Archipelago: a journey across poetic islands of the self

by

Paul Venzo

BA (Hons.), MA (Research), Grad. Dip. Journalism

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Full Name: Paul Venzo

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_Archipelago_ is dedicated to the memory of my father, Albano Venzo.
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Abstract

Archipelago is a manuscript of poetry in English and Italian that takes Venice and the Veneto as a creative topos. It is written from the perspective of a first generation migrant who explores his own provisional and transitory relationship to this geo-cultural terrain. To do this the poetry engages with different historical and cultural settings in northeast Italy, exploring how identity is shaped by this land and seascape. A series of important ideas emerge from the manuscript and are investigated in the exegesis that accompanies it. Employing theoretical frameworks to do with literary and linguistic nomadism, flânerie, self-translation, Third Space and hybridity, the exegesis focuses on the relationship between Venice and the Veneto and the representations of self and subjectivity at play within the poetry. The first chapter demonstrates how the poetry of Archipelago intersects with but also challenges prior literary imaginings of this space. The second chapter poses the idea that the poet who writes in situ can be understood as a flâneur, whose status as an insider/outsider captures the essence of what it means to be connected to but separate from the land of one’s forebears. In the third chapter, the practice of simultaneous auto-translation is discussed, bringing into question dominant discourses in translation studies that privilege the idea of a mother tongue and fixed allegiance to a single cultural origin. In the final chapter, various aspects of poetic form used in the manuscript are analysed in order to argue that the poetry shapes the identity of the poet in relation to the creative topos in which the writing is set. The thesis concludes with the central finding that the various aspects of creative practice mobilised in the poetry of Archipelago reveal a self that is negotiated, hybrid and nomadic: in constant translation between languages, sites, cultures and literatures.
Veneto, Italy (Google Earth, 2014)
Archipelago
The clerical sonnets\textsuperscript{1}

\textsuperscript{1} This section of \textit{Archipelago} includes fifteen sonnets, influenced by Petrarch, that trace the life of a young cleric living in the Venetian lagoon in the 1300s. It begins with his selection as a monk and a journey north to Venice. Once there, he describes his relationship with another young cleric, his exposure to both the refined and the brutal aspects of life in the lagoon, and gives his impression of the Republic at a point when it was reaching its pinnacle as a military, religious and cultural power.
An old crone sits cross-legged
In the dusty yard, sorting berries
From an apron in her lap.
Under her breath she mutters:
“Yes-no-no-yes”...Shaky hands
Toss the sour and the soiled
Left and right; nearby chickens
Scratch about, picking through
The sticky debris. It seems I
Am sorted too; this morning
Put aside, ripe for God. They say
I’m special—the fruit you’d
Bother to pick from a prickle-bush—
But really, I’m just one more mouth
Pecking about this stubborn earth.
We are many days along the road
And take shelter in a low, stone barn.
The rain falls with such evenness,
Each droplet a crystal grain winnowed
From the thresh of a turbulent sky.
For some days we have not met
A living soul. The dead give no alms,
And we do not eat. I think to die,

Here, on the forgiving straw that takes
Pity on my bones, my shaven head, with its
Splintery, golden pillow. I'm not frightened—
Just surprised—when I awake to find
Brother Luca cradling me, spitting
A fresh yolk between my mewling lips.
iii

They won't tell you, but in the summer
The mosquitoes are bird-big.
If you don’t bury the refuse—the fish,
Or meat, or any humid waste—
Their armada descends to pillage
Human flesh, as if your skin’s a village,
Leaving big red welts that won’t heal
Until winter chills their assault.

I lie close to the fire; I think
The smoke repels them.
The glowing embers remind me
Of the heart of the volcano
Near my home, in the south.
Nothing but ash flew in that air.
iv

Though they do not cast or gather stones
The fishermen know the simple laws
Of heave and ho: with apostolic patience
They mend nets when obtuse winds blow.
Even ringleted young men on the Giudecca
Remember to leave Saturday as vacant
As a piazza after market day. Like them
I accept my exile, my time apart: to all things

Their turn, and for now, war must have its day:
It is dog-hungry for young men like me. It is as
Hungry as the flames of the sentinel blaze
I will have to feed with driftwood, a sign
To my distant Brothers of their coming fight,
Of their death that sails gracefully by firelight.
v

I crouch on my pallet. Through a crack
I can look back to the islands:
Here on Malamocco we can see
Their sails shear the horizon.
When they get closer the clickering
Of arrows, the stench of men,
Rapes every sense. It’s my job
To sound the alarm with fire and bells.

I’m no soldier, but they’ve given me
The means of hot oil and plague-rags.
I’m scared but Brother says the Lord
Is both a shepherd and a soldier:
He rode a cloud-white horse and
A sword came out of his mouth.
vi

You hear stories about living saints but
I’ve never met one. They say Saint Damian
Doctored with the aid of a dog, but here
Their saliva is not considered medicinal.
We’re all too busy picking at fleas and lice
To be selfless and sinless. It’s hard to be
Saintly on an empty stomach: now even
Fish-soup is thinned to the bones.

I stare at the monstrance and pray
To be transfigured. I imagine myself
Screwed into its tiny, host-shaped core,
The centre-piece of its golden rays.
Of course, nothing happens and I must settle
For the everyday martyrdom of itchy skin.
vii

In the library it is my job
To empty ink wells and
Fetch paper and remain
Quiet, as a mouse. As I
Scurry about I pick up
Little crumbs of letters;
Tidbit shapes and swirls
Left on their blotters.

One day I'll learn enough
To write the Creed: I'll
Write it on a discarded
Scrap of Paper, and you
Can hide it, carefully,
In a fold of your tunic.
I like to remember you
In the garden, busy with
Tarragon, rows of carrots
And black runner beans.
You were fond of music:
Sometimes you would hum
The Te Deum, though it was
Against the rules of the place.

I doubt they even told you
I was leaving. Why would they?
We’re not supposed to be friends.
But I scratched a little picture of us—
Two boys with bald pates, smiling—
Into the pew where we sat.
Something strange happened last night,
Perhaps I should confess it? You see
I dreamt we were naked, bathing
Outdoors, at the big public well—
The one in the piazza, near the Arsenale.
You had a wooden bowl to scoop water
Over my head. I know it was you because
I recognized the little birthmark on your hip.

The people went about their business and
Thought nothing of us two larking about in public.
When I awoke my lower parts were wet
And I felt tired, although I’d slept for hours.
Surely it’s nothing to worry about—you don’t
Think I might be ill with something, do you?
Pier-Luigi told me it’s possible to ride from Padova to Milano
in a boat, along the Brenta. I don’t think it could be wide
enough for much of a boat, and I can’t see the Emperor being
one for paddling. Imagine the ladies, and their splendid frocks
and fine shoes and parasols, and little dogs, and picnic things;
they are hardly likely to take to drifting in what is little more
than a ditch. It wouldn’t surprise me if Pier-Luigi exaggerates;
after all, he’s from Dolo, and you know what they are like.

No, the Emperor takes horses and carts and carriages, much as
anyone with a retinue does to get about. Imagine the luxury of it:
cushions and blankets for your knees and trifles to eat and perhaps
a man playing music. Really, after all is said and done, people are used
to horses and like to stop here and there at a tavern or under a tree
for a drink. Honestly, only Venetians think boats can go anywhere.
The old man has a long white beard—
Who does he think he is? Moses?
I've been here since matins and
Still he ignores me. His cloak is
Covered with thumb-marks of
Paint, but he hasn't made a single
Mark upon the canvas, in all the
Time I've been sitting here, waiting.

His Mary is too glum for someone
Blessed with such a responsibility.
Delivery of precious goods—and I
Should know—requires a certain
Quiet dignity. It's this that prevents me
From crushing the note in my hand.
Dear Brother Bartolomeo,

Even the window-ledge
Of your tiny cell deserves
A planter-box of herbs.
Imagine the pleasure in
Rubbing the felt leaves
Of a little sage bush, or
Tilling the soil with a finger

Only used for turning pages.
Perhaps, in summer months,
It will attract a bird
To your sparse eyrie.
How soothing its gentle peep
Might be to silent ears.
As I serve, an entourage of ladies
From the parish of San Polo
Gaggle into the pews just below
The foot of the altar. I am distracted
By the snap of fans, the preen and
Rustle of silk, the trill sound of young
Voices reciting the Pater Noster.

Kneeling, gaze lowered in solemn
Reverence, my truant eyes creep
Along the tiles and reach a foot,
A slender slipper, the colour
Of cornmeal; so real I consider
What it might be like to lick it.
Quartering, flaying, racking, stocking
And now, simultaneously hanging and
Burning. Honestly, the drawn out horrors
We devise for ourselves defies all sense:
Even chickens are quickly strangled.
I can't pass by on my way to Mass in
Santo Stefano without being overcome
With the stench of roasted flesh. You'd
Think we'd reserve something for the
Cardinal sins, but instead we waste
Such torments on simple acts of treason.
I'm concerned that even we might trip
Over such minor indiscretions, laughing
Ourselves onto an unexpected scaffold.
xv

In the middle of the cloister
Is a nectarine tree which,
Faithful to our ministrations,
Has given fruit these three years
Spent here on San Lazzaro.
Each time I eat the stringy, pale
Flesh I realize I have forgotten
Its taste, from one year to the next.

It was like that when I saw you
In that same courtyard, after months
Of duty on the barren marshes.
My happiness was as ripe as a
Mid-summer nectarine;
Its juicy tears ran down my face.
The first poem in this section is addressed to the Roman tragedian, philosopher and statesman Seneca. However, it refers more specifically to his character in the opera *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppaea) by Claudio Monteverdi, first performed in Venice in 1643. The other four poems address the poets Francesco Petrarca, Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon (Lord) Byron and Andrea Zanzotto, all of whom had strong personal and creative links to Venice and the Veneto. The poem ‘Shelley, out riding with his Lord Byron’ is a response, in sonnet form, to Shelley’s autobiographical poem about his relationship with Byron and their time spent together in Venice titled ‘Julian and Count Maddalo’ (1824).
To Seneca

O Seneca, Rome doesn’t need heroes!
The cart that drags the past behind us
is too full with them; it groans beneath
the weight of those you resurrect—
Oedipus, Agamemnon and Iestes—
not to mention its own native sons and
daughters whose effigies populate
every nook and cranny of the temples.

Why be so austere? Give yourself over
to steam baths and the decadent excesses
of the mushroom and the fig. Unbuckle
your sandals and rest contented hands
on your fat belly. Gaze over the horizon
of your flesh and you will see Monteverdi’s
trim portrait of you: how stern you will be
then, your basso profundo reverberating
like a full-blown conch, bellowing with a
seriousness even you couldn’t hope to fake.
To Petrarch

Imagine your surprise when, on a Lenten morning cold and crisp with privation,
you saw her, sitting with her scrofulitic family,
adjusting a grimy linen bonnet.
Did your heart seize in your chest
at the sight of her unblemished bosom?
Did you start a frantic Pater Noster when
her angelic face tilted up towards you?

How you must have filed that memory deep
in the hostile forest of the future, a coarse thought
to blanket around your old, bony shoulders,
a bandage for your wounded pride when
at the crucial hour the Italians turned against you:
obessed with their own intoxicating youth.
Shelley, riding out with his Lord Byron

I rode out with him one day, early, to avoid the crowds that even then would follow him as far as the Lido, keen to see the limping Lord, the sharp-pencilled bard and infamous English cuckold. As sweat upon our satin-coated, chestnut mares we galloped the beach to Alberoni where,

pausing in the cool pine-shade, we spoke of his dual philandering. On one hand he is an Armenian sacerdote on San Lazzaro, while on the other he inclines to prostitute himself to that old Lady waiting, in heat, on the near horizon.
Soligo

Zanzotto, is that you I spy
crouched beside the chestnut tree,
your beret cocked, your ear
close to the damp, cool earth?
What fungal language do you hear?
Perhaps it is the truffling
baby-talk of the spring,
the molecular chew-talk of the grubs,
or the over-lapping dialect
of rotting leaves—those brown,
paper-thin tongues
upon which nature writes
its own transparent eulogy.
Belluno is both a city and province located in the Dolomite Mountains in the northern part of the Veneto region. The word ‘Belluno’ means ‘beautiful one’, and indeed, it is renowned as one of the most physically beautiful environments of this part of Italy. While I have ancestral connections to Bassano del Grappa, some kilometres further to the south and closer to Venice, Belluno, and in particular the small village of Pieve di Limana located in its outskirts, is the area in which my family now live.
Archipelago

There are other lives I might have led
crouched in the foothills of Pordenone,
meandering along the shoals of the Piave,
stabled in a farmhouse in Maser, impatiently
pacing the platform at Ponte nelle Alpi.

They are lives crouched over endless rounds
of bastoni, played in a truck-stop bar
in Refos, or Castion or god-forsaken-Trichès;
an ever-mounting Tarot deck of

forgotten images:
here we are thugging about in Chioggia,
here we are kissing
beside the grotty cathedral in Vicenza.

I am tumbled from this archive,
strewn across the cool marble floor.
I stand marooned on private islands
of uncertainty, potential:
a vast, sweeping, uncharted archipelago.
Strade secondarie

Cammino per le strade secondarie, agricole, verso Limana. Ogni anno della mia lontananza appaiono le villette nuove: i giocattoli e bici dei bambini sono dispersi nei giardini.

Più avanti c’è Luxottica: oggi il giornale mi dice che la fabbrica va in rovina, e per sottolinearlo ci sono solo un paio di motorini parcheggiati vicino l’entrata.

Anni fa, proprio a questo passo, una mattina invernale, ho visto un cerbiatto, per un momento rivellandosi sotto le rami innevate, le puntini di bianco visibili sulla schiena, ma adesso sembra l’impossibile. Vale solo la vita rumorosa ed ovvia, che si appoggia nei passi carrai, che si stabilisce in mattoni e malta, che significa essendoci, in carne e ossa.
Secondary roads

I walk the secondary, agricultural roads towards Limana.
Each year I am away new houses appear,
kids’ toys and bikes scattered in their gardens.

Further along there’s Luxottica: today’s newspaper tells me
the factory is going broke, and as if to underline this fact
there are just two motorbikes parked outside.

Years ago, on a winter’s morning, right at this very spot,
I saw a fawn, for an instant revealing itself from under
snow-laden branches, white spots visible on its young back,

but now that seems impossible. What counts is noisy, obvious life
that sits itself in the driveway, that settles itself in bricks and mortar,
that means being here, in flesh and bone.

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4 Where two versions of a poem appear in Italian and English the Italian version is
given first and the English version appears immediately following it or on the
subsequent page. If possible and where formatting permits, the two versions are
placed side by side.
Il lago delle ore

Fra l’orto e cantina l’anziana si dimentica che cosa sta facendo—nelle mani un riservatoio di fagioli che parla del pranzo, ma purtroppo non più di questo.

Il suo ritmo preciso di ben’ ottant’anni ora include, per forza, queste pause. Il suo proprio pensiero si riempie all’improvviso: lascia uno spazio vuoto per le memorie. Così entrano le immagini del matrimonio, dal lavoro dopoguerra nella Svizzera, degli apuntamenti di ieri alla dentista. La vecchiaia sembra un vero Piave di malattie e dolori, opere di casa, spese al supermercato: sono tutti quanti gocce nel lago delle ore, in cui si sfoga, lente-ma-decisamente.
The lake of the hours

Between the vegetable garden and the cellar
the old lady forgets what she is doing—
in her hands a bowl of green beans
suggest lunch, but little more than that.

Her precise rhythm of nigh on eighty years
must now admit such pauses.
Her very thoughts suddenly empty,
leaving a vacant space, a catchment

for memories: images of her wedding,
of post-war indenture in Switzerland,
of yesterday’s appointment at the dentist.
Old age is a channel, a veritable Piave⁵

of sicknesses and aches, odd jobs
and trips to the supermarket, all
filling the lake of the hours in which
one drowns, slowly-but-surely.

⁵ The Piave River is a well-known waterway of the Veneto.
Verderame

La bicicletta sott’acqua della Brenta
ha preso il colore verderame.
Gli anni passano sopra, ma ancora
l’estate si rivela, come noi
per le rive di meta-luglio.
In questo breve periodo

nelle frazioni della gioventù
osservo, crescendo dentro di me,
una nostalgia, una nuova sentimentalità
per gli anziani, per le loro facce,
per quegli che stanno per addormentarsi,
seduti nella piazza.

Mi accorgo anche della Bruna—
già sui settantott’anni—
i suoi movimenti sempre più lenti,
facendo suo giro del giardino
soffocato coi fiori,
una massa di facce native.

È quest’umore melancholico
raggiunge anche al verde del prato,
del bosco, dentro l’ombra del Piave,
dove tante belle cose si risolvono,
dopo un anno o due,
sepolto nel sedimento bello fresco.
Verdigris

The bicycle submerged in the river Brenta
has a patina of verdigris.
Years pass overhead
but each summer it appears again as we do
on the warm banks of mid-July.

In this brief period
in the backwaters of my youth,
I note a new nostalgia growing in me,
a sentimentality for the old, for their faces,
for those in the piazza close to sleep.

I notice too the ever slower-motion of Bruna—
already in her seventy-eighth year—
as she tours the garden,
choked with flowers,
a crowd of native faces.

