

## Toccatà and Variations on Venice

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Venice, Venezia, Serenissima. *Serenissima*, the name with which the Venetians christened her, most clear, most bright, most fair. Glittery but grounded. The word most like Venice, so long, so slow. So many *Ss*, a little *M*, a little *R*, but mostly the *Ss* swishing along, gently, gently, like the lagoons of Venice .

“It is truly a city of appearances,” wrote Mary McCarthy in *Venice Observed*. Vistas everywhere, but small, tiny, limited vistas. Narrow passageways, crooked, broken spokes at the rim of a *campo*, the small plaza of Italy, literally “ground.” If you stand on any one of the dozen openings at the edge of the “ground” and peer nearsightedly down a corridor, you see a church across a square with what appears to be a false front; then you follow a gnarled alley until, after many twists and turns, you’re on the *fondamenta*, the long breezeway of the city. Sinuous turns behind you, limitless water before you, islands floating like cakes in a swamp. Broad space and nagging closeness at the same time.

Line and surface. Things in their proper place. *Please do not touch the fruit*, arranged just so--red, orange, red, orange, red--*nor the window*. I can with persistence prevail upon the shopkeeper and lightly brush the fruit, but never the window.

Glass: blue, pink, coral, ruby, translucent Murano, crafted on the island across the lagoon, echoing itself. Medallions, necklaces, and earrings arranged in small mounds inside halls of mirrors so that the insides of the shops reflect the maze of cramped narrow alleys in which Venetians pace their days.

Lost always. On the other side of the Rialto, so far west that the buildings actually look new. Too far. Lost is a more or less permanent state here, a turning around to an “aha” of found, only to twist again and lose oneself. No whisper of a grid wafts over this city. A short man in his seventies, dressed in suit and tie, finds me one evening after I have followed a trail of people thinking they were strolling to the center of Venice; instead I have followed them home to their little doors and large dinner smells. Frederico walks me out of his neighborhood, across a large bridge, under a cramped archway, up a higher bridge, under brick walls, beneath umbrellas, in the dark and rain of a November night he murmurs soft, misty hellos to people he knows. He knows the whole city. Then, after a dreamlike time, both forever and an instant, I find a place I know. He bows, nods, smiles, and turns to backtrack the miles to the comforting odors of basil pasta and wine where I found him.

Do not bother to talk about directions in Venice. Do not bother to tell a friend where the Filippi poster shop is, where to find roasted red peppers, where the Pesaro family resides. It is not possible. Talk submerges quickly into surrealistic patter and you find yourself in a Beckett play. Even guidebooks limpidly succumb to the futility of directions. “Off Piazza dei Frari” is as specific as you get. Then you’re on your own, and you can’t remember if the Frari is the place where you found the love of your life or where you collapsed with exhaustion because you couldn’t find your cappuccino.

Room XX, quite by chance. I race through the stone maze of the Accademia, a frantic woman gasping for breath. Guards close the gates behind me, turn out lights as I run around curves, into rooms and out, under paintings, around sculptures, voracious, American to the core, my eyes devouring what art they can scan in seconds. Against the

will of the guards who are crying silently, "Leave. Go home." I am running from imprisonment in the 12C when I trip upon whole rooms, whole walls, frescoed, painted, temperaed with scenes of Venice as she was when other merchants lived here, parading in their pageants, costumed in their long carnelian and cerulean gowns. Carpaccio, Bellini, two minutes to gobble it up. Veronese, Giorgione, Vivarini, della Francesco, Mantegna, Tintoretto, Memling. Memling? How did he sneak in here?

Constant angles, here, there, under, over. The one-oared boats must navigate canals as angular and tricky as the sidewalks. Changing directions is hard; whether maneuvering a gondola or hobbling home; it demands preparation, split second timing, and care--no simple turn to the left and switch of lanes. Venetians are accustomed to making quick turns, to moving deftly in small spaces. Even in the arts. *The Last Supper*, crafted by Veronese, in the face of Church opposition to the secular appearance of the tableau and the presence of Germans in the scene, turns into *The Feast in the House of Levi*. An about face. Nothing wasted--a few strokes here, a few strokes there, and the masterpiece is useful once more. Venice is, after all, a city built on commerce.

