter) look better when photographed in black-and-white, he only ever shot one roll of film in monochrome. In Venice and St Petersburg, he thought, "some buildings are better photographed in colour". This was particularly true of the Russian city, where he loved the contrast of white pillars and painted stucco.

Parfit, who died last year at the age of 74, stopped taking photographs around the turn of the millennium in order to concentrate on philosophy. (Another reason was that he thought the quality of snow was changing - for the worse.) But he continued to give prints to friends and colleagues, and even once approached the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to suggest that it exhibit his work. It never did.

After Parfit's death, two of his former students, Owen Laub and Sam Sokolsky-Tifft, decided that his photography deserved a wider audience. Together they have curated an exhibition of his work that opens in London next month.

In 2015, Laub and Sokolsky-Tifft attended one of the last classes Parfit ever taught, a Harvard seminar on "meta-ethics". This is the branch of philosophy that deals with the foundations of morality, and which was the subject of ▶

Above: Lamp and Statue, Venice, c1980s
Facing page: Parfit photographed in 2015

Above left: Palazzo Grassi, Venice, c1980s
Above right: Palazzo Grassi at Night, Venice, c1980s

Below: Neva and Lion, St Petersburg, c1980s

Left: All Souls College, Oxford, c1980s

◀ Parfit's second and final book, *On What Matters*, a gargantuan three-volume defence of, among other things, the idea that there are universal moral principles ("normative truths" in the jargon). Without such principles, he wrote, "nothing would matter, and we would have no reasons to try to decide how to live".

Sokolsky-Tifft recalls Parfit quoting a line from Homer in the middle of a talk. "He started to weep because he found it so beautiful. That was when I first started to get the idea that this was a man with a strange heart, for whom art was always bubbling beneath the surface of these logical arguments."

The photographs in the exhibition are powerful expressions of that "strange heart", of Parfit's highly distinctive intellectual and aesthetic temperament: crepuscular views of the Grand Canal; St Petersburg snowscapes; and fragments of architectural and sculptural detail (a bridge next to the Palazzo Grassi shot at dusk and in milky daylight, an angel's hand with a missing finger). There are also misty views of All Souls, Oxford, where he was a fellow for many years.

Parfit attributed his obsession with a handful of places - he once said that there were only 10 things in the world he wanted to photograph - to a condition called aphantasia, the inability to form mental images. He was unable to visualise things familiar to him, even his wife's face when they weren't together.

While it is tempting to conclude that photography was for Parfit a kind of compensation for that affliction, this doesn't really explain why he should have made multiple

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images of the same places. Nor does it begin to account for the way he treated the images once he had shot them. It wasn't simply that he wanted a record of his favourite places to make up for some neurophysiological deficit - he was also trying in his photographs to capture their timeless essence.

Although he shot thousands of rolls of film over more than two decades, he believed that he "managed to produce about 120 good photographs" in that time. These were the result of an intensive - and ruinously expensive - post-production process in which colours were manipulated and extraneous items such as cars, vapour trails and, more often than not, people were removed by a professional processor. (Parfit was also an enthusiastic early adopter of Photoshop.)

The effect is often highly painterly. Many of the Venice photographs are evocative of Turner's moonlit Venetian watercolours, while those of St Petersburg tend to be studies in colour. A good example of the latter is a photograph of the Neva river. In the foreground is a statue of a lion, snow lying thickly on the base. Behind it is the glassy stillness of the water and on the far bank a row of neoclassical buildings in which the play of pillar and stucco is rendered into almost hyperreal perfection.

There aren't many people in the photographs chosen for this exhibition. In an image of the magnificent curved frontage and triumphal arch of the General Staff Building, a handful of figures are silhouetted against the snow, a vast gunmetal sky above them. And in one of the Venice pictures, we see a person with a camera and tripod, who could be Parfit himself. But for the most part they are emptied of humanity, as if taken in the aftermath of some unspecified disaster.

Parfit once told an interviewer that he "wanted to take good photographs, and write good philosophy, for their own sake". He said little, though, about the relationship between those two activities. The connection, I think, lies not in what he thought and wrote about and the places he photographed, but in his attitude towards them.

As Laub and Sokolsky-Tifft put it: "Parfit's photographs did not depict the two cities as they were but as he thought they should be." Likewise, he believed that the job of the philosopher is not to describe the beliefs we already have about morality but to change them when, as they often do, they turn out to be false. "By temperament," Parfit wrote in the introduction to his first book, "I am a revisionist." That was as true of his photography as it was of his philosophy. FT

Jonathan Derbyshire is the FT's executive opinion editor. "The Mind's Eye: The Photographs of Derek Parfit" is at Narrative Projects, 110 New Cavendish Street, London W1, May 11-June 30