And this melancholia reaches out
to the edge of the green lawn, to the woods,
down to the shadowy bed of the Piave, where
all manner of things settle, after a year or two,
buried in the cool, rich sediment.
Pieve di Limana

Il pieve si appoggia fra la strade
andando verso Trichiana, conosciuto
per i libri. All’altro lato c’è Belluno
e di sopra, il profilo delle alte cime.
La mattina passa il furgone con il pane
per il davanzale d’ogni casa,
un regalo della notte. Così mi alza,
smettendo quest’emero per il Piave
senza parola, senza contatto con il mondo
umano. Un cane da caccia mi segue giù
al fiume, dove spoglio tutto. Il sole
mi lava, mi nutrisce, mi ripieno
con pensieri lievitati. Qui non c’è più
mancanza, ni solitudine, ni dovere.
Pieve di Limana

The old village sits itself among the roads leading to Trichiana, famous for its books. In the other direction lies Belluno and above, the profile of the highest peaks. In the morning a small truck passes, with bread for the windowsill of every house; a gift from the night. I rise and quit my quiet cell, wander to the Piave without a word, without human contact. A hunting dog follows me down to the river, where I shed my clothing. The sun washes me, nourishes me, fills me with leavened thoughts. Here there is no more loss, nor solitude, nor binding duty.
After Chernobyl

After the clouds ambled down from Poland, Austria, after the rain had eased itself across the valley—no crackle of electricity, no chemical vapour; just dumb, plump droplets—came the digging in of vegetables, the burning of corn, the garaging of cars, motorini, the barning of animals, the home-schooling of children, the closure of the local dairy, the lovely, bitter taste of chicory, abandoned in a dirty plastic bowl by the step.

After wailing headlines and non-committal sound bites and looks of consternation from sashed mayors and Carabinieri came the powering down, the cementing sarcophagus poured over holiday plans, renovations, church excursions.

For some months shops sold pricey jars of pickled things that older folks enjoyed. Silently pleased with cat’s bum parsimony and the war-like canteening of tinned things, they fermented a fondness for this new enemy: devious and untraceable.

But of course the next spring, the very next April, a persistent, irrepressible thrusting of oniony spikes drilled up again and soon there was splitting, seeding; an unstoppable vomit of regeneration.
Once again the boys—newly shaven, over-cologned, bare brown legs stretching devilishly out of shorts—lounged about the plastic furniture of the gelateria, happily lapping at cups of liqueur-flavoured ice-cream churned from familiar cows, familiar pastures.

Meanwhile, in the nitrous sludge another darkness coughed itself up to the light, ready to splutter out when least expected, at some distant dinner-table moment, spotting on the napkin.
Slingshot

A jet from Aviano slingshots overhead. It trips a wire, a cable no thicker than my wrist. Down the car comes, triggering an avalanche of mad press, stuffing that glass coffin with fat, black headlines.

At the supermarket shoppers post obituaries on a cork notice board; among these an ebony-bordered photo of a corn-fed Fascist, lit fag hanging limply from his gob.

Seen from late train windows electric candles flicker in the cemetery at Sedico. Their intermittent blink recalls distant aircraft descending, full of other unseen, low-flying lives.
Vajont

Alle 22.39 precisamente, il 9 Ottobre, 1963
un pugno scuro perforò la diga del Vajont
e due mila anime della valle furono obliterati.

Oggi, cinquant’anni dopo, nella Piazza dei Martiri
a Belluno, proprio nel giardinetto ben’ curato,
c’è un monumento. Leggo la dedicazione,
scritta a mano, sull’asse di una corona funebre:

«L’acqua non deve distruggere ma fa’ crescere la vita».

Così l’alta marea di morte e colpevolezza è bollito
fino al sorso più breve di dolore.

Vajont

At 10.30pm precisely, on the 9th of October, 1963
a dark fist of water punched through the damn at Vajont
and two thousand people were wiped off the valley floor.

Today, fifty years later, in the Piazza dei Martiri
in Belluno, right in the middle of its well-kept garden,
is a memorial. I read its hand-written dedication,
across the axis of a wreath:

“Water should never destroy, but rather create, life”.

Thus, the king tide of death and guilt is boiled down
to the briefest sip of grief.
A natale scende un silenzio

Smesso la laguna, treno su in montagna—
Mestre—Padova—Montebelluna—Ponte nelle Alpi—
da passare le ferie al vecchio Pieve di Limana.
Qui, a natale, scende un silenzio;
la frenesia della gente, delle machine e dei negozi
si stanca, accettando il momento in cui
tutta l'energia di Dicembre cade per terra
con la costante prevedibilità della neve.

La vigilia di natale decido fare un salto a Belluno.
Dal Pieve bisogna una camminata,
una scivola teatrale sopra la strada ghiacciata,
l'aria gelida spingendomi nel fondo del piumino e
durante l'undici minuti interminabili aspettandando l'autobus,
le palle si nascostano dentro di me, le uova nel nido.
Il pullman mi mangia, succhiandomi dentro il calore
della sua pancia piena di pensionati e ragazzi già in ferie.

Faccio il passaggio fra la stazione e la Piazza dei Martiri.
I negozi bisognavo una camminata,
incontri allungati con le salutazioni festive;
le parole hanno il gusto di canella. Una comessa
mi offre una castagna; un cervello minuscolo
sotto una corazza di legno. Il commercio sul serio
è già fatto, mentre a casa amici, famiglie e gli amanti,
panettone e vin santo stanno pronti, i regali fanno
la loro vigilia sotto i pini artificiali. Girovago fino alle porte vecchie, la parte più diminutiva del centro, i vicoli medievali ed i portici m’inghiottono dentro i bar e negozi purbene. Qui le archi inquadrano una cortile molto gentile dove una massa di persone (con telecamere, microfoni, luci e tutta l’attrezzatura del set cinematografico) aspetta un take. C’è un’immobilità quasi sacra:

l’unica cosa che si muove sarebbe la neve artificiale che scende con la dolcezza delle palpebre stanche battendo. Non c’è niente da rompere l’illusione di questa scena che senz’altro fa parte d’una telemovie messo in transmissione ogni anno a natale in perpetuità; la storia d’una donna chi trova amore all’ultimo minuto, uno sconosciuto (un tizio come il Jeff Bridges) l’offre una mano al fruttivendolo, e presto that’s amore, qui al vecchio cuore della città.

Il direttore grida “Action!” e sono io raccolto nell’onda dolce degli extra; senza perdere un colpo cammino verso la scena con un naturalismo straordinariamente Hollywoodiano. Con calma proseguo all’altro lato della piazza e non guardando in dietro, mi oriento ancora alla stazione. Le finestrine del pullman incornicia la valle come una cartolina. Scrivo a casa sulle righe sbiancate di abeti.
La sera torniamo in macchina per la Messa di mezzanotte.

Studiando la statua della Madonna delle Spade—
cosi fissa, accolteleata, lacrime sospesi sulle guance—
considero la possibilità che esisto per sempre inserito
sul frammento di pellicola, in cui cammino per la piazzetta
vestito in questi jeans, giubbotto, scarpe di ginnastica,
la faccia un pò arrossita, congelato nel silenzio che scende
nei minuti precendenti di Natale.
At Christmas a silence descends

I quit the lagoon, train up to the mountains—
Mestre—Padova—Montebelluna—Ponte nelle Alpi—
to spend the holidays in the old village of Limana.
Here, at Christmas, a silence descends,
the frenetic activity of people, cars, shopping
tires itself out, welcoming the moment when
all the energy of December falls to earth with
the steady, predictable drift-down of the snow.

Christmas Eve I make an assault on Belluno.
From Pieve this requires a walk, a theatrical slip-sliding
uphill over icy bitumen, the gelid air shoving me
into the depths of my parka. An interminable
fifteen minutes must be spent waiting for the bus;
my nuts crawl up into my torso, eggs in a nest.
Soon the bus devours me, sucks me into its warm innards
full of pensioners and kids already on holidays.

I walk from the station to the Piazza dei Martiri.
the shop-keepers lean in their doorways, their
street-meetings drawn out with seasonal greetings:
their words have the flavour of cinnamon.
A shopkeeper offers me a chestnut; a tiny, warm brain
in a wooden carapace. With the serious business
of Christmas trading done, at home friends, family and lovers,
panettone and vin santo are waiting, while presents
stand sentinel below artificial pines. I wander through
the old wooden doors to the miniaturized historic centre;
medieval alleyways and covered cloisters swallow me
into shops and bars and other spaces.
The arches frame a central courtyard where
a crowd of people (with cameras, microphones, lights
and all the attendant paraphernalia of a film set)
waits silently for a take. There is an almost holy immobility:

the only thing that moves is the artificial snow
that falls with the gentleness of tired eyelids blinking.
There’s nothing to shatter the illusion of this scene
that is undoubtedly part of a telemovie to be put on air
every Christmas in perpetuity; the story of a woman
who falls in love at the last minute, a handsome stranger
(an Italian Jeff Bridges) offers her a hand at the greengrocer’s
and that’s amore, here in the old heart of the city.

The director shouts “Action!” and I am caught
in the gentle wave of extras flooding the scene;
without missing a beat I walk across the set with
the most extraordinarily Hollywood-esque naturalism.
I calmly proceed to the other side of the piazza and
not looking back, keep on walking to the station.
The dark frame of the bus window makes postcards
of the valley. I write home on its blank lines of fir trees.

That evening, we return by car for midnight Mass.
Studying the statue of the Madonna of the Swords—
so utterly fixed, knifed to the spot, tears suspended in mid-drop—
I consider the possibility that forever more I am inserted
on a fragment of film, walking through that little square
in these jeans, this parka, these sneakers,
my face a little flushed, frozen in the falling silence
of the minutes before Christmas.
Expectancy

Although it’s early summer
snow dandruffs the high peaks
and insipid rain bothers itself
to fall on evening streets.

This year, shoes of the softest nap—
the colour of a staghound pup—
wait for puddles to evaporate,
and linen trousers to be pressed,

drawn forth from the recesses
of a camphored wardrobe. I
stand in the doorway smoking
another damp cigarette while

in the marketplace coloured
sheaves of wheat are bundled up
for long vases, and hard cherries
split their plastic punnets.

How odd then—amidst all this—
that I did not see you coming,
a grey shape moving in the drizzle,
suddenly close, in sharpest focus.
Diluvio

(Deluge)

The rain from Sotto Gouda punches the horizon, bruises the sky. I bolt for the last bus to Feltre, miss it, watch its blue arse wagging goodbye as it turns towards Limana. My expletives are drenched in the cats-and-dogs downpour; I am stranded and the payphones are constipated with coins. A likely lad in a battered Opel cruises once, twice, and pulls up. As he leans across to open the door, I can see the dark, moist fur of his armpit. He’s a barracks boy. I get in. He clamps a paw on my wet, denim thigh, guns the accelerator. His fingernails are as clean as the hour after a storm.
Michele, per strada

Andando in machina verso casa—
io con gli occhi cane-da-caccia
dopo un giorno interno di viaggio—
vediamo una coppia per strada:
lei alta, magra, sconosciuta mentre lui
ha una faccia dal mio passato,
barbata, dura.
All'improvviso lui ci ferma
con la mano alzato.
Subito dopo la sua testa
è venuta per la finestrina mia,
e mi sento le guance bacciate e coccolate.

Michele! Il grande Michele!
Quanti notti ho immaginato
il piacevole conforto ci sarebbe
addormentarmi contro il tuo petto
luosamente peloso, il profumo
di vernice ad olio, di acquaragia
che si agrappano, anche adesso,
leggermente alle dita.

Salto fuori, dentro l’abbraccio tuo,
ma vedo che i nostri guiati di gioia
non piacciono alla fidanzata, e
nostre promesse di stare in contatto
sono solo parole-aquarelle; mancano
da durezza del tuo corpo che
a questo momento, incide
suo profilo su di me.
Michele, on the street

Heading home by car—
me with gun-dog eyes
from a full day of travelling—
we see a couple on the street:
she is tall, thin, unknown
while he has a face from my past,
heavily bearded, hard.
Suddenly, he raises his hand,
stops us, thrusts his head
through the car window.
I feel my cheeks kissed, caressed.

Michele! The great Michele!
So many nights I’ve imagined
how comforting it would be
to fall asleep against your chest,
so luxuriously pelted,
to smell the faint scent
of oil paint and turpentine that
still clings to your fingers.

I jump out into your embrace,
but I can see our yelps of delight
are making your girlfriend frown
and our promises to keep in touch
are just watercolour words;
they lack the brutal hardness
of your body that, at this moment,
etches its outline into me.
The singular chime

Four stone griffin dribble tepid water into the fountain while nearby a pair of German tourists sip equally lukewarm beer from glass stivali. In this shady oasis of the little piazza of Santo Stefano di Belluno the elderly wilt; they slump on the stone benches outside the church, their shopping bags from Billa splitting with melons, spilling little tubes and tubs of oiliness about their feet. Far too loudly a group of school children emerge from around a corner, messing into summer with lurid icy-poles and swear-words and plumes of illicit cigarette smoke. Overhead a singular bell gives a dull, perfunctory chime: it is just one o’clock in the afternoon.
Viaggiando in treno

Viaggiando in treno fra
Ponte nelle Alpe e Vittorio Veneto,
già passato Conegliano, la pianura
ai piedi di Montebelluna,
sono cacciato nelle parole nere
delle donne africane,
sotto lo sguardo della guardia,
implicato nella loro fregatura
di un biglietto non timbrato.
Mi offro in difesa,
mi alzo e mi sento,
per la prima volta,
di essere al limite,
proprio all'ultima frontiera,
pronto per buttarmi
dentro il buio
della valle, di essere
proprio la cosa più strana
contro il muro degli alberi.

Come sono la cosa strana nel
sottopassaggio della stazione di Padova,
a tavola, nei bar: un’insistente,
strillando incidente di nascita.
Travelling by train

Travelling by train between
Ponte nelle Alpi and Vittorio Veneto,
already past Conegliano, past
the pianura at the feet of Montebelluna,
I am trapped in the black words
of the African women, I am
under the frown of the conductor,
implicated in the deception
of an unstamped ticket.
I rise in their defence
and feel, for the first time,
to be on the edge,
to be really at the farthest reach,
ready to hurl myself
into the darkness of the valley,
to be absolutely the strangest thing
against the wall of trees.

As I am the strangest thing
in the station underpass in Padova
at the dinner table, in the bars:
an insistent, shrieking accident of birth.
A Tissot

A well-dressed fellow
steps down from a ladder
in the window of Coin:
he has been arranging ladies’ winter parkas
and has scattered the scene
with tiny bits of polystyrene
to simulate a snowfall.
He glances at his watch—
a Tissot, a present from an ex—
he’s late for spin or step or whatever it is
he does these days
at the health club in Bribano.
He only goes to perve on the instructor,
a young guy from Conegliano,
whose over–tuned body
is as distant and fake
as a holiday brochure.
His own physique has begun to droop
like a tennis net
on an abandoned court;
the kind you’d find
in a book by Bassani
that no one bothers to read anymore.
The young man has a hollow laugh

In a dingy enoteca in central Belluno
a young guy can’t keep his eyes off me.
He raises the amber fragolino to his lips
and flinches when his girlfriend
tucks a lock of frizzy hair behind her ears.
He hates the vicious ways she sips
brachetto—soured in the barrel—
and prattles on, endlessly dissecting
the dregs of a holiday in Croatia;
where all he wanted to do was
go nude and get laid with his mates.
Mariella—la più bella

(Mariella—the most beautiful)

In the coop is a high-wire hen
whose wings remain unclipped:
she will not sleep in the straw
with her ladies-in-waiting but
rather prefers a solitary ledge,
under the eaves of the old shed.
No doubt there is a fox in her past.
Il Circo Bidone

(The Dustbin Circus)

A travelling circus in a vacant lot
outskirting Vittorio Veneto.
Gypsy wagons, dust kicked up in little coughs
of brown smoke and lantern light.
The music of a whirly-gig.

The ring-master, a fat French clown
Bow-tied and tipsy,
steps us up onto rickety benches.
Stringy-haired girls trot a pony
while even chickens stunt for money.

Crowds gasp at the fakery
of a broken, flaming trapeze.
A wiry acrobat feints his death with
a ta-da dismount. Feet-stamping encores,
and hats filled with clinking lire.

Later, my mate is asleep by the fire,
belly full of bread and cheap red.
I chat with an unshod boy: the ratty son
of the acrobat. His junkie mother
scratches her arm, thin as a sparrow bone.

She flinches when daddy
and I strike up in English.
Dried out he joined the circus, and now
turns new tricks from an old dog.

Getting late, I wring out my mate
for the long drive down the valley.
Richard complains at my leaving, wants
my number scribbled on his hand.
I roll my own act onto the autostrada.

A week later, Richard rings.
Keen for more bread and circuses
for its good-bye slap-up do
in a villa that once boasted a Count,
I head off in a prize-fighting Fiat Uno.

Torches, drumming, pipes and
flag throwing. Something
rose-fleshed roasting on a spit.
Children eating dry cake.
Prosecco, golden in glasses.

Richard reels me out of the circle,
Wraps me in his jig, dances me
to the edge of the music, to the steps
of a kitsch caravan. In the dim light
his kisses molest my mouth.
His stubble scrapes off a layer
of my inexperience.
His lust is a ramrod pegging out
a tent of illicit possibilities.
Outside, a creeping footfall breaks us.

Weeks later, Barcelona. We reconvene:
Harriet, Michele, Richard, his wife, his kid,
the rat, the fat French clown
and God knows who else
tumble out together to a magic show
where a man balances a pool-table
on his head. Absinthe and hash
and these hangers on intervene
in a private duet of brief touches
and sideways glances.