Clarity of sound. Metallic tinkles. Every so often a song or a prayer drifts through streets from the next campo, around a corner, down an alley, clearer for being so far. The boats lap, footsteps trudge or scurry on bridges. Gates close, Gates close, wooden doors shut, brass knockers ring, arguments echo. No wind here--wind lacks clarity through leaves or grass. No leaves or grass.

Rainy season. Thirty meters high at 7:00 a.m. It's "aqua alta," the routine swamping of the piazzas, stores and homes that happens every November. Venetians turn out in one body with their brooms and sweep the water out of their stores. First floors are

tiled, not carpeted, part of the Venetian's precautionary respect for the Adriatic. They sweep and the water swishes, obeying the shopkeepers, out to the street, into the canals. After all, this is a city where people and water have struck a truce. We stay here and you stay there except for the aqua alta. Have your yearly tirade but then get out!

It's during the aqua alta that you see rubber boots in unequivocal color, yellow, red, and blue, hanging from the tops of hardware store windows, gaiety in the face of the routine swampings. Fashionable Venetian women are now up to their knees in outlandish color, while above the knees their torsos remain swathed in brown and beige suede coats. Ugly and rough wooden swampwalks appear in the night --- the snowplows of Venice, they allow commerce to continue. Venice, always pragmatic, always in touch with the necessity of accommodating the elements, knows that there are times when beauty cannot prevail and it is prudent not to argue.

Water protocol is finely developed. Umbrellas, at least one million of them, float through the narrow streets, bobbing along, disembodied. Hold them straight up, straight across, do not slant. If I tilt my umbrella, the whole city loses its balance. Balance is everything, analyzed and synchronized centuries ago. Like the gondola and the harmony of life in death, the rainy reason has been sorted through. When I make a mistake, when I angle it sideways like *Singing in the Rain*, a chorus of Italian erupts and I quickly get in line.

Please use the umbrella stand in cafés. When I neglect water protocol the owner points to the umbrella stand with his long fingers, and a peremptory nod indicates what I should do. When I accidentally lay a wet blue umbrella on his chair, he picks it up silently, cigarette in hand, and puts it in the umbrella stand, then wipes the offending

chair. I feel as though he would wipe me if he could. I am trailing water into his shop, water which the Venetians agree belongs in the lagoon.

A huge puzzle, Venice. Thousands of islands creaking on piles, temporary artificial legs, a soggy jigsaw puzzle sitting on poles, easily separated. The stones “strain,/ Crack and sometimes break,/ Under the burden,/ Under the tension, slip, slide, perish/ Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,/ Will not stay still.”<sup>1</sup> You see how precarious it is.

The all-consuming algae have upset the balance between water and stone, contributing to Venice’s dehydration. Gnats nibble at the algae as Venice dehydrates; they swarm, constantly, overwhelming the brain with their sheer numbers, like the paintings and the churches, the Byzantine tiles, the lace and glass silhouetting the air, Escher and Gaudi magnified to city size.

No one can see where they are, who is with them, or where they are going, not in the dark streets, snaky walkways, and deluge of umbrellas. I think Venetians find their way with radar, as if bats after sunset, not too fast and hurried, not too slow--at the water’s pace.

At night in the mist, muffled voices, the clackety clack of shoes on pavement. I light upon a restaurant and feel I have discovered a hut in the middle of a night in the Alps. I am grateful, crazy with warmth, bubbling from wine.