Of that night all I’m left
is a faded t-shirt swiped
from Richard’s bag. Dead-end
searches on the Internet—
an open matrix for a heavy fall.
Il colore delle ciliegie

Sono le undici manca cinque
nella Piazza delle Erbi di Belluno.
Le commesse di frutta e verdura
stanno sotto le ombrelloni,
davanti alle pesche robuste
e rossicce. Una decina di suore
decidono di comprare invece
le ciliegie, quelle dure e scure.
Magari faranno una marmalata,
la prima di quest’anno.
Da qui la frutta ha il colore
di labbre tinte, o di sangue.

The colour of cherries

It is five minutes to eleven
in the Piazza delle Erbi, Belluno.
The sales girls of the fruit market
stand under big umbrellas,
in front of the fat, rosy, peaches.
Instead of these, a dozen nuns
decide to buy some cherries,
of the dark, unripe kind.
Perhaps they intend to make jam,
the first of this year.
From here, the fruit has the colour
of painted lips, or blood.
La pattinatrice

Accanto al parcheggio c’è
una pista di pattinaggio, uno stadio semi-aperto
dove una ballerina, una pattinatrice,
scivola. Ogni rotazione è una centrifuga
consumando la superficie, stridendo suo disegno:
una stella caotica, una furia di linee,
filamenti di rabbia trivellando il ghiaccio.

The ice skater

Next to the car-park is
an ice-rink, a semi-open stadium
where a dancer, an ice-skater,
glides. Every spin is a centrifuge
consuming the surface, etching her design:
a chaotic star, a fury of lines,
webs
Credo che gli spiriti siano sopra

(I believe the spirits are overhead)

Hosts, spectres, apparitions, angels:
in my mind I have woven them
into that triumphant scene, the
reunification of the holy, an immediate
transference from earth to heaven.

In so far as I have any proof, your
brother stood by your bed as you died,
as I stood by his; our triumvirate bathed
in that most believable light trumpeting
across the masculine flanks of the Dolomiti.

Over the glacial heights its chorus blaring,
and to the last your mother calling
with only me to answer for her
as the last vibration shook your body,
as blood congealed, marbled in your veins.

Figs fell, sticky-pecked, the rosy flesh
turned out, while Easter kept its gruesome,
wounded promise and history rolled
in her river ever on, rolling over tiny pebbles
smoothed by the Brenta’s liquid tongue.
Canova's children

The hills have their regimental rows of almond trees, the autostrada its symphonic curves of bitumen.

The temple at Possagno has its bone-white symmetries and Canova his alabaster children, still lying in the sun.
Canova’s orphans

Give me the chaos of the flea market in Padova,
the chipped graves of San Michele
and the disorder of shoes by my door.
Give me the dishevelled rent boys in Mestre,
their writhing backlit moments, the emptying
of bladders: wet scribble of a raucous whore.
Country for small deer

The Piave shovels out a valley
where little villages crouch
in the lee of the mountains:
it is country for small deer
and the pitter-patter of rockfall.

After the up-down-rollabout
of Venice, the heave and haw
of the stretches between San Giorgio,
Redentore, Giudecca, Sacca Fisola
and Tronchetto, a last coffee—
cigarette at Piazzale Roma,
there is nothing more soothing
than the slow throttling-along
of the regional train, drugging its way
through the Pianura until,

an hour or two later,
the green embankments of Alpago
close in, and the carriage is suffused
with the soft nasal dialect
of the students who alight at Feltre.

An over-groomed conductor
lazily flag-furls us into the station
at Sedico-Bribano. I descend,
walk through the deserted bar,
out into a vacant carpark.

For a moment there is nothing:
no sound of a car, no-one in sight,
no phone squealing its owner’s
lateness. It is nearly lunchtime.
My only concern for today will be

to pick fresh rucola, scratch out
a line or two, kip and smoke.
I let this thought runs its finger
down my rigid spine and unlock me,
as you did, twelve hours ago.
So, a Colderù

àidemo so a Colderù
le sabo, è ghe xe la fest’—
Onorina, Gilda, Bruna,
Remo, Vito, Riccardo, Franco,
Suòr’ Imelda—
tuti cuanti qua in çima,
So so a Colderù.

Bévemo prosèc’
zerchàm’ il cucc’
magnemo le frag’
indrio l’ónbra dèla baràc’—
mi resto qua,
capi ti bèn—
so so, a benedìo Colderù

Up, at Colderù

Let’s go up to Colderù
It’s Saturday and there’s a party—
Onorina, Gilda, Bruna,
Remo, Vito, Riccardo, Franco
and Sister Imelda—
They’re all up there, up
in the hills of Colderù.

We’ll drink some bubbly
we’ll hunt the cuckoo
we’ll eat wild strawberries
in the shade of the shack—
I’m staying here,
you’ve heard it true—
here, at blessed Colderù.
Canzoni della Laguna – Lagoon Songs

6 Although Venice is held in the popular imagination to be a city, it is more accurate to say that it is a collection of islands and communities scattered about a lagoon. For this reason, the poems in this section refer to Venice in the broadest sense of the word and contain references to both the city and the lagoon in which it is located.
Vespers

Between the dark pines blink the harbour lights:
their animal eyes prowl the lagoon.
Across its mirrored face the moon is cast
in almond ribbons. Here the buildings blush at sunset
and in the shy dusk pigeons coo their vespers.

Just as the snow is in the air before descending
I am pausing here, hiding in the folding slap the water makes
on lacquer-black keels, on gritty shorelines.
The light bringers

Night settles, a dark sheet
across a summer bed. Feet
beggar-shuffle through
the gardens of San Giorgio.
In the queer religious hush
of the Teatro Verde voices
bob and sink, swallowed by a low,
Aegean murmuring. Music,
a queer crystalline pulse, nestles
in the ear, a lover’s tongue.
The dancers come bringing light,
their feet on cold tiles drum.
Aloft upon a peninsula of limbs
the lanterns sway, cloaked in
chiffon cages. The dancers’ dervish
tilts to me, its ever-slight precession
kiltered to my lean, the loose
red tresses of anger caught
in torso-bobbins. I am withdrawn
in the rip of bodies, smashed
against their hands, drummed thin.
I am a foetal thought adrift
in the blue, unstarred night.
I might have been that man
drinking caffè orzo
or the young guy buying summer shoes at Clarke's,
or perhaps one of those married-types
who stand, dazed, in the back aisles of la Billa,
utterly unnerved by shelves of pasta sauce.

I might even have been the man I see shattering ice
from the windscreen of his blue Fiat Uno;
the one who spent last night cruising
for a prostitute behind the station at Mestre.
**Strappi gola**

Scendendo con voi, i miei colleghi
dei due mesi d’internamento al museo Guggenheim,
ho dovuto camminare per un po’ in silenzio, per un po’
con gli occhi per terra, i vostri voci Americano-Inglese
un segghettato frammento di vetro alla gola.

**Throat rips**

Alighting from the train with you, my colleagues
on a two-month stretch at the Guggenheim,
I had to walk in silence for a short distance,
eyes cast to the ground, your American-English voices
a ragged shard of glass at my throat.
Little Bear

There is a boat called *Little Bear*
moored a few steps from where I sit:
she is a jolly, fat ketch
with a wooden deck and elegant wheel,
her ropes and sails are neatly trimmed
and her navy hull gleams,
awash with late-June sunlight.
Today the wind is up, the Bacino
chopped with wave and craft—
it is a day for bobbing and polishing—
best to be safe and sound, hibernating
behind a solid breakwater.
The sparrow’s game

Little sparrow I know your game
and I’ll play it to a point:
tiny morsels of brine-soaked bread
I’ll spare for your nest, hidden
in the shady confines of the monastery.
I figure you have a family
sequestered in a meagre pine
and we both know the thought of that
makes for never-ending flight.
La Calle Piscina Venier

A Dorsoduro ci sarebbe la Calle Piscina Venier—qui, a quattro passi, vale la pena guardare in su: dal piano nobile di un palazzo, in ogni modo Veneziano, esce un giardino verdente e glorioso, un’esplosione dei fiori e piante e bandiere, veramente un’insalata di colore e fogliame, davvero un saluto alla capacità universale da mettere giù i radici, non importa dove.

The Calle Piscina Venier

In Dorsoduro you’ll find the Calle Piscina Venier—here, a few steps along, it’s worth looking up: from the first floor of a palazzo, in every way Venetian, bursts out a gloriously verdant garden, an explosion of flowers and plants and flags, altogether a mixed salad of colour and foliage, a fine salute to the universal capacity to put down roots, no matter where.
Al Prado

Al Prado di Madrid incontro
una coppia sessantenne di Vicenza.
Gloriamoci nell’idea
di quanto piccolo il mondo
e quant’è piacevole vedere qui,
alla distanza di paesi ed epoche,
i bei quadri di Tiziano.

Anche se il Prado sia magnifico,
sono d’accordo con la signora
che sia più al nostro gusto
l’Academia di Venezia:
a quelle stanze dello Scarpa,
cosi raffinate,
ci teniamo molto.

Durante questo dialogo,
mi rendo conto che faccio finta
di essere un paesino loro.
Però non rivelo la mia identità—
basta avere una faccia italiana,
come i ritratti che ammiriamo
in questo museo tanto Spagnolo.
At the Prado

At the Prado in Madrid I meet
a couple in their sixties, from Vicenza.
We revel in the idea
of how small the world is,
and how lovely it is to see,
at the distance of countries and eras,
the beautiful paintings by Titian.

Even if the Prado is very pleasing,
the lady and I agree
that the Academia di Venezia
is more to our taste:
we both hold dear to those
quietly elegant rooms
designed by Scarpa.

During this conversation I realize
I am pretending to be
one of their countrymen.
However, I do not reveal my identity—
it’s enough to have an Italian face,
just like the portraits we admire
in this most Spanish of museums.
Dopo Beuys – Fragile

In piazza, dopo il terremoto,
frantumi di vetro creano
una copertina di cristallo
che brillava nel sole.

Qui a fianco sono arrivati
i mobili dal piano nobile
dal palazzo che ormai,
non esiste più.

Come può essere che un ouvo,
ancora intatto, si bilancia
pericolosamente sull’orlo di
una tavola di quercia?

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After Beuys – Fragile

In piazza, after the quake,
shards of glass make
a blanket of crystal
that glitters in the sun.

Here to the side furniture
has crashed from the first floor
of the palazzo that now
no longer exists.

How can it be that
an egg, still intact, balances
precariously upon the lip
of an oak table?
Suspension

Marlene—I look for you in the crowded places, in the luggage halls, at platform’s end, where Tuscan and Venetian faces blend. Through that human forest memory chases the foreign ghosts I once befriended: Daniele, in your bathtub, the Bronski Beat twinned nodding heads and tapping feet (the sound now thin, the riff suspended).

And now in creviced calle walls I post the lines—these wanted ads, short scraps of writing—on the chance that you are one day passing by the Café Noir in Dorsoduro and you’ll see this ink-bled, scruffy mail. Return, read the signs I’ve hidden here. For God’s sake rescue me.
Today, tomorrow, Berlin

Crisp wine is drunk in a wet gulp
and anchovies spine the tongue.
In the night I find
the sharp edge of the canal.

Sounds smash sleep: a bell
above a shop–door glassly tinkles.
I hear the clip of heels in the calle
and spill into the morning with a dozy piss.

The freezing air ghosts around my feet,
and beyond the prow of the traghetto
it ices buildings in cold confection.

In Berlin there is a riot
and Liebigstrasse 14 is raided.

Today’s a mad zigzag:
I ring Miriam and warn her,
spill hasty coffee, rush to Piazzale Roma—
shredding suitcase wheels,
the threads of plastic snap with charge—
catch the airport bus, bathe
in its blue junkie glow.
Reach Marco Polo and down my throat
chuck a desperate dart.
In my jacket pocket a pencil,
a stub of notepaper, a photo. In it
a skinhead is standing with his back to me,
spray-painting on a wall:
‘Gangsta Bush Fuck U!’

Today in Berlin—a squat, cops, dogs.
Clown-sick colours and 12-up boots, shiny
as a new-bruised eye.
Acrid smoke from a camo–coloured canister
screams in my nostrils.
I devour the meat of the story:
it rots in my gut for weeks.

Tomorrow I’ll go south,
take a cheap flight to Treviso,
go and stay at Ivan’s,
get wasted, fool around.
Get up the next morning, early,
sniffing the air for salt.
Air bridge

It is 4am and you are sleeping.

Restless, seal-skinned with perspiration, I abandon the turbulence of our bed.

Unshuttered windows gulp shallow breaths of humid air.

I stand in the galley of the bathroom, naked.

Take a piss, scratch my chest, roll a damp cigarette. A porthole window is my vent—I lean out, head and shoulders.

Rialto is silent and still. The moon is a bone button on a bolt of Prussian blue.

There is a rooftop, metres distant, where a couple have spread a blanket over the gentle slope below an attic window. A young woman sleeps on it, curled around her stitch-less boyfriend.

He sits upright, smoking a joint, legs at 45 degrees. His cock is a popped jack-in-the-box, trunking down between his thighs.

He nods a conspiratorial greeting between our duetting exhalations of blue smoke, spliff-stub piked in a lazy arc to the street.

Between us loose tiles, the undulating sea of terracotta, and dead air.
Ferragosto

Ormai il negozio d’estate si chiude:
le bancarelle di frutta, gelati,
creme d’abbronzatura,
asciugamani stra-colorati,
gli aperitivi, sandali e pagliette
sono tutti messi via
e la frenesia di meta-luglio cede
alle strade vuote di agosto.
Al Lido la gente sparisce, evacuandosi
per la freschezza delle montagne.
Prendo l’autobus della penisola,
accompagnato con pensionati e ragazzi
stufi dello sbadiglio
delle ferie che si allunga in dietro
come la sabbia lo fa
sotto i miei piedi
alla fine della spiaggia desolata
di Alberoni.
Mid-August

Now summer’s shop is set to close:
trestle-tables of fruit, cones of ice-cream,
bottles of tanning lotion,
brightly coloured beach towels,
aperitifs, sandals and straw hats
are put aside
and the frenzy of mid-July
makes way for the empty streets of August.
Residents have disappeared from the Lido,
retreating to fresh mountain air.
I take the bus along the peninsula,
joined by pensioners and teenagers
bored with the yawn
of school holidays that stretches out
behind them, just as the sand does
beneath my feet
at the denuded and scrubby end
of the beach at Alberoni.
Alberoni

Sulla spiaggia ad Alberoni
un’arietta rovina l’intenzione
corregiosa di fare bagno;
e mi prendo invece
alla pineta lì vicino.
Qui la pace è interrotta solo
dei rumori di golf,
il click-swoop distante
di un gioco neanche visto,
oppure dei passi degli uomini sparsi
che ci sono come al solito,
chi hanno trovato i loro posti
sulla coperta d’aghi di pino.
C’era caso e caldo
per andare nudo: ovviamente
gli occhi non ci riuscivono
stare sempre per terra ma,
a quest’ora tardi della stagione,
gli sguardi furtive non significa tanto.
Verso le cinque di sera
l’acqua era bevuta, sole preso,
panino mangiato, giornale letto.
Indossando solo i sandali,
lo zaino e l’asciugamano
sulla spalla, comminciavo
quella piacevole e conosciuta
passeggiata al pullman.
Ho incontrato, facendo la stessa cosa,
un signore sui sessant’anni—
anche lui senza costume o camicia—
e noi facevamo due chiacchiere mentre
si camminava nelle ombre.
Be’, era anziano, ma lui
riteneva sua forma ben’ curata,
la sua pelle abbronzatissima
parlava dell’abitudine di
venire qui spesso. Infatti,
la pellicia stravagante sul corpo
si è imbiancata molto
e i suoi baffi avevano
il tinto d’argento.
Alungo il viottolo c’è un punto
in cui si vede, in fondo,
la gente in fila alla fermata,
e si deve tornare, alla fine,
al mondo purbene di pantoloncini.
Prima di vestirci, invece
di stringermi la mano, lui
restava, per qualche secondo,
suo palmo sul mio petto.
Mi diceva questo:
«Ricordati che la bellezza
non dipende sulla gioventù».
In silenzio siamo tornati alle
nostre proprie vite, ma neanche
per un’attimo rimpiangevo
il passaggio di quel giorno;
ni le ore, ni l’estate,
già consumata.
Alberoni

On the beach at Alberoni
a cool breeze ruins
the brave intention of a swim
and so instead I go
to the nearby pine forest.
Here the peace is broken
only by the sounds of golf,
the click-swoop of a distant,
unseen game, and
the soft footfalls of those few men
who are always here;
they have selected their places
on the blanket of pine needles.
It's sunny and warm enough
to go nude: obviously
there's a bit of trouble
keeping eyes to the ground but
at this late stage of the season
furtive glances are just that.
At five o'clock
my water is drunk, the sun taken,
sandwich eaten, newspaper read.
Wearing only sandals,
backpack and towel
slung over a shoulder,
I begin that pleasant, well-known
walk towards the bus-stop.
I meet, heading in my direction,
a sixty-year-old man—
without swimsuit or shirt—
and we make small talk
while strolling along the shady path.
Yes, he was getting on in age, but
had kept himself in good shape,
his deeply tanned skin
speaking of the habit
of coming here often.
In fact, his voluptuous body hair
was bleached white
and his moustache had
a silvery tint.
Along the track there is a point
where one can see, in the distance,
people queuing for the bus,
and then one must, in the end,
return to the world of shorts.
Before getting dressed,
instead of shaking my hand,
he placed, for a few seconds,
his palm on my chest.
He said to me:
“Remember that beauty
does not depend on youth”.
In silence we returned
to our own, private lives,
but not for a second did I lament
the passing of that day;
neither the hours, nor the summer,
already savoured.
Sonnet for Redentore

Dark shapes bob in the kiss of the bay,  
and moorings jink a metallic symphony.  
Corks pop and cutlery scrapes away  
late dinner. Across military pontoons we  
Jesus-step across the sea towards Giudecca;  
looking back, the soot-black cupola  
of Salute looms, a Baroque full-stop to  
plague days. Overhead we hear the whir  
and fizz of fireworks, a cascading  
 coloured fugue; the sky adrip with  
Pollock flicks of dying embers, falling.  
Centuries of mundane death now coloured  
streaks of neon-green and yellow-white,  
an orgasmic and torrential rain of light.
Chi fa guardia

C’è il bambino che fa guardia
della sua bici nella calle,
mentre noi adulti ci portiamo adosso
l’ansia della fregattura generale.
Borse, gioelli, soldi...
quanto abbiamo su di se-stessi
che tira sfortuna,
e quante le cose che,
neanche abandonate per strada,
pedinarci per sempre.

He who watches

There is a little boy who guards
his bike in the alleyway,
while we adults carry about us the
general anxiety of being ripped off.
Bags, jewellery, money...
how many things we have on us
that attract misfortune,
and how many things that,
even when abandoned in the street,
shadow us forever.
Il molo di Mondrian

In una stanza ampia e buio dorme
un quadro Mondriano che dipinge un molo,
un imbarcadero, visto in alto.
I rami di legno sono semplicemente
brevi passegni di carboncino.
È un campo visivo, una baia senza limite,
liquidandosi finché le linee galleggiano
come isole tutte sue.

Mondrian's Pier

In a spacious, dark room sleeps
Mondrian's picture of a jetty,
a pier, seen from above.
The wooden pylons are simply
brief passages of charcoal.
It is a visual field, a bay without limits,
liquefying itself until lines float
as islands of their very own.
L’acqua invernale

Se non ce la faccio più
non mi mettete
nella bara nera:
avvolgermi nella scura
dell’acqua invernale
della laguna.

The winter-water

If I can’t go on
don’t put me
in a black coffin:
shroud me in the darkness
of the winter-water
of the lagoon.
The boyfriend

Long-haired Marisa has a leonine poise: she lets her Australian boyfriend prattle on about his job in customs at da Vinci. A full ten minutes later she slaps his wrist with a manicured paw, and sweetly tells him to “shut-the-fuck-up, darling”. Smiling, she extracts an ultrathin cigarette from its packet and ignites it with a lighter that plays the Chinese National Anthem. I bet her other hand is squarely on his crotch.
12 lines too late

We sat in the window of *Ti Amo* and drank black coffee. I remember your Yank smile, wide as a prairie, and your problem skin. The place was full of students and stank of my cigarette smoke. Outside we tied our bikes up, a pair of metal lovers, next to the bin.

We hung out for a week and then you went off to Queensland, or some other, warmer place. That's where Misty recognized your face—was it Fraser Island?—and within days had sent a letter to reveal you liked me, after all. My black bike leans, unlocked, against a wall.
Ragazzi della parocchia

L’estate, dopo cena, i ragazzi «della parocchia»7 vagabondano verso Rialto, alungo la stretta calle si chiama la Frezzaria. Ogni tanto gli occhi si alzano, si incontrano, in consapevolezza silente.


Passa un’oretta e siamo sudati con la fatica di indovinare le speranze di corpi sconosciuti. Più piacevoli sono i minuti in cui ci sdraiamo sul tappeto, ascoltando l’ultima sinfonia di voci, carozze di merce e mundizie, i campanili di mezzanotte che ci chiedono: chi passa la notte da solo, e chi si vede correndo per la piazza, lanciandosi sull’ultimo vaporetto andando a casa?

7 The term ‘ragazzi Della parocchia’ literally means ‘boys of the parish’. However, in this context, it is also slang for ‘gay boys’.
The boys of the parish

In summer, after dinner, the boys “of the parish” wander towards Rialto, along the narrow street they call the Frezzaria. Now and again eyes lift and meet each other, in silent recognition.

We don’t have a fixed spot: no bar, park, nor bridge. Ours are typically Venetian meetings—made in passing, sudden, hasty—they are materialised in glances, reflections, footfalls in quiet corners that, at this hour, are almost empty. Just so I meet a guy in Campo Santo Stefano who is carrying home his shopping. After brief, whispered greetings we find ourselves in his flat.

An hour passes and we’re sweaty from the exertion of guessing the hopes of a stranger’s body. More pleasurable are the minutes spent lying on the carpet, listening to the last symphony of voices, carts full of goods and rubbish, and the bells of midnight that ask us: who will spend the night alone, and who sees themselves running through the piazza, hurling themselves onto the last boat for home?
La porta rossa di Francesco Gerbaudi

Quanto piacere bussare alla porta rossa
del tuo studio a Campo Sant’Angelo,
da salutarti in passaggio, scambiando
le notizie della giornata metà-consumata.

Sarò contento da bere lo spritz con te,
fuori sulla nostra amata Zattere,
gli accenti nostri intrecciati come
la tagliatelle fine, fatte in casa.

The red door of Francesco Gerbaudi

How pleasing it is to knock at the red door
of your studio in Campo Sant’Angelo,
to greet you in passing, exchanging
news of a day not yet fully digested.

I will be glad to drink a spritz with you,
out on our beloved Zattere,
our accents knitting together
like fine, homemade tagliatelle.
White Rabbit

In my hot weather linen
I am the White Rabbit racing
across the campi of Santo Stefano.
My reflection is broadcast against
the magenta metal tubes of a Jeff Koons dog:
I am a flag of surrender to
an inevitable lateness.

You will already be waiting
in our favourite libreria,
violently thumbing through Taschen books
of Tamara de Lempicka or Tom of Finland,
reciting under your breath
the angry lecture you’ll give me later.

The minute-hand lashes the watch-face.
I arrive to find you
grinding out a half-loved cigarette.
Without a word you unscowl your face and,
with all the malice of a puppy,
lean in and lick
a bead of perspiration from my brow.
Sonnetto per Paolo

Di notte c’è un buio attrante
ei giardini di San Giorgio Maggiore.
si vede, vagamente, le stradine
che vanno al teatro all’aperto—
ormai ricoperto di erbacce—
oppure per la viletta vecchia
dove i nespoli fanno amore,
i loro rami carichi di frutta.

Altrove ai confini dell’isola
sono i posti più scuri, in cui
due ragazzi possono togliersi
un po’ i vestiti, sentendo l’afa
sulla pelle, il bacio dell’umidità,
il primo tocco della stagione.

Sonnet for Paolo

At night there is an enticing darkness
in the gardens of San Giorgio Maggiore.
Just visible are the little paths
that lead to the amphitheatre—
now overgrown with weeds—
or around to the old villa where
a pair of loquat trees make love,
their branches heavy with fruit.

Towards the edges of the island
are the darkest places, in which
two young men might undress,
feel the nocturnal heat on their skin,
humidity the season’s first fruit,
held wetly to their lips.
Sonnet, seen from the air

I would bank
these gull wings,
tilt and bird’s-eye
the rose-pink monastery
where, at this hour,
you would be
thumbing a score.
From this height

you’re little more
than a tiny
black speck but,
like any notation,
such dots are filled
with secret music.
Le gondole di San Barnabà

Grazie per quest’ultima domenica, una giornata limpida
in cui il suono dei campanili è sospeso nell’aria
e il passo della gente si rallenta proprio alla velocità
delle gondole che passano per i canali di San Barnabà.

The gondole of Saint Barnabas

Thank you for this last Sunday, a day so clear
that the chimes of the church bells hang in the air
and the crowds’ footsteps slow to the pace
of the gondole passing by Saint Barnabas.
Pane fresco

Oggi non c'è più caso per pane fresco—
invece, si compra una qualcosina,
un piccolo ricordo da portare via.
No, non parto mai senza un gioellino sepolto in tasca.

Fresh Bread

Today there's no need for fresh bread—
instead, one buys a small something,
a little souvenir to take away.
No, I never leave without a trinket buried in my pocket.
Avevamo passato il giorno a Ferrara
e la sera, tornando per ferovia,
ho cercato un posto libero, aparte di voi altri.
Appena seduto il treno gridava suo addio
a quel paese così piatto, secco, nudo.
Gli occhi arrivavano in su,
da vedere, seduto di fronte a me,
una persona molto familiare.

Faccia composta nello stile del Veneto,
nello stile Modiglianesco:
naso un pò aquilino,
guance alte, labbra precise,
la pelle leggermente bronzata
sopraciglia curate e
il suggerimento di una barba
con momenti di grigio e rame.

Abbiamo sorriso. Anche lui si è reso conto
che suo gemello straniero si sedeva
sul palco opposto, le nostre reflessioni
negli specchi sotto il bagagliaio
facendo un infinitissimo mise-en-abyme.

Beh, certo ho notato le piccole
differenze fra di noi;
aveva l’aria di un graffico
o uno che studiava l’economia,
o chi lavorava nel municipio
a Montebelluna o Castelfranco Veneto.
Lui non aveva orecchini mentre io si,
e portava una maglia di Benetton o Stefanel
masticava gomma
e parlava con il suono nasale di qualcuno
cresciuto in montagna,
nord italianissimo.
Accanto le sue gambe restava un portafoglio
del tipo ch’io non l’avrò mai,
di un cuoio marrone, lustroso,
del tipo che non si compra da se
però si riceve dai parenti fieri.

Nonostante tutto questo—
i queste osservazioni intense,
i la nostra conversazione banale,
i la mia voglia acuto da dire qualcosa
profonda, importante—
ci siamo salutati con un semplice «ciao»
quando, in fretta, ha smesso il treno a Mestre.
Tribe

We spent the day in Ferrara.
That evening, coming back by rail,
I sought out a spot by myself, away from you all.
Just as I sat down
the train screeched its goodbye
to that flat, dry, denuded town
and I looked up to see
a familiar person sitting opposite.

His face was composed in the Venetian style, 
a portrait by Modigliani:
nose somewhat long,
high cheekbones, precise lips,
his skin lightly suntanned,
eyebrows groomed,
the hint of a beard, peppered
with moments of grey and copper.

A smile passed between us.
He realized his foreign twin sat opposite,
our reflection in the mirrors
below the luggage racks
creating an infinite mise-en-abyme.

Oh yes certainly I noticed
little differences between us;
he appeared to be a graphic designer,
or a student of economics,
or a council employee
from Montebelluna or Castelfranco Veneto.
He didn’t have earrings as I do, and
wore a jumper from Stefanel or Benetton,
chewed gum
and spoke with the nasal inflection
of someone truly north-Italian,
raised in the mountains.
Next to his legs was a briefcase
of the sort I’ll never own,
made of deep-brown, shiny leather,
the kind of thing one never buys
but might be given, by proud relatives.

Notwithstanding all this—
these intense observations,
our banal conversation,
my desire to say something
really deep and significant—
we said goodbye with a simple “ciao”
when, in haste, he quit the train at Mestre.
Archipelago: a journey across poetic islands of the self
Introduction

In the Venetian Museo Correr, overlooking Piazza San Marco, is the famous ‘Bird’s eye view map of Venice’, created by Jacopo de’ Barbari in or around the year 1500. The map represents a wonderful circus-trick of perspective: it is as if de’ Barbari has climbed a non-existent, but nevertheless very high tower, somewhere to the far side of San Giorgio Maggiore and the Giudecca, to look across the main islands of Venezia—Venice—all the way to the mainland and the Dolomite mountains beyond. Added to this feature are more supernatural elements that give a sense of liveliness to the map; such as cherubs that blow wind into the sails of the ships in the lagoon, and the figure of Neptune who commands the maritime scene with a raised trident.

De’ Barbari’s map conceives of Venice and its surroundings as something real and at the same time historical, mythological and imaginary. It suggests that to understand this terrain we must let our imaginations be free to interact with its life, its history, its inhabitants, its myths and stories and its relationship to the wider world. For me de’ Barbari’s map issues the challenge to take up my own, unique position in relation to Venice and the Veneto: it inspires me to roam about this space, describing my relationship to it through poetry.

When first defining the parameters of this project, and in particular the manuscript of poetry to which this exegesis responds, I took a sheet of butcher’s paper and began to jot down a series of words and phrases in English and Italian, the names of certain places and people, and a few lines of unformed poetry; in short, a collection of unformed ideas. I circled these word-sketches—some large and others quite small—and when I had done so realised how uncannily similar to a map of the islands in the Venetian lagoon my design had become. Immediately the choice of a poetic topos as the unifying framework for my poetry was apparent: Venice and the Veneto.

That I recognised this pattern is no accident, in so far as writing about my relationship to the places, people and language of northern Italy has long been
a feature of my creative practice. I am not born to this space, but nevertheless I am connected to it in very significant ways: it is the home of my paternal family, and I have moved between Australia and the Veneto for over twenty years. Thus, at the core of my writing, both creative and critical, is a central question: what kind of self has emerged from my poetry set in Venice and the Veneto? To answer this question I will explore how I use this geo-cultural terrain as a poetic topos, in which I am neither truly at home nor abroad, where my bilingualism is in operation, and where my own hybrid subjectivity, as an insider-outsider, takes shape.

The primary focus of this project is the manuscript of poetry titled Archipelago, and as such, this exegesis is designed to investigate the range of ways in which I have represented a very personal, subjective relationship to Venice and the Veneto through my creative writing and translation. In particular, I focus on the way my poetic practice responds to experiences of moving through this space, intersecting with its history, literature, language, people and places. My methodology in this exegesis is also a nomadic one; it does not settle on a single poetic or philosophical treatise to explain how the self is represented, but rather finds intersections with a number of different areas of practice and theory.

In the first chapter, I examine how Venice and the Veneto can be understood as an imagined space, created through writing. Many other writers have "storied" Venice, both in Venetian/Italian literature and in English/foreign literature, and this literary history provides a general context for my poetry. However, in this chapter I will argue that my poetry sits somewhere between and to the side of the various literary approaches to this terrain made before my own. No single poet, poem, or indeed piece of literature about Venice or the Veneto inspires my work, and as such, I seek to define my own approach to writing in and of this space as a form of literary flânerie or nomadism. That is, I will examine the ways my work is connected to and intersects with the writing of this terrain, but is also different and personal. I do so in order to situate poetry “in-between” other literary approaches that predate my own, as
a reflection of my status as insider/outsider in this terrain, as I have described above.

My poetry is written primarily *in situ*, which is to say that it is a creative response to an experienced, geo-cultural environment. In the second chapter I look into this important aspect of my poetic practice, to better understand how the poetry is produced through a kind of productive wandering through physical as well as cultural environments. In this section I formulate an idea of myself as a poet-flâneur, moving through the places and spaces of Venice and the Veneto, collecting images, words, ideas and characters for my poetry. It is my contention that writing poetry in this way enables me to exist as part of this terrain while also being separate from it, enabling me to explore what it means to be an insider/outsider in this geo-cultural space.

Bilingual writing is a fundamental part of my creative practice in writing poetry. As such, in the third chapter I investigate my own practice of simultaneous self-translation, also known as auto-translation. I trace the history of translation that charts the relationship between different nations, languages and cultures, noting how the dominant discourse of mainstream translation studies concentrates on notions of originality and the relationship between source and target text. I contend that my own practice of simultaneous self-translation challenges this approach, in so far as it brings into question the idea of the mother tongue as a signifier of a singular, fixed and monolingual identity. I argue instead that translation is about negotiation between texts and that this process of translation represents my own negotiated, transnational/transcultural and hybrid identity.

In the final chapter I investigate my use of certain elements of poetic form and genre as a means of communicating the kind of negotiated, multiple and hybrid subjectivity discussed in the previous chapters. I focus in particular on the use of the poetic or lyric “I”, suggesting that it is a means through which to locate myself within the poetry as within the geo-cultural terrain it describes. I then turn my attention to my engagement with certain conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet, arguing that it has historical antecedents in the Italian
literary tradition that connect with my own “mixed origins” and hybrid ancestral relationship to this space. It is also a vehicle through which I am able to turn attention to the self and its relationship to the world it inhabits. Following on from this idea, I examine how my use of stanzaic forms, within the context of the manuscript as a whole, is a way of creating “islands” or subjective environments in which different versions of the “I” can be imagined or staged through writing.

These chapters are designed to explore a number of different pathways through which I express a personal, subjective response to the geo-cultural terrain of Venice and the Veneto. However, certain key ideas punctuate this work and recur throughout it. While no single theoretical perspective dominates this project, it is important to note that ideas to do with nomadism, Third Space and cultural/linguistic/literary in-between-ness are at play throughout this exegesis.

Nomadic people are characterised by the fact that they do not live in one place, but rather move and live across a wide terrain. This is not to say that they do not belong to the spaces they inhabit; in fact it is the knowledge of and familiarity with different geographies that enables them to live as they do. In her use of the term ‘nomadism’ Braidotti does not index a romanticised notion of such people and their lifestyle, preferring instead to narrate her ‘own embodied genealogy’ that includes shifts in identification with different languages, cultures, places and ideas (2011, p. 27). In an online interview with the civil society organisation European Alternatives: Democracy, Equality, Culture Beyond the Nation State, Braidotti refers to the notion of ‘subjectivities that are split, complex, nomadic’, using nomadism as a broad signifier to suggest ‘a process by which we map out multiple transformations and multiple ways of belonging’ and ‘alternative cartographies of the non-unitary subjects that we are’ (Saleri 2010, np). This theory responds to Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘Treatise on Nomadology’ in which subjectivity is not composed according to the rules of the state or higher power but rather as a kind of assemblage of various links to culture, era and ideology, a subjectivity that evades simple
categorisation and is continuously transforming (1987). Subjectivity, in these terms, is an ongoing process of “becoming” in the ever-expanding contingencies and contexts of contemporary life.