There is regularity, even for tourists. I go to the same *caffè* bar, *Piccolo Martini*, whenever I can find it, three times to *Malibran’s* for ham and marinated red peppers on white bread, to the same *pasticcerias* where the same people serve me. To *Harry’s Bar* in ’83 and ’87, the same waiter both times. Obsessive sameness, infinitesimal changes. I

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent unidentified quotations are taken from T.S. Eliot, “Four Quartets.”

return to the same places inevitably. I must concentrate with all my might to find them, but I do because I need the certainty they provide, that I am here and haven't floated off into some interminable eel-shaped alley leading always to nowhere.

Restoration is the business of Venice. *Memento mori*. Remember that you must die. Everything is passing, peeling, and patched, but the city plods along, preens, and on occasion, drops off a bit. Craftspersons work for restoration, commemoration, and magic. A Jewish artist at work in the ghetto says, "I work from the Bible and from my imagination." From form and image. The imagination, always present in Venice, near the surface, intruding, extruding, suffusing, stretching its tendrils into reality, making us pay attention.

DuMaurier's *Don't Look Now* take place in Venice. In Nicholas Roeg's movie of the same name, as the husband and wife glide on Venice's gondolas, their dead child seems to appear, then disappear, they hear the click of her footsteps, the slapping of her mackintosh against stone. The husband won't admit that the séances and spirits he doesn't believe in affect him in Venice; because he doesn't admit this, he is caught, fatally, unaware. The city is a phantasmagoria, insinuating the imagined whisper, the word left unsaid, the boat, almost seen, slipping around the corner

"The things of this world reveal their essential absurdity when they are put in the Venetian context. In the unreal realm of the canals . . . the real world with its contrivances, appears as a vast folly," writes Mary McCarthy. Venice is funny, a cackle. There are few street lamps, no traffic lights, and no stop signs. No cars, no busses, no bicycles, nothing on wheels. My *bicicletta* sits on its haunches in the car park adjacent to the train station outside of the city, waiting to whiz off through Mestre, a less silly place,

toward Ravenna, Bologna, Firenze. What could you do with a bicycle in a city where a bridge interrupts your straightaway every few yards? The specter of a ten speed careening around Venice is funny and horrific at the same time. And, because there are no cars, no street needs to be broader than the widest human being, so the large delivery trucks that we are used to must shrink themselves to human size.

The frenzy that is me finds perfect recourse in Venice. I try to run tearing through the stone streets, rubber tennis shoes on my American feet, but I can't go far without running into a person, steps, a bridge, or an abrupt dead end at a *rio*. And I can never dark quickly into and out of my hotel because I'm never dropped at my door, always at the vaporetto dock. From there I must walk. I wonder, what happens to the old, the infirm, the wheelchair bound, the dying? Where are the ambulances? Even what Venice lacks stimulates obsessive thought, worry, and giggling. The hearse I can picture – hearses move slowly – but not the ambulance. In a city of death, a hearse appears often.

Because there are no cars or bicycles to watch for, everyone is uniquely free – at the same time, uniquely confined.

Confinement on islands constrains. *Isola*, the Italian for island. Walking up up and then down down, go a few feet and do the same, go farther, again up and then again down. “The way up is the way down, the way forward, the way back.” Now I've crossed into the Jewish ghetto after a walk over a bridge, *Sotoportego de Ghetto nuovo*. The world's first ghetto. In the sixteenth century, the first naming of the act of isolating, the Venetian love of clarity again. How fitting that these island dwellers would turn to isolation as a solution for those they wanted to control.

“Ghetto” seems to have meant a foundry for artillery when the Venetian Republic placed the Jews here in 1516, having forced them to leave the fertile island called La Giudecca due to the usual real estate imperatives--the land was beautiful and more-powerful people wanted it. The Jews were plopped down here in limited space. Venice doesn't expand but the Jews did--their buildings grew higher and higher. In the ghetto the height between floors is smaller than in the rest of Venice--more people had to squeeze in so there wasn't room for the luxury of air or tall people. Guards watched the bridges at night to ensure no Jew leaped out the windows to passing gondolas.