As a theoretical framework, nomadism can therefore be understood as a ‘non-unitary philosophy of the subject’ (Braidotti 2011b, p. 210); a way of thinking that suits the particular characteristics of the post-modern era in which many of us move across different terrains of culture and language, going beyond the root-like anchorage of our birthplace or mother tongue. Indeed, this calls for new ways of thinking about identity at a time when the processes of globalisation result in international flows of people, culture and ideas (Appadurai 1996, pp. 27-47). However, Braidotti makes a distinction between the narratives of loss and displacement associated with migrant literature and her use of the term nomad:

The nomad does not stand for homelessness or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. It expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes without an essential unity (2011a, p. 57).

For me, this ‘nostalgia for fixity’ is replaced by the desire to mobilise a poetic self that is also ‘without an essential unity’. In this manner the first person writer/translator/subject has the potential to embrace his or her de-territorialisation from a single linguistic and cultural identity and become hybrid, split and multiplied.

Homi K. Bhabha argues that, in the contexts of globalisation, migration and post-colonialism, it is ‘theoretically innovative, and politically crucial…to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities’ (1994, p. 2). His writing interrogates ‘colonial discourse and its dependence on the concept of “fixity”’ (1994, p. 94) in which clear divisions between self and Other, belonging and alienation, are maintained, often tied to a clear sense of national identity. Instead, Bhabha seeks to account for the hybrid, multiple identities
he associates with the contemporary era, a phenomenon I recognise in my own dual identification with Australia and Italy, English and Italian.

Bhabha’s notion of Third Space is tied to a view of inessential, hybrid identities as well as to a view of translation as a ‘split-space of enunciation’, where linguistic differences meet and overlap to produce an ‘inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity’ (1994, p. 56). As a bilingual writer I am drawn to the concept of such a Third Space in so far as the act of translating my poetry across English and Italian is an ‘articulation’ of my own national/cultural/linguistic hybridity. In this manner, my creative writing can be seen as an attempt to represent this ‘split-space of enunciation’ in poetry.

Third Space is also an apt description of the kind of in-between position that I inhabit when I move about my ancestral homelands and encounter the languages, stories, events, peoples, architectures, natures and histories that are/are not my own. *Space*, in these terms, is a term broad enough to encompass both the geography and the cultural environments and contexts that belong to Venice and the Veneto. In comparison, I define *place* quite literally as those specific physical sites and environments (streets, towns, bridges, islands, buildings and so forth) in which my poetry is set and in which I situate the lyric “I” mobilised in my poetry. However, space and place are indelibly linked in this project, for while the poetry makes specific reference to certain physical sites or natural features the reader may recognise and even visit, it is also situated in a vast archipelago of memory, history, literature, experience and desire.

Bhabha suggests that ‘by exploring this hybridity, this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves’ (1988, p. 8). This rather cryptic statement can, in the context of this exegesis, be translated thus: in choosing Venice and the Veneto as a location for writing poetry, I am able to explore what it means to be in constant movement between familiarity and alienation, between home and abroad. Under these conditions, the self becomes multiple and hybrid: a blend of all the possible
“I”s that might be created through writing and put on the stage of this particular geo-cultural space.

Subjectivity, identity and self are terms that appear frequently throughout this exegesis, primarily because its aim is to explore a personal interaction with a real and imagined terrain that I have made through poetry. Identity can be defined as ‘the series of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that cohere into a personality or social being, whereas subjectivity denotes reflection about identity, that is, self-consciousness’ (Hokensen and Munson 2007, p. 149). However, I would add that the self—the mechanism through which this “self-consciousness” operates, drawing together different facets of identity—is not necessarily always so coherent or determined.

Despite this focus on the self, I do not choose to conceptualize my writing through the lens of autobiography, for this would not adequately address the creative ways I have allowed a number of different first person voices to be enunciated in my poetry. Through my poetry I suggest that there are ‘other lives I might have led’ (‘Archipelago’) which can be staged at various locations and in various times throughout history. Indeed, when crossing and re-crossing physical, historical and linguistic boundaries in creative practice, there is the potential to discover frontiers where essential notions of “who we are” come into play and can be challenged. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, an artist and researcher on subjectivity in creative practice, puts it thus:

Since the self...is not so much a core as a process, one finds oneself, in the context of a cultural hybridity, always pushing one’s questioning of oneself to the limits of what one is and what one is not. The reflexive question is no longer: who am I? but when, where and how am I (so and so)? (1992, pp. 156-157).

This exegesis will respond to the when, where and how of subjectivity, looking into various ways in which it might be possible to multiply the self, expanding and testing its boundaries, in order to account for a profound sense of being defined by more than one language, place, space, literature or culture. As a first generation migrant, whose notion of selfhood is not confined to a fixed sense
of home or mother tongue, I ask: how might poetry allow me to roam about Venice and the Veneto, being Venetian, Italian and Australian, the “familiar stranger”, all at once?
Chapter One

**Imagined terrain: a subjective literature of Venice and the Veneto**

No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between one and the other there is a connection (Calvino 1997, p. 62).

The historical character Marco Polo, describing Venice to the Mongol ruler in Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1997), knows that there is both a difference and a connection between how we represent a city or place in writing and how it comes to exist in the imagination. In a similar way, the poetry to which this exegesis responds is concerned with real spaces and places, in so far as it is about my relationship with Venice and the Veneto, and yet it also describes an imagined terrain, created and represented through writing.

Many others before me have used Venice and, to a lesser extent, the Veneto, as a literary topos. Indeed, the literature that is associated with this area and the various scholarly approaches to understanding and analysing it are rich and varied. On one hand there is the literature that might be said to be “native” to this area, a literature written by “insiders” who belong to the Italian/Venetian literary canon. On the other hand there is the non-Italian tradition of writing Venice, a phenomenon that spans English literature, in particular, from William Shakespeare’s time to the present day.

While I am conscious that the literature of this space creates dominant or popular ways of imagining it, I am interested in exploring the fact that my own creative practice in poetry does not attach itself or spring from a single, particular way of writing about Venice and the Veneto. Instead, I take the approach of a literary nomad. This enables me to situate my own writing of this space in-between that of the insider and the outsider. It is also a means through which I am able to explore the interconnections between my work and that of others. However, most importantly, it is a mechanism through which I
am able to create a subjective literature that describes my personal relationship to this imagined terrain.

**Italian and non-Italian approaches to literary Venice**

In the Italian literary canon, the concept of a Venetian literature—that is, a literary tradition focused solely on the city of Venice—does not exist. Rather, it is more accurate to speak of the *letteratura Veneta*: the literature of the Veneto, the region of northeast Italy that includes the Dolomite mountains, the Po valley and the Venetian lagoon. While it is fair to say that the city of Venice is the cultural hub out of which the literature of the Veneto emerges, its scope is broad enough to suggest a deep connection between the city and its surroundings.

Bruno Rosada provides an overview of this *letteratura Veneta* (2002). He traces the literary history of the region dating back to the period immediately before the formation of the Venetian Republic in 812AD to the mid twentieth century. His study includes reference to a wide range of writings including historiography, plays, novels and poetry. Nevertheless, Tony Tanner argues that Venice is a city without a single, iconic, author: ‘London has Dickens; Paris has Balzac; Petersburg has Dostoevsky; Vienna has Musil; Dublin has Joyce; Berlin has Döblin—and so one might go on. There is simply no comparable writer for—of, out of—Venice’ (1992, p. 4).

However, two native sons might provide potential candidates: the eighteenth century playwright and librettist Carlo Goldoni; and his contemporary Giacomo Casanova, the author of an autobiographical memoir recounting his adventures as a romantic libertine (1922). In addition, many of the most important writers in the Italian canon, including Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), Pietro Aretino and Ugo Foscolo are associated, in various ways, with Venice and the Veneto.

While few canonical Italian writers were born there (with the exception of Goldoni and Casanova) others were exiled from it (as in the case of Foscolo).
Some had political, social and/or philosophical connections to the Republic (such as Dante and Petrarch). Still others found their creative, adopted home there (as Aretino did). And while not himself a writer, Marco Polo’s story, originally documented by Rustichello da Pisa, takes Venice as central compass point in relation to Polo’s travels in the east (2001).

That no single writer dominates this literature is perhaps because the letteratura Veneta includes the work of writers such as these, who had relationships to Venice and Venetian literature that might best be described as provisional or transitory. Two illustrative examples underscore this point. Dante died in 1321 after travelling through ‘malarial swamplands’ on his return from Venice to Ravenna after an ill-fated attempt to act as an emissary over navigation rights along the Po River (Norwich 1982, p. 4). Petrarch, a close friend of Doge Dandolo, took Venice as his adopted home between 1362-1367, even promising to bequeath the city his substantial library. However, after suffering a public insult from a Venetian youth, he left the city abruptly (Norwich 1982, p. 236). His final years were spent in the Veneto town now known as Arquà Petrarca, and his home there remains a culturally revered landmark.

Another key characteristic of the letteratura Veneta is its multi-lingualism. Rosada (2003) notes that many of the writers associated with this region wrote in a variety of languages, including Latin, French, Italian and Venetian dialects. Even the most famous of Venetian writers—Casanova and Goldoni are just two examples—did not write exclusively in Italian.

While the consolidation of the Italian vernacular as a literary language occurs during the late medieval period and early Renaissance (Panizza 1997, pp. 152-177), running alongside this development is the continued use of Venetian dialects in the literature of the Veneto. Rosada observes that literary works using Venetian dialect date back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (2003, p. 9) and continue into the modern era, with Goldoni famously producing libretti in Venetian as well as Italian. Of particular note however is the twentieth century poetry of Andrea Zanzotto, famous for his experimentation
with language and the creation of a hybrid Venetian dialect called petèl (Caesar 1997, p. 574).

The Veneto, but most particularly Venice, is also a site that has captured the imagination of many writers from outside the Italian literary tradition. The list of foreign writers who take Venice as the subject or setting—or both—for their writing is extensive. William Shakespeare, George Gordon (Lord) Byron, John Ruskin, Robert Browning, Henry James, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Ezra Pound, Joseph Brodsky and Ian McEwan are just a few of the tens, if not hundreds, of non-Italian writers who have written of, about and in Venice.

As a result, several studies have been dedicated to this subject. The collection of essays titled Venetian Views, Venetian Blinds (Pfister and Schaff 1999) interprets literary Venice as a heterotopic space, with many different approaches to imagining the city. Michael L. Ross (1994) compares literary representations of Florence, Rome and Venice, predominantly by English writers. Venice and the Cultural Imagination: ‘That strange dream upon the water’ examines different cultural imaginings of the city by non-Italians in music, art, architecture and literature (O’Neill, Sandy and Wooton 2012), while Tony Tanner (1992) reads literary Venice of the modern era through the lens of desire: desire in Venice and desire for Venice.

Emerging from this scholarship is the notion that there are two key “moments” in which Venice is represented in writing other than Italian. The first comes in the Elizabethan/Jacobean era in which the plays of Shakespeare (Othello, The Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew), Ben Jonson (Volpone) and Thomas Otway (Venice Preserv’d) reflected the English cultural and political fascination with the Republic of Venice at that time, which provided a counterpoint to the English monarchical tradition. Beatty (2012) observes that while Venice and the Veneto provide settings for several of Shakespeare’s plays, Otway’s play was perhaps the most popular tragedy of its era. It combines sexual and political intrigue, with a famous scene in which the lead character Antonio, a Venetian senator, makes love in the guise of a range of different animals. Through this
play, and the others mentioned above, Venice became synonymous with ‘sex, revolution and possible models of government’ in the English imagination (Beatty 2012, p. 16).

The invasion of the Napoleonic forces and the annexation of Venice by the Austrians led to the fall of the Republic, which ceased to exist in 1797. At around the same time, a “second Venetian moment” in English literature occurred: the Romantic poets, led by George Gordon Byron, took Venice as a literary topos. Perhaps the most famous representations of Venice come to us from the poetry of the Romantics. Byron in particular produced a number of works in relation to Venice, including a section of ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ (published in its entirety in 1841), the ‘Don Juan’ cantos and the blank verse tragedy ‘Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice’. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem ‘Julian and Maddalo’ (1824, pp. 5-26) refers to the poet’s time with Byron in Venice. In this poem Shelley ultimately describes the city as a ‘madhouse’, perhaps referring to the wonton dissipation of his fellow poet, who threw himself with gusto into the intellectual and sexual pleasures the city had to offer (Tanner 1992, p. 24). William Wordsworth’s ‘Ode to the Venetian Republic’ instead uses the metaphor of a widowed bride, once married to the sea, to describe the rise and fall of the Republic as a maritime power, imagining Venice as ‘the eldest Child of Liberty’ that becomes a ‘Shade/Of that which once was great’ (1999, p. 115).

The fall of the Republic and the physical and political decline of the city provided a backdrop for Romantic poetry and its fascination with nostalgia, loss, ruin, love and tragedy. This connection between physical and personal ruin was then adopted by a further generation of writers for whom Venice

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8 The English architectural historian John Ruskin also represented Venice as a city in decline in his paen to medieval architecture *The Stones of Venice* (1981). Sergio Perosa argues that Ruskin’s literary/artistic response to Venice was built on the images of the city in Romantic poetry (2001, p. v). He writes that: ‘After Ruskin, I believe, one cannot appreciate its beauty as anything other than fractured and fragmented, always on the point of collapsing or imploding’ (p. vi, translation my own).
became a literary topos. For example, Robert’s Browning’s ‘A Toccata of Galluppi’s’ links the fall of the Republic with debauchery and sexual lassitude:

As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop

Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:

What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?
(Pettigrew 1981, pp. 550-552)

Browning’s poem harks back to the assumption at the heart of Otway’s play mentioned above: that Venice is a sexually debauched and despotic place and its people destined for ruin.

Another key literary motif associated with non-Italian literature set in Venice is the labyrinth, which is also used as a metaphor for the ambiguities of sexual desire. Henry James’ The Aspern Papers (first published in 1888) begins with a gondola ride through the twisting and turning canals of Venice. During this journey the narrator outlines a plan to infiltrate the world of the reclusive Miss Juliana Bordereau. His intention is to penetrate the deepest recesses of her palazzo in which secret papers belonging to a dead poet are hidden. The metaphor of the labyrinth is carried further when the narrator attempts to inveigle himself into the world of her carer and niece, only to discover that his final chance to secure the eponymous papers rests on a romantic betrothal he wishes to avoid: he finds himself hostage to his desire for the letters but repulsed by the idea of marrying Miss Tina.

Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice (1912) also characterises Venice as a labyrinthine space. In obsessive pursuit of the beautiful youth Tadzio, the ageing writer von Aschenbach gets lost in the backwaters of Venice, contracts cholera and dies. In his inability to speak Italian and thus heed the warnings about the encroaching epidemic, the protagonist von Aschenbach is lost: literally and figuratively. Michael L. Ross describes this as a ‘fatal plunge into abject sensuality’ (1994, p. 121) that links the writer’s homoerotic desire with tragedy: he succumbs to the danger lurking at the heart of the labyrinth.
These historical motifs of sexual dissipation and danger are reinscribed in the contemporary era in Robert Dessaix’s *Night Letters* (1999). This is an epistolary novel charting a journey through Switzerland and Italy in which the narrator, who has just contracted a terminal illness, writes to his lover from a hotel room in Venice. Bruce Bennett, in his chapter ‘A love affair: Australian writers and Italy’ (2010)\(^9\), observes that Dessaix’s story responds in part to Mann’s novella, including a reference to the mysterious figure Professor Eschenbaum...who travels south to Italy each spring to do what his literary predecessor Aschenbach could only dream of doing—to experience the gamut of sexual desire before retreating to the theories and paradoxes of his intellectual life (2010, np).

Bennett writes that the ‘widespread public fear and curiosity about HIV Aids and its effects at this time’ led to an assumption that the illness in *Night Letters* referred to a contemporary epidemic (2010). In both *Death in Venice* and *Night Letters* sexuality and mortality, so prominently linked in the Romantics’ view of Venice, are restated and embellished. Moreover, that Dessaix responds in particular to Mann’s novella is indicative of the way a kind of literary mythology has developed in this space, one that has its own dominant themes to do with death, sex and decay.

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9 From an Australian perspective, many writers have taken Italy as a literary topos, including Morris West (*Children of the Sun*, 1957) and David Malouf (*Child’s Play*, 1982) and the contemporary bilingual poet Simon West, who has also published a translation of the Venetian poet Andrea Zanzotto’s ‘La perfezione della neve’ (2008). In addition, Gaetano Rando, in his paper ‘Italian-Australian Poetry by First Generation Writers’ (2006), outlines the work of Italian-Australian poets such as Luigi Strano, Enoe di Stefano, Mariano Correno and Lino Concas. According to Rando the focus of the majority of this writing is either looking back at Italy from the point of view of the migrant who has left their country of birth (p. 52), or an attempt to come to terms with being in Australia through an ‘expression of feelings and attitudes in regard to their transition to and engagement with the new country’ (p. 43). However, while many literary associations with Italy are to be found within the Australian context, no single author or poet has focussed solely or primarily on their relationship to Venice and the Veneto.
Literary nomadism: towards a personal literature of Venice and the Veneto

It is not within the scope of this project, nor is it my aim, to detail the myriad ways in which Venice had been represented in either Italian or foreign literary traditions, for just as there are almost endless physical entry and exit points to and from the Venetian lagoon, so too are there almost innumerable literary responses to Venice and the Veneto. This poses a challenge for the creative practitioner who represents Venice anew. How is their response to be located in this vast literary terrain?

While a writer such as Dessaix may have chosen the path of engagement and revisionism, in my case there is no single text or author that univocally informs, influences or inspires my own understanding of Venice. Neither do I focus solely on the city of Venice, as so much non-Italian literature has done. Nor do I wish to promulgate the dominant, perhaps even clichéd, approaches to Venice that evolved in the Romantic period. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that my poetry does, in some instances, intersect with the prior literary imaginings of this space. It mobilises, for instance, traditional themes of the erotic and of masquerade, as is evident in poems such as ‘Sonnet for Paolo’ and ‘I might have been that man’. Other poems, such as ‘Vajont’ and ‘Credo che gli spiriti siano sopra’, deal with scenes of disaster or decay in ways that might be seen to resonate with motifs of death or degeneration apparent in traditional representations of Venice.

However, it is also necessary to account for the fact that my writing is part of a larger project to investigate a personal relationship to this part of the world. In Nomadic Subjects Rosi Braidotti describes her own journey as a ‘migrant who turned nomad’ (2011a, p. 21). That is, she describes a personal and intellectual experience of living and working between countries, cultures, languages and philosophical traditions. In the introduction to this thesis I have suggested that this idea of nomadic subjectivity is applicable to my own life and creative practice, in so far as I find myself moving between Australia and
Braidotti writes that ‘Avoiding romanticizing or appropriating the exotic, the “other”, I want to practice a set of narrations of my own embodied genealogy; that is to say, I want to revisit certain locations and account for them’ (2011a, p. 27). In a similar fashion, I have taken Venice and the Veneto as a space in which to identify and account for my own ‘embodied genealogy’ that is nurtured and nourished by this particular terrain. In so doing, however, I have encountered those stories or ‘narrations’ that already belong to this space and precede my own. As Braidotti argues, ‘Territories are powerful locations...all communities are imaginary constructions—they are all “imagined” to a large extent’ (2011a, p. 31). As Homi K. Bhabha similarly recognises in his introduction to Nation and Narration, any place or space is both physical and created through what we say, think and write about it (1990. pp. 1-7). It is for this reason that this chapter focuses on the idea of a region and a city imagined through literature.

I have suggested a number of dominant ways in which Venice and the Veneto have already been represented in writing. However, I am also interested in “accounting for” the subjective nomadism inherent in my poetry, in which I move between different approaches to representing this terrain. I find myself, and my poetry, located somewhere between Italian and non-Italian cultural responses to this space. This seems natural, in the sense that I write and translate my work across English and Italian, and while I take the Veneto as the setting for my writing, its subject is the national and linguistic in-between-ness I experience there, as one who is/is not at home in this region of northern Italy.

In this chapter, I therefore turn to an aleatory approach in which I “roam” across a wide literary terrain to find intersections between my own work and that of others. In this sense I practice what might be termed a literary nomadism, moving between one tradition or approach and another, a practice that reflects my own movement between being Australian and Italian. Such a
literary nomadism is a means by which to follow my own paths around Venice and the Veneto, a journey in which I encounter both Italian and non-Italian texts that populate and embody this space and bring it to life. Through this process I am able to identify moments or textual examples that intersect with my own experience of Venice and the Veneto, and that resonate with my sense of being in-between, hybrid and transcultural.

To begin with, I am conscious of the connection between the bilingualism of my own poetry and the rich linguistic diversity that characterises the literary output associated with this topos. This begins with the Latin historiography focused on the creation of the Venetian Republic (Rosada 2003, p. 8) and follows through to the English fascination with Venice in the Renaissance and Romantic periods (Tanner 1992, Ross 1994, Pfister and Schaff 1999, Beatty 2012). Though I do not often write poetry in my particular family dialect of the northern Veneto, I am conscious of the way the use of dialect in the literature of this region contributes to the linguistic identities that “belong” to this space. The self-translated poem titled ‘So, a Colderù’/‘Up, at Colderù’, appears in this manuscript in both dialect and English and is an example of the way the mobilisation of different languages in my own writing intersects with this history. It refers to a very specific site in the area around the northern Veneto city of Belluno, and in so doing, connects dialect with place. However, the fact that I have attempted to transpose dialect into English (and vice-versa) highlights the connection between my own translocation and a much longer tradition of multilingualism associated with the letteratura Veneta.

Patrick Barron, writing on the twentieth century Venetian poet Andrea Zanzotto, observes that the use of dialect was a means by which the poet created an “archipelago di luoghi” or archipelago of sites (2006, p. 194) that shaped ‘a labyrinthine spatial knowledge, a veritable forest of endless signs… in which we are called to wander’ (p. 211). I have adopted this notion of an archipelago of sites in relation to my own poetry, using Venice and the Veneto as a broad cultural, historical, geographic and literary terrain in which to locate my poetry. However, while Zanzotto used his poetry as a sign of his
belonging to Pieve di Soligo and the Veneto more generally, I use my poetry, with its various journeys between Italian, Venetian and English, as a means to interrogate what it really means to be “at home” anywhere.

Moreover, my use of both English and Italian in my poetry signals a broader interest in the connection between language, literature and national identity. Indeed, English/American literature that takes Venice as a literary topos brings into question the idea that identity is solely located in one’s place of birth. The notion of transnationalism is directly explored, for example, in Henry James’ *The Aspern Papers*. The narrator of the novel observes that the Misses Bordereau, ex-patriots living in Venice, inhabit a kind of in-between space in which a fixed sense of national identity becomes blurred:

> You could never have said whence they came from the appearance of either of them; wherever it was they had long ago shed and unlearned all native marks and notes. There was nothing in them one recognised or fitted, and, putting the question of speech aside, they might have been Norwegians or Spaniards (2013, p. 29).

The young Miss Tina in particular presents a kind of strange “in-between-ness” in her capacity to speak the local dialect, despite her sheltered existence behind the seemingly impenetrable walls of her aunt’s palazzo.

In a similar way, the poetry to which this exegesis responds includes numerous examples of a poetic first-person narrator who considers this question of sameness and difference, belonging and alienation. One such work is ‘Travelling by train’/‘Andando in treno’, in which I write about being ‘absolutely the strangest thing’, an ‘accident of birth’, while another—‘Prado’—recounts my experience of meeting Italian nationals at an art museum in Spain and ‘pretending to be/one of their countrymen’.

However, this is itself part of a larger framework in which the city of Venice can be considered a stage upon which the masquerade of multiple identities is played out. In *The Aspern Papers* the narrator observes that Venice
Chapter 1: Imagined terrain: a subjective literature of Venice and the Veneto

resembles a theatre with its actors clicking over bridges and, in straggling processions, tripping along fondamentas. As you sit in your gondola the footways that in certain parts edge the canals assume to the eye the importance of a stage, meeting it at the same angle, and the Venetian figures, moving to and fro against the battered scenery of their little houses of comedy, strike you as members of an endless dramatic troupe (James 2013, 86).

Venice—and for me, the Veneto—is indeed a stage upon which my primary character, the self, can be put into play in various guises. And yet it is a mobile “troupe” of possible identities that take up position in different times and places. I have responded to this idea most specifically in the poem ‘Archipelago’ in which I suggest that ‘There are other lives I might have led/crouched in the foothills of Pordenone,/meandering along the shoals of the Piave,/stabled in a farmhouse in Maser,/impatiently pacing the platform at Ponte nelle Alpi’. It is a theme picked up again in the poem ‘I might have been that man’, in which I describe ‘that man drinking caffè orzo/or the young man buying summer shoes’, thus imagining the various people I might have been had I been born in the Veneto myself.

In order to capture this masquerade of possible identities I have chosen a number of different settings within the Veneto, both temporal and geographic, for my poetry. This mobility reflects a tendency for the writers of Venice and the Veneto—whether they be Italian or foreign—to have a transitory and provisional relationship to the space their characters and ideas inhabit. Petrarch, Byron, Browning, Mann and James, to name just a few, all spent periods of their life in Venice, but did not settle there indefinitely. I recognise this as an important aspect in my own poetry that describes a personal peregrination around this real and imagined space.

Byron famously approached Venice as a stop on his poetic Grand Tour, in ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’. For Byron an image of Venice was already formed in his mind by the writers who come before him: ‘I loved her from my boyhood: she to me/Was a fairy city of the heart...And Otway, Radcliffe, Schiller, Shakespeare’s art,/Had stamped her image in me’ (Canto IV, Stanza
XVIII in Byron 2009, p. 220). Byron’s representation of the city is in this sense a literary pilgrimage through which he encounters the city as it has already been imagined by others.

I have used this notion of a literary pilgrimage as the inspiration for my own encounter with the literature of Venice and the Veneto. Specifically, I have used this idea as the starting point for the poems in which “I” address two of the most important literary figures that “haunt” this space, Petrarch and Byron. The sonnet ‘To Petrarch’ directly addresses the great humanist, referring both to Petrarch’s unrequited love for Laura de Noves and to his political misfortune as a fervent Republican who supported the unification of the Italian peninsula. The phrases ‘Imagine your surprise...’, ‘How you must have...’ and ‘Did you...’ signal the direct address of the poetic voice to the medieval scholar and poet. It is a means through which “I” insert myself into the scene described in the poem, and into Petrarch’s world.

The poem ‘Shelley, out riding with his Lord Byron’ is a response to Shelley’s poem ‘Julian and Count Maddalo’ (1824). In the original Shelley recalls his time spent riding with Byron on the beach at the Lido, where Byron famously stabled horses. I have concentrated on this detail in the original, using it as the basis to take up Shelley’s perspective on Byron’s relationship to Venice. This poem refers to Byron’s twin identities that developed in Venice: on one hand he was a sexual philanderer and on the other a student of languages with the Armenian monks on San Lazzaro. As Tanner puts it: ‘Byron, in search of an occupation in Venice, took up sex and Armenian’ (1992, pp. 24-25).

As I have mentioned above, non-Italian literature tends to employ the tropes of sexual debauchery, ruin and death in relation to Venice after the fall of the Republic. I have concentrated in particular on the example of Death in Venice, as I acknowledge that it is a touchstone for this kind of narrative. This poses a dilemma for those of us who use sexuality and mortality as themes in poetry set in the Veneto. To what degree does this present a kind of dominant literary script, and to what degree might a more personal literary engagement with this site offer some kind of alternative?
To begin with, the representations of love, desire, sex and homoeroticism to be found in *Archipelago* are not always and invariably tied to their Venetian setting. Indeed, they not always set in Venice proper: for example, the poem ‘Diluvio’ makes specific reference to a place in the Dolomite Mountains called Sotto Gouda. Neither do I use the fall of the Republic as a synonym for sexual dissipation. Rather, (re)imagining my own sexual and erotic encounters in this space is a way of transforming the poetic self into something corporeal and *alive*, searching for connection with the other bodies/personas it encounters.

The erotic scenes I describe in ‘Sonnet for Paolo’, ‘Diluvio’, ‘Air Bridge’ and ‘The Dustbin Circus’, though fleeting, have in common a yearning for connectedness, for a sensory pleasure that situates the poet—through a first-person perspective—in time and place. For example, in ‘Air Bridge’ a physical distance exists between the narrator and another naked man on a nearby rooftop, and the poetic voice observes: ‘Between us loose tiles, the undulating sea of terracotta, and dead air’. Similarly, the narrator of ‘Il Circo Bidone’/’The Dustbin Circus’ is left searching the Internet for news of Richard, a lost lover. In contrast, the poem ‘Diluvio’ recounts a chance encounter with a ‘barrack’s boy’, a situation that is full of unnamed potential as two young men, hitherto unknown to each other, speed off in a car. Meanwhile, ‘Sonnet for Paolo’ uses the image of the hidden garden of San Giorgio Maggiore and its exotic loquat trees to suggest the scene is fertile with possibility, that the ‘season’s first fruit’ is about to be tasted.

Where representations of death and decay are concerned, I have not attempted to connect these tropes to the fall of the Republic. Nor have I characterised Venice as a plague-ridden labyrinth in order to represent how mortality presents itself to me in this space. In fact, the poems in this collection that deal most explicitly with death are again located outside of Venice; for example, the poem ‘Vajont’ describes the aftermath of the horrific dam disaster at Longarone in the northern Veneto. Moreover, I have attempted where possible to personalise mortality in my writing, to involve myself in it directly, as part of the larger project to locate myself in the lived history of an
ancestral terrain. For this reason, some of these poems refer obliquely to the death of my father who embodied, symbolically, the connection and disconnection I feel with this landscape. For example, the poem ‘After Chernobyl’ describes the effects of radiation on my family’s “home soil”, and yet the final line describes the way illness, contracted unknowingly, can lie dormant for many years. This mirrors the fate that befell my father, who was exposed to asbestos as a post-war migrant labourer in Switzerland, and died from its effects—in Australia—some forty years later.

I use this example in particular to underscore a simple but important point: while my poetry intersects with the dominant approaches to imagining this terrain that resound in literary forms across different periods and traditions, ultimately it is a subjective and therefore subjectively revisionary response to this space. While this poem deals with abjection and mortality, it does so through an experience that connects space and place with a story that is, ultimately, very “close to home”. This corresponds to Braidotti’s notion of an ‘embodied genealogy’; I locate myself in this terrain through writing about my direct experiences of it (2011a, p. 27). However, by intersecting with dominant tropes to do with eroticism and mortality, I am also able to respond to a kind of inherited imaginary that exists here, using my personal sense of in-between-ness as a tool for navigating the literary traditions through which my poetry finds its own path.

**Venice and the Veneto, re-imagined**

The creative practitioner who takes Venice and its surroundings as a literary topos faces the danger of becoming mired in the various dominant themes, motifs and narratives that already characterise this space. In particular, the non-Italian tradition that takes Venice as a literary topos shapes a popular western conception of the city as a space synonymous with ruin, sexual dissipation and tragedy. Thus, writing that refers to the popular imagery/imaginary of Venice—its faded glory, its labyrinthine canals and alleyways, its masks and funereal gondole, its reputation for debauchery and
the Fall of its glorious Republic—is at risk of being inundated by a set of ideas that are always–already embellished and worn.

The imagined terrain of Venice provides a powerful and unavoidable context for my own relationship to this space. However, considering both the Italian and non-Italian literary traditions that have evolved here, it also provides a multi-vocal, transnational stage on which I am able to perform multiple selfhoods: across languages and across identities. Indeed, through the practice of a literary nomadism I have pieced together my own, hybrid literature that belongs to this topos. It is an existential, embodied, intimate relationship with a literary terrain that I describe. Ultimately, it is not a literature that is exclusively Italian-Venetian or foreign; it is the personal and subjective literature of one who is simultaneously insider and outsider to Venice and the Veneto.
Chapter Two

Creative wandering and the poetic practice of flânerie

In Italy there exists a tradition of the Sunday afternoon *passeggiata* or stroll. *La passeggiata* offers the chance to stop and exchange pleasantries with fellow citizens, to pause for a coffee, to enjoy the scenic delights of a place that is familiar and yet consistently new as the seasons change and the merchandise in shop windows is updated. Learning the art of *vagando* (wandering) has become an important way for me to locate myself in the communities of the Veneto, the site of my creative practice. In so doing I have become a poet-flâneur.

Central to flânerie is creative wandering: the seemingly aimless but simultaneously meaningful movement through the cityscape. Drawing on the study of the flâneur across a range of disciplines, I see traces of this mid-nineteenth-century Parisian phenomenon at play in my own poetic practice. Indeed, this historical social type and his engagement with the environment around him offer a model for understanding my relationship with Venice and the Veneto. This is because my poetry is written primarily *in situ*: as a poet-flâneur I move through the places and spaces of Venice and the Veneto and collect images, words, ideas and characters for my poetry.

In the opening chapter I have studied how my work relates to Venice and the Veneto as an imagined terrain; that is, as a space that is represented through writing. I now turn my attention to Venice and the Veneto as a space in which I make poetry of the existential material of my physical wandering, creating a relationship between real space and the way it is imagined through poetry. Through the guise of the flâneur I look to embody an ambiguous and hybrid relationship to my ancestral home, in order to explore how I am insider and outsider, observer and writer, a familiar-stranger in Venice and the Veneto.
Chapter 2: Creative wandering and the poetic practice of flânerie

The historical flâneur

The masculine noun flâneur is derived from the French verb flâneur, meaning to saunter or stroll in a laconic manner, and the flâneur as a social type appeared in Paris in the 1830s, moving slowly through the streets and arcades of the city to "take in" the world around him. Gluck, in her introduction to 'The Flâneur and the Aesthetic Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-19th-century Paris', points to the various ways the term flâneur has been described, noting that 'despite his status as a cultural icon...considerable ambiguity surrounds the figure' (2003, p. 53). Nevertheless, Gluck observes that the flâneur has been interpreted in various ways; as an urban detective (Frisby 1994); a surveyor of the social spaces of the modern cityscape (Wolff 1990); a prototype of the contemporary mass culture consumer (Schwartz 1998); a kind of aesthete or dandy (Predergast 1992, Rignall 1992, Gleber 1999) and as a bricoleur (Weinstein and Weinstein 1991).