The Campo Ghetto Nuovo is very small, women in black, children so tiny they pass unnoticed. Hugging the northeast wall are seven small bronze reliefs, each the size of a painting you might hang on your den wall. They seem to grow out of the wall, mottled and chipped, white and brown and beige and ash in decay. They are memorials to the Venetians who were boated away to concentration camps during the Second World War and didn't return.

“Old stones that cannot be deciphered.” What is compelling, mysterious, eerie, what we love about old places is the sense that many lives have passed through, millions have been here before, and they are watching, rising up from the water, their spirits hovering, slightly damp and wrinkled, an eye lost to the fish here and there, but still clear-sighted, thoughtful, attentive.

The city lends itself to the neurotic. The water, its hypnotic changes, the labyrinthine besotted alleys mirroring the waves, always changing, always the same.



I obsess in Venice. I must. I can't not. This is Venice, this trying every which way with slight variations, losing yourself so deeply that you don't remember where you started from and where you hoped to end.

I too like to get lost. I like to get lost in my mind, to follow each path around and down and over to dead ends. I like to take a question, big or small, and tease it to its very marrow, chew it down to its skeleton. An Irish friend tells me this is the essence of Americans. We devote the same attention to everything whether it's a funeral or buying a pair of shoes. Lack of perspective makes us dizzy.

Remembering, reexperiencing, retelling a drama of love: Each time I relive it in my mind I find a new detail, a nuance neglected in the previous telling, a reminiscence with new meaning. All the obsessions that slither and slime around in my mind, that slosh in and out of the blood vessels in my brain, are externalized in Venice.

Every so often a square opens up, lets in the light, gives me breathing space before I am off again to the mire, the subconscious elucidating just long enough to keep me above water. The next step, and I am plunged again into the subterranean landscape of my soul.

But to prove they know the beauty of light in space and form against sky, in addition to glass, water, and lace, Venetians give us Piazza San Marco. A huge square where the light never stops, where there is more space than any city has a right to. The orchestras, the cafés, even the millions of tourists don't fill it up. The pigeons in San Marco's square, as many pigeons as there are tiles in the Byzantine mosaics of the story of Job in the Basilica of San Marco, can't darken it. Their millions of shadows, Escher reflections, constantly ebb and flow on the stone floor of the square.

How brilliant to have a square like this, so large, so full of light that it easily accommodates the irregularities of obsessive detail and at the same time measures God.

Frame anything against water and it pleases the eye. Laundry hung out between buildings, colored and white, is strung like chunky Navajo jewelry above the canals. I wonder how many pale blue shirts, plum-colored skirts, pairs of pink underwear fall into the canal, how you find them, whether they smell, if neighbors know exactly whose they are. Impossible not to be a great photographer in Venice. She welcomes the camera as a good friend dedicated to her reflection, like her glass, mirrors, and water. Despite this, Venice is always a double or triple exposure.

Portraits of the doges, former presidents of the Republic, lined up on the ceiling in the Palazzo Ducale, look down on me as, my neck cramping, I crane upward. A veil blackens one painting. A doge betrayed the Republic, high treason, the veil a potent sign of what happened to those who did not fear the Republic. It remains covered today, chillingly clear what these water people can do.

Is Venice a place for lovers? I haven't done it but I think not. Venice is for intrigue, for mirrors, to take a microscope in greater and greater depth to the tentacles and terrors beneath the surface, the crack in the stone, the intricacies of the waves, to plan, plot, and perhaps consummate an affair or a liaison, but not a romance.

On the surface it seems a likely place but "seems" is what Venice is about. In no time, with a few steps in one direction, a few errors in another, your romantic notions hit a bridge, or an unknown alley, or a stony dead end, or the perilously seductive water, and the chill and "waste sad time before and after."

The glitter of Venice is built upon its antitheses, water and stone. The tensions of these, the fight as to what will endure, is the lure of Venice. Venice is not a happening, it's carefully planned, diagrammed, and measured. Very real materials constitute the show of Venice, glass, tile, and stone, and the whole chimera wages a constant battle not to lose ground for its existence. That battle is more than any romance could sustain.