These various characterisations evolve from the representation of the historical figure of the flâneur in the 'so called physiologies, which consisted of pocket-sized illustrated booklets about social stereotypes, sold to a mass audience at 1 franc a piece' (Gluck 2003, pp. 61-62). These 'physiologies' were sometimes referred to as feuilletons (leaflets) and it is from these mass-circulated literary forms that the history of the flâneur in Paris is in part drawn.

However, 'The flâneur receives his most famous eulogy in the prose and poetry of Charles Baudelaire', who calls 'forth a poetic—and a poet's—vision of the public places and spaces of Paris' (Tester 1994, p. 1). Baudelaire, in The Painter of Modern Life, observes that

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10 In this chapter I refer to the flâneur using masculine pronouns. This approach echoes the gendered identity of the historical figure (Parkhurst Ferguson 1994, pp. 22-42) as well as my own identity as a contemporary poet-flâneur.
The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite...Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life (1964, p. 9).

For Baudelaire, the flâneur epitomises the poet’s capacity to observe life and draw inspiration from it. Walter Benjamin, enamoured of Baudelaire’s poetic interpretations of the cityscape and the citizens moving through it, also takes up the subject of the flâneur in his writing (1973, 1999). For Benjamin, the flâneur represents a cultural shift from private to public life: ‘The street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls’ (1973, p. 37, italics in the original).

A short fragment of writing by Benjamin, set in Italy, is indicative of the kind of creative eavesdropping practiced by the flâneur:

I sat at night in violent pain upon a bench. Opposite me on another two girls sat down. They seemed to want to discuss something in confidence and began to whisper. Nobody except me was nearby and I should not have understood their Italian however loud it had been. But now I could not resist the feeling, in face of this unmotivated whispering in a language inaccessible to me, that a cool dressing was being applied to the painful face (Benjamin 2006, p. 95).

Even though the language is foreign to him, Benjamin creates a story out of a scene witnessed from a park bench and shifts the focus from the whispered conversation in Italian to the soothing effect it has on his own emotional state. Frisby argues that flânerie positions and configures the city as an urban text
(1994, p. 83); a site that is eminently readable; a repository of stories that can be uncovered by wandering through it.

Exploring the idea of flânerie as creative practice, Featherstone suggests that the flâneur practiced a ‘recording and analysis of the “random harvest” of impressions from the street’ (1998, p. 913). This idea of wandering, collection and assemblage is a form of poetic bricolage. Bricolage is a concept first proposed by Lévi-Strauss in his work on structural anthropology in *The Savage Mind* (1972). He contrasted the role of the bricoleur—the amateur craftsman who adapts the tools at his immediate disposal and who is never sure of the final outcome of his work—with that of the engineer, the master craftsman who follows a pre-ordained, rational and scientific approach towards a predetermined goal. Bricolage is instead about making do with what is at hand, a creative process that adapts the materials one encounters in the immediate vicinity, without a pre-determined idea of what the end product will be. Indeed, the flâneur happens across his subjects and inspiration and transforms it into literature: much as Benjamin does with a conversation overheard in a public park in Italy.

Weinstein and Weinstein compare and contrast the historical figure of the flâneur with the later concept of the bricoleur, suggesting that while the flâneur was content to wander through the spectacle of the cityscape, the bricoleur seeks ‘knowledge from his milieu, not merely diversion from it’ (1991, p. 160). However, the flâneur’s ability to transform his impressions of the street into textual material, such as the poetry of Baudelaire and the fragmentary prose of Benjamin, suggests that bricolage is a kind of methodology for the poetic practice that results from the physical and yet creative wandering of the poet-flâneur. In this manner, the flâneur has the potential to be both a character and an author. He is both the subject of poetry and stories, character sketches and musings (by Baudelaire, Balzac, and Benjamin, for example), a subject who is written into history, but also an observer-writer-participant, reading and writing and becoming part of the text of the city as he went.
This dual identity of the observer-participant allows the flâneur to take up a unique position in relation to his environment, a kind of critical engagement with the world around him. For example, Benjamin connects the figure of the flâneur with the new commodity culture centred on the arcades and department stores of eighteenth century Paris, in which his dawdling was a reaction against the encroachment of consumer capitalism into public space (1973, p. 54). The flâneur is “slow” in contrast with the rapid modernisation around him, and his snail’s pace allows for a careful consideration of the people and architecture he encounters.

This kind of engaged estrangement corresponds to the ‘technique of defamiliarisation’ proposed by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay ‘Art as technique’ (1965). Shklovsky points out that ‘perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic’ when we are accustomed to the sight of everyday objects (p. 11). In response to this, he proposes that art, and in particular poetry, can de- and re-contextualise images and objects and draw our attention to them through the use of specialised poetic language and form (pp. 8-9, 21-22). In so doing the poet produces ‘a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object’ or image that ‘makes the familiar seem strange’ (pp. 12-13).

Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarisation has its antecedents in the philosophy of the Romantic poets who believed that their writing could reveal the beauty and wonder inherent in everyday things. As Douglas Robinson, writing on the connections between Shklovsky’s theory and Romantic thinking, puts it: ‘conventionalization’ was seen by the Romantics as ‘psychologically alienating, anesthetizing’ and the reader therefore stood ‘in need of some sort of aesthetic shock to break him or her out of the anesthesia’ (2008, p. 80-81). This Romantic philosophy immediately coincides with the historical period in which the figure of the flâneur would take his first stroll through Paris, “making strange” the newness of modern life.

However, in the case of the flâneur it is not simply that he was able to defamiliarise the objects and images of everyday and render them poetic. Rather, it is he himself who embodied the duality of the familiar-stranger,
existing somewhere between the position of the observer and the observed, the native and the foreigner. Rob Shields argues that the flâneur is the native who becomes alienated from their surrounds in order to take up a poetic relationship to the world around him (1994, p. 68). As Tester puts it, 'He is the man who is only at home existentially when he is not at home physically' (1994, p. 2). The flâneur is thus the embodiment of a familiar-stranger: he is simultaneously “at home” and “abroad” and as such, brings into question what it means to belong to any given social context or site.

**Venice and the poetic practice of flânerie**

With these historical and intellectual contexts of the flâneur/flânerie in mind, I now turn my attention to how the characteristics of the poet-flâneur function as a model for my own creative wandering in Venice and the Veneto. As noted above, the flâneur is originally associated with an intimate knowledge of Parisian street life at a particular point in modern history. This is not to say, however, that flânerie as a creative practice cannot exist outside of this particular spatial and temporal environment. Keith Tester writes in his introduction to *The Flâneur* that

> Originally, the figure of the flâneur was tied to a specific time and place: Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century as it was conjured by Walter Benjamin in his analysis of Charles Baudelaire...But the flâneur has been allowed, or made, to take a number of walks away from the streets and arcades of nineteenth century Paris (1994, p. 1).

Indeed, academic and popular interest in the flâneur has extended beyond the physical and historical contexts of Paris of the early 1800s: even Walter Benjamin uses another “modern” city, Berlin, to explore the ideas associated with flânerie (2002).

Just as Benjamin identified Paris and Berlin as cityscapes synonymous with modernity, where the effects of industrialisation were made material in architecture, public space and culture, contemporary Venice continues to
Chapter 2: Creative wandering and the poetic practice of flânerie

embody a complex interplay between the old and the new. To travel along the Grand Canal, for instance, is to encounter in a few brief minutes a mesmerising display of architectural history spanning many centuries. Moreover, it is a place in which to bear witness to rampant commercialisation; not simply the everyday commerce of the lagoon community, but also via the framing of the city as a site for optical consumption by the tourist gaze. Indeed, Benjamin’s Arcades Project (1999) heralded the era of modern tourism in which the city became a visual commodity to be consumed through looking.

It is tempting to think of Venice in these terms, in so far as it is the example par excellence of mass tourism that renders an entire city a commoditised spectacle. And yet flânerie involves a more intimate and interactive relationship with the city than this, something beyond the ‘trumpery’ of the tourist who seeks to unlock the ‘genius loci’ of a city by visiting its monuments and museums (Benjamin 1999, p. 416). As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson puts it: ‘Flânerie presupposes an urban epistemology’ (1994, p. 30). This specialist knowledge of a particular site is part of a modus operandi in which the sights, sounds and experiences witnessed by the flâneur can be put to use creatively.

In line with this approach I have sought to use my own intimate knowledge of the spaces and places of Venice and the Veneto as a foundation for my poetry. For this reason, I take the reader to specific but often “out of the way” places in my poetry: Sedico-Bribano, Conegliano, Ponte nelle Alpi, Mestre, Feltre, Maser, ‘a truck stop bar in Refos, or Castion, or godforsaken-Trichès’ (‘Archipelago’). This is not the typical view of the tourist. In fact, certain poems focus their attention on the less than picturesque views of everyday life: ‘here we are thugging about in Chioggia/here we are kissing beside the grotty cathedral in Vicenza’ (‘Archipelago’). Even when the poetry is signposted with references to Venetian locations and buildings with which the tourist might be familiar (the church of the Madonna della Salute, the Peggy Guggenheim museum, a palazzo in Rialto), the view is personal, enunciated from a first-person perspective. For example, in the poem ‘Ferragosto’/‘Mid-August’ I describe the desolation of the iconic beach of the Venetian Lido after the
midsummer period: ‘I take the bus along the peninsula/joined by pensioners and teenagers/bored with the yawn of school holidays that stretches/out behind them, just as the sand does/beneath my feet/at the denuded and scrubby end of the beach at Alberoni’.

The majority of the poems in Archipelago were written in situ, in order to respond directly to the specific topos of Venice and the Veneto, chosen as a geo-cultural framework for this collection. This required the kind of creative wandering I have thus far associated with the flâneur-poet, whose movement through space also involves an accumulation of images and experiences. Trains, cafés, public squares, museums, beaches, churches and many other public and private spaces were the sites in which I practised this kind of poetic flânerie. As Tester puts it: ‘to be a poet is the real truth of the idler and the observer; the poetry is the reason and justification of the idling; the poet is at his busiest when he seems to be at his laziest’ (1994, pp. 2-3).

The city of Venice is a site synonymous with this kind of creative idling in so far as it is replete with public spaces and thoroughfares. Venice is the flâneur’s city: to navigate it successfully requires its inhabitants to embrace the aleatory conditions of its maze of calle (streets) canals, bridges and sestieri (parishes). Indeed, with its intricate system of streets and waterways that spiral and double back upon themselves, Venice is a city that confounds those who look for grids and logic in its layout. For example, twin yellow signs on the corner of a building may indicate opposite directions to the same place. To become familiar with it relies on a patient and repetitive criss-crossing of its geographic terrain, the building up of an ‘urban epistemology’ (Parkhurst Ferguson 1994, p. 30); a kind of internalised knowledge of the cityscape. This is itself representative of a kind of nomadism, a physical movement about a geo-cultural terrain that results in the accumulation of an embodied knowledge of and relationship to the space in question.

It is through this nomadic wandering that I am able to record the “random harvest” of impressions from the street’ (Featherstone 1998, p. 913). Like the bricoleur, as a poet-flâneur I assemble texts from the material collected on my
wanderings, through the observation of the people and places I encounter. Words are tools that are refashioned to suit the purposes of each poem: as an example, a snippet of a conversation overheard in passing might be put to use within a poem, and given a new context. For instance, the images and ideas used in the poem ‘Chi fa guardia’ (‘He who watches’) came from witnessing a young boy standing guard over his bike in a backstreet of Venice. I overheard him explain to his mother that he was scared to leave it alone, lest someone steal it. His sincere concern became the basis for a poem about the inability of human beings to liberate themselves from any number of different attachments. In this manner a short conversation, overheard in a Venetian street, provided the material from which the poem was crafted. As a poet-bricoleur-flâneur I “made do” with what was immediately at hand, transforming it into poetry.

Lacy Ramsay, writing on ‘Modes of Found Poetry’ (2012) notes the overlapping characteristics of found poetry, collage and assemblage. Ramsay argues that a ‘non-literary nature is what most clearly distinguishes found language, the basis of found poetry, from other forms of quotation’ while texts ‘that include both found language, or indeed literary quotation, and original material are frequently said to constitute an example of collage’ (pp. 363-364, italics in the original). In addition to this, ‘where poems are made up of found material from different sources they are sometimes called assemblages’ (p. 364, italics in the original). Poems such as ‘He who watches’ share many of these characteristics, in so far as they are a hybrid blend of material drawn from everyday life and, on occasion, literary sources. However, I have chosen to describe this poem, in the context of the poetic practice of flânerie, as a form of bricolage. This is in order to emphasise the role of the poet as an existential “craftsperson” who pieces together texts from his or her own responsiveness to place and space. In this sense it is not so much a found language that is the basis for this kind of poetry, but rather a subjective engagement with the random and unpredictable life of the street.
Moreover, the chance encounter, critical to this kind of poetic bricolage, is a recurring motif in my poetry. Poems such as ‘Diluvio’, ‘Michele, on the street’ and ‘Expectancy’ explore what happens when old friends and even complete strangers suddenly meet. The impromptu appearances and disappearances in these poems mirror the mobile and unfixed nature of my own life lived in the coming-and-going between one country and another. At the same time, they also reflect the kind of existential approach of the flâneur to the world around him: he is unable to predict who or what he will encounter next in his meandering, and he is himself just as likely to appear, as if out of nowhere, as something unexpected and uncanny.

**The flâneur-poet as insider/outsider**

I have just described my capacity to wander about Venice and the Veneto as a space in which I practice a creative, poetic flânerie. This kind of poetic navigation is predicated on the ability to move about incognito, neither completely a tourist nor a native citizen, to be ‘at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden’ from it (Baudelaire 1964, p. 9). Tester hypothesises that the ‘Baudelairean poet’ has an identity for every occasion, tuning his persona to each social situation or site in order to remain anonymous within it (1994, p. 4). Similarly, Gluck notes that the flâneur is able to put on psychological and vestimentary costumes or masks to blend into the crowd and to change his identity to suit whatever social space he inhabits. In so doing, ‘This kind of mobile, centerless self was capable of the multiplication and intensification of experience precisely because it had the capacity to relate to the world through multiple facades’ (2003, p. 77).

Venice is famous for its masks that signify the dramatic personae of the Commedia dell’Arte and are synonymous with the Carnival that precedes Lent. Wearing a mask traditionally allowed for political decisions to be made incognito and for citizens to anonymously cross social and sexual strata. In the context of this project, the “masks” I wear are physical, linguistic and cultural:
I may sound and act and even look like a Venetian, yet I am also the visitor, the “long lost relative” and the stranger.

Rob Shields writes of the ‘complementarity between the work of Benjamin and [George] Simmel’ (1994, p. 68), whose theory of the Stranger (Simmel, 1950) emerges at the same historical moment as the figure of the flâneur in the writing of Benjamin and Baudelaire. For Simmel the ‘Stranger is the personification of the problem of our uneasiness in dealing at first hand with those who are foreign to us or anyone who is culturally different’ (Shields 1991, p. 68). According to Shields, the Stranger is a ‘foreigner who becomes like a native, whereas the flâneur is the inverse, a native who becomes like a foreigner’ (1991, p. 68, italics in the original). I am neither the foreigner who becomes native nor the native who is alienated from his original culture or home. In fact, my ‘personification’ of the familiar/stranger is actually one that involves cultural similarity and difference, an ongoing movement between the position of the native and the outsider.

In the poem ‘Tribe’ I have described a train journey between Ferrara and Venice, and an encounter with a man who looked uncannily similar to me. I examine the ‘little differences between us’, imagining the kind of life this person must lead that would surely be in counterpoint to my own, for ‘he appeared to be a graphic designer/or a student of economics/or a council employee/from Montebelluna or Castelfranco Veneto.’ The title of the poem invokes a question: to what degree is this where I belong; am I part of this man’s “tribe”? Quite clearly we might have been related, and yet there was still a divide between us, made apparent by ‘my desire to say something/really deep and significant’, and ultimately, my failure to do so. This ‘foreign twin’ was both a sign of my belonging, and of my difference and alienation.

I am not born in or of this space, and yet my physiognomy, my grasp of language, and my ancestral connections to Venice and the Veneto allow me to slip into its society and public spaces without remark. I am neither the returned migrant nor the displaced exile, but rather someone who lives in-between these identities. For this reason I see myself as a poet-flâneur: it is an
identity that is rooted in the idea of being simultaneously an observer and the observed, an occupant of and a participant in a given space. It is not simply that I defamiliarise the objects and images so prized in the cultural imaginary of Venice, but that I embody this uncanniness, this movement between familiarity and strangeness. This is a critical principle in relation to the ideas of nomadism and hybridity outlined in the introduction to this exegesis, in which I describe what it means to be between nations, cultures, literatures and languages. In the guise of the poet-flâneur I am able to be both insider and outsider simultaneously, using this as a position from which to explore my relationship to Venice and the Veneto through poetry.

Through his perambulation the flâneur develops an intimate knowledge of particular sites, and it is through the patient and repetitive criss-crossing of a particular terrain that I build up a sense of what is going on, what is changing, what is worthy of interest and assemble this material into poems. This enables me to create my own version of the *fueillitons* in response to the world around me. I am the poet-flâneur-bricoleur who pieces together his relationship to Venice and the Veneto through writing, transforming the real into the imagined. If, as I have suggested in the opening chapter, my subjective approach to literary Venice and the Veneto is a case of an ‘embodied genealogy’ (Braidotti 2011a, p. 27), the kind of creative wandering I undertake as the poet-flâneur can be understood as an embodied cartography; whereby the self is made mobile, set to wander, creatively, across a particular geo-cultural terrain. Conceptualising my practice of writing poetry in terms of flânerie is a means by which to explain what I make of an intimate, personal knowledge—an epistemology—of Venice and the Veneto. Even though I am not born in this space it becomes a navigable landscape that I know intimately: I become the familiar-stranger. Thus, to embody such a figure as the poet-flâneur is not only to re-animate an historic social type; it is also a way of connecting existential experience with an approach to the creative practice of writing poetry.
Chapter Three

(Self)Translation and the poetry of the “in-between”

In the northern Veneto there is the tradition of a late morning tipple known as a bicicletta (a bicycle). The ingredients for the drink are gathered and mixed in one receptacle and then poured out into two separate glasses: two wheels of one bicycle, as it were. Whenever I watch this drink being prepared I have had cause to think of the splitting, doubling and mixing in my own life, characterised by my relationships with Australia and Italy. In particular I am reminded of the movement I have made between and across these two fields of existence, always aware of and engaging with two places, histories and cultures. I am one person and yet my life, and my writing, is “poured out” from a mixture of various linguistic and cultural affiliations.

It is unsurprising then that the subject and practice of translation has long been a feature of my poetry. It is a way of enacting bilingualism; the splitting and doubling of words, ideas, images and meanings that comes about in the processes of translation is a reflection of my identity as someone who is in constant movement between languages and cultures, split and doubled by my twin allegiances to different languages and places. In light of this relationship between translation and subjectivity, my aim in this chapter is to focus in particular on self-translation, as a means to investigate how this experience of being between cultures and languages is expressed in my poetry across English and Italian.

The history of translation studies traditionally sidelines or ignores self-translation, focussing on notions of originality and the fidelity of the relationship between source and target texts. To challenge this dominant approach, I use my own practice as an example of the subjective nature of translation, which requires an ongoing movement between national/linguistic identities. Following on from this, I question the ideas of a mother tongue,
originality and the notion that identity is essentially monolingual, arguing that translation is a process of negotiation: between texts, languages, cultures and identities.

**Historical approaches to (self)translation**

The field of translation studies is now vast, but the development of scholarly interest in this area was gradual. In the ancient and pre-modern eras translation was very much a practice rather than an academic discipline. However, in the early Christian period there began a distinct interest in the degree to which translation achieved verisimilitude and accuracy. While the Romans allowed for some flexibility in the degree to which one text might mimic another, for early biblical translators such as St. Jerome translation was a divine gift through which the Word of God could be accurately transposed and transcribed. In this period the primacy, even divinity, of the “original” text is thus established, for it was believed to represent no less than divine wisdom (Robinson 2001, p. 126).

In the late modern era the relationship between national identity and translation was isolated for study. In the early 1800s the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher contrasted the translatorial methods of “alienation” and “naturalization” (Kittel and Poltermann 2001, p. 428). These methods are more commonly referred to as “domestication” and “foreignisation”; that is, a text that is translated in such a manner as to suit a new audience/culture might be thought of as “domesticated”, while a text that demonstrates its allegiance to the culture/language in which it is originally produced stands out as “foreign” when put into translation. As part of his nationalist agenda to promote German culture abroad, Schleiermacher expounded the virtues of translation practices that encouraged fidelity to the original or source text, believing that texts-in-translation should alert readers to the fact of their translation and the primacy of the original. Indeed, so keen was he to preserve national identity through literature that Schleiermacher warned against the ‘wicked and magical art’ of the bilingual writer who
‘becomes a traitor to his native tongue by surrendering himself to another’ (Robinson 1997, p. 236). Following on from this stance, Schleiermacher’s insistence on a single linguistic purity was a paradigm for translation that [came] to dominate the nineteenth as well as twentieth century, by so radically splitting the linguistic multiculturalism of 1800 into halves: the foreign as one pole, exterior and other, and the domestic as its opposite, internally derived, infinitely supple, and uniquely authentic in subjective expression (Hokenson and Munson 2007, p. 142).

In 1923 Walter Benjamin produced his essay ‘The Task of the Translator’. This often-cited work is in fact a preface to his translation of Baudelaire’s ‘Tableaux Parisiens’ (Benjamin 1973) and thus Benjamin’s observations are very much tied to his own experience of the practice of translation as a material process. For this reason, Benjamin’s ideas are an important starting point for those of us interested in the knowledge that emerges from our own hands-on experience of doing translation.

Benjamin offers a more flexible approach to translation than Schleiermacher. He argues that ‘no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife…the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process’ (1973, p. 73). In this sense Benjamin calls into question the idea of translation as a mode of preservation, preferring instead to focus on its regenerative possibilities. Peter Bush, writing on Benjamin’s theories in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies, points out that under this new rubric ‘Translation...is not about striving for a likeness of the original because the original undergoes changes...A translated work can thus renew the original working by giving it myriad “after-lives” and in so doing create new linguistic forms within a variety of target languages’ (2001, p. 195).

To contend with the difficulties of literal translation Benjamin puts forward the idea that there exists a ‘kinship’ between all languages that transcends individual linguistic differences and that it is this ‘pure language’ that translators should aim to make accessible to their readers (1973, p. 74). This
is not the pure language of an original, unsullied and unchanging mother tongue but rather a kind of meta-communication that is rendered, in Benjamin’s writing, as something mystical: ‘a force hidden within certain texts, a poetic potential, a kernel that is striving to go beyond the immediate shell of words’ (Bush 2001, p. 194).

While Benjamin’s theory appears to hark back to the notion of a transcendent, divine meaning prevalent in early Christian approaches to translation, his acceptance that translators must work beyond their allegiances to a single language fixed in time and space is critical to the shift in translation studies that takes place later in the twentieth century. Benjamin’s ideas have had a profound influence on contemporary approaches to translation in so far as they foreground a shift in emphasis on the original or source text towards an interest in the various contexts—personal, linguistic, political, literary, poetic, historical, cultural—that come into play whenever a translation is undertaken. In this period Lawrence Venuti, Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere and others have contributed to the consolidation of the discipline, effecting what is sometimes referred to as the “cultural studies turn” in translation theory.

Bassnett and Lefevere (1990, 1998) argue for a theoretical link between cultural and translation studies, moving the focus away from other more narrowly scientific, semiotic and linguistic approaches to translation theory. In their co-authored work Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation (1998) they point out the development of translation studies beyond the pre-modern fixation with equivalence, whereby translation studies now includes discussion of the ways in which translation contributes to the recognition and establishment of cultural diversity in the era of globalisation. Similarly, Venuti’s The Translation Studies Reader (2004) contrasts the strong focus on the preservation of the source text in early translations of Holy Scripture with later, modernist practices that take into consideration the culture in which literary translations are produced and consumed. Venuti seeks to ‘develop a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural differences of the
foreign text’ (1995, p. 23). In effect, Venuti argues that ‘literary originals should be retranslated for every generation, so that foreign otherness may be experienced by reading subjects under new cultural conditions’ (Hokenson and Munson 2007, p. 154).

The key theoretical approaches to translation mentioned above demonstrate that thinking about translation and its relationship to culture and cultural difference have developed and changed over time. However, it is important to note that they share a common assumption that translation always involves an original or source text and a subsequent translated or target text, even in those instances where a shift from “foreignising” to “domesticating” translation practices occur. In light of this, it is worth examining an area of study in which these key ideas come into question: self-translation.

The mainstream approaches to the study of translation outlined above pay scant attention to the sub-discipline of self-translation. For example, The Translator as Writer (2006), edited by Susan Bassnett and Peter Bush, focuses on the translator who also does creative writing as a separate or adjunct activity to translation, rather than the translator/writer who simultaneously writes and translates their own work. Other scholarship on this topic tends to focus on monographic studies of the work of individual author/translators, such as Samuel Beckett (Fitch 1988) and James Joyce (Risset 1984).

Susan Bassnett questions whether self-translation practices are in fact a form of translation at all: ‘The problems of defining what is or is not a translation are further complicated when we consider self-translation and texts that claim to be translated from a non-existent source’, relegating such practices to a category of ‘problematic types’ (1998, p. 38). Christopher Whyte in his essay ‘Against Self-Translation’ (2002) goes even further, insisting that self-translation is an ‘activity without content, voided of all the rich echoes and interchanges...attributed to the practice of translation’ (p. 68) whereby an author exerts ‘an improper control over texts’ that leaves little room for further interpretation by the reader or outside translator (p. 70).
Rainier Grutman, writing in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, confirms that ‘auto-translation is frowned upon in literary studies’ (2004, p. 17). Moreover, ‘Translation scholars...have paid little attention to the phenomenon, because they thought it more akin to bilingualism than to translation proper’ (2004, p. 17). In *The Bilingual Text: History and theory of Literary Self-Translation* Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson agree that the topic of self-translation has been neglected and even rejected in the dominant literature about translation because ‘the keepers of the canon rather strenuously [insist] on the purity of founding figures’ in Western literary history, whereby ‘theories of nation and genius [erase] the intercultural origins of literary innovation’ (2007, pp. 1-2). Grutman argues that this way of thinking evolves in the Romantic era, a period that ‘favoured self-expression along linguistic and national lines’ (Grutman 2004, p. 17). Under this model, the ‘genius’ of the author was understood as evolving from a single, monolingual, national/cultural identity, ignoring histories of literary bilingualism and cultural hybridity.

In response to this, Hokenson and Munson bring into the frame of their analysis the bilingual writing of John Donne, Carlo Goldoni, Stefan George, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Giuseppe Ungaretti and others, in order to demonstrate this “hidden history” of writers working in more than one language. Moreover, Hokenson and Munson argue that self-translation is a discipline in which traditional approaches to translation, predicated on ideas to do with originality and equivalence, are challenged:

Theoretical models of source and target languages...break down in the dual text by one hand, as do linguistic models of lexical equivalence, and foreign versus domestic culture...translation as diminution and loss, a falling away from the original, simply cannot serve. New categories of analysis must be developed (2007, p. 2).

This is because the practice of self-translation includes the possibility that two texts-in-translation are equal rather than equivalent. The truly bilingual writer-translator cannot necessarily be said to be more or less original or
authentic in one language or another. Rather, his or her skill lies in the ability to move back and forth between languages and between cultural identities. In effect the bilingual writer-translator produces two different but interrelated texts-in-translation, rather than separate source and target texts.

Merlinda Bobis, a writer, performer and scholar, is one of the few self-translators to base their research on their own practice. Bobis describes the process of moving between Bikol, Pilipino and English in her writing as part and parcel of living across more than one nation and culture. Despite or even because of her experience of migration, Bobis questions the idea of an original, first and authentic voice:

That I am born to a particular soundstation (Pilipino or even my dialect Bikol) is accidental...I am born with the timbre of the first sound, that first prehistoric grunt in the caves. So, in a way, I am bound by kinship to all the languages that grew out of that first primal cry. No language can be imposed on me, because each language by affinity is mine (2007, p. 7).

Because of this affinity, Bobis does not see translation in terms of a diminution of her “true self” as she moves from one language to another. Instead, translation is a space in which her cultural hybridity and border crossing is staged. For Bobis, self-translation is a means by which to investigate relationships to nation, culture, language and place: to celebrate the possibilities of bi- and multi-lingualism rather than ignoring them. As Grutman states, in the context of self-translation, ‘it proves useful to consider, in addition to the actual use authors make of their languages, the attitudes and feelings they develop towards them’ (2004, p. 18). This is the focus of the work of writer/self-translators such as Merlinda Bobis, and it is a foundational principle that guides my own practice-based research in this area.

**Negotiation: the self-in-translation**

I am a bilingual poet. In practical terms bilingualism means that some of my poems are written exclusively in English, others in Italian. On occasion I
combine the two, while at other times I translate an English poem into Italian or an Italian poem into English. I sometimes take things further and incorporate words from my family’s northern Italian dialect or from the Italo-Australian-English I share with bilingual friends. However, the type of self-translation I practice most often is referred to as consecutive self-translation or simultaneous self-translation (Grutman 2008, p. 259). That is, when doing self-translation I tend to write the same poem in two different languages at the same time. When developing drafts I work on two pages sitting side by side, teasing out two versions of the same poem, one predominantly in Italian and the other in English.

Take for example the short poem 'Pane Fresco’/’Fresh Bread’. The first draft of this work was written at the end of a sojourn in Venice. Passing a bakery, it struck me that there was no need to enter and buy bread as I was about to leave the city. At that point I had been in Italy for some weeks, moving within a polyglot social circle, and my thoughts and conversations were slipping in and out of one language and another. In line with this, the poem, when I sat down to write it later that day, was “built up” by moving back and forth between two versions—one in Italian, the other in English—until the poems were completed.

The drafting and redrafting of poetry written in this manner reveals the degree to which notions of source and target text blur when writing and translating simultaneously. In the much longer poem ‘Alberoni’, the process of moving between texts and making minor changes took place over several months. This is because even a single word or element of punctuation changed in one version requires consideration of and potential change to its counterpart in the other. As a result, neither version precedes the other: in this case there is no “original” poem. As such, this sort of translation practice has clear implications for traditional approaches that seek to establish and maintain a division between the source and the translated texts.

In his playful treatise on translation titled Mouse or Rat? (2003) Umberto Eco uses his own experiences of doing translation and having his work translated
by others as a means to reorient a discussion of translation from theory to practice. Part of the actual doing of translation is a process of moving backwards and forward between two texts. For Eco, however, this is not a one-way street where traffic flows unevenly from source to target text. Rather, he argues that translation opens up a field of interrelationships connecting translators, texts-in-translation and the cultures that surround them.

Eco recognises that in the practical doing of translation there are certain ‘losses and gains’ (2003, pp. 32-61) of shared meaning or effect. That is, the primary notion of equivalence upon which so much of translation theory hinges must be broadened out to incorporate those instances when it is not possible, or even desirable, to translate word for word. Eco argues that translation based on mechanical or mathematical equivalence cannot capture subtle nuances of context and connotation (2003, p. 71). To do so may result in the translated text being treated as an inferior Other: a version of the original that is somehow less authentic.

In a similar fashion the scholar and poet Dan Disney argues that the poet-translator who seeks to transmute the spirit of one text into another, rather than focussing on notions of equivalence and strict word-for-word fidelity, is involved in a process of what he calls ‘versioneering’ (2014, p. 1). Disney contends that by ‘Entering an essentially creative zone, the versioneer does not act as a traduttore-traditore, or “translator as traitor” or betrayer’ but rather as a ‘traduttore-traghettore, or “translator-ferryman”’ that transports the spirit of one text into another (2014, p. 3, italics in the original). While Disney’s approach focuses on translation practices in which original and translated texts are separate, such a theory takes account of the nuanced aspects of language and poetic form that are sometimes very difficult to translate, even where simultaneous self-translation is involved.

Disney identifies ‘sound and syntax’, in particular, as areas in which the poet-translator might look to establish a kind of sympathetic relationship between texts-in-translation (2014, p. 3). Take, for example, the case of ‘Le gondole di San Barnabà’ and its sibling poem in English, included in the manuscript of
poetry to which this exegesis responds. In the Italian and English versions there is a rhyme scheme across the four lines of poetry: A A B B. However, the difference in sound-effect between the word endings –a and –à in the Italian version are extremely minimal, signifying a stressed syllable as much as a slight difference in pronunciation. To try and capture this subtle difference in sound, I have used an inexact rhyme between pace/Barnabas in the final lines in English. To create what the Italians might refer to as a *simpatia* (a kind of friendliness or understanding) between the two, the softness of these line endings is maintained in the final two lines of each poem, lending itself to the idea of the gondole that cruise about the canals on a lazy Sunday.

This poem also demonstrates what Eco calls ‘losses and gains’ of translation (2003, pp. 32-61). For example, in the first English version ‘Grazie’ is translated literally as ‘Thank you’ rather than simply ‘Thanks’ or even ‘My gratitude for’: a direct address which remains implied, rather than openly stated, in the Italian poem. Line lengths across the two poems also vary. In this sense, it is not possible to translate these poems word for word, or mechanically, as Eco might put it. To do so would mean losing the overall effect shared by the poems: a wistful description of a ‘last Sunday’ in Venice, the almost sing-song quality of rhyming couplets “ringing” like the chimes described in the poem. Indeed, such a poem demonstrates the manner in which any translation must incorporate interrelationships above and beyond that which exists between individual words on a page. Eco writes that:

> Between the purely theoretical argument that, since all languages are differently structured, translation is impossible, and the commonsensical acknowledgement that people, in this world, do translate and understand each other, it seems to me that the idea of translation as a process of negotiation (between author and text, between author and readers, as well as between the structure of two languages and the encyclopaedias of two cultures) is the only one that matches our experience (2003, p. 34).\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{11}\) In a similar fashion Jacques Derrida puts forward the idea that ‘nothing is translatable’ and yet ‘nothing is untranslatable’ (2012, p. 369). This rather cryptic notion relates to Derrida’s belief that the self is psychically split in its inability to reconcile the experience of cultural
Eco’s theory that translation involves various forms of negotiation evolves primarily from his experience and study of standard translation practices that involve separate authors and translators, whose job it is to try and bridge the gaps that exist between languages, cultures, histories and subjective opinions and identities. The Australian poet, scholar and translator Christopher (Kit) Kelen notes that his own work with creative writers/translators in Macao is aided by a process of collaboration, arguing that ‘Questions of foreignisation/nativisation…are largely foregone where there is no one agent/persona responsible but rather a cooperative process engaging active subjects from either side of the cultural divide’ (2012, p. 48).

In the context of self-translation the writer-author is in fact in collaboration with the self, in so far as he or she must negotiate between his or her own twin allegiances and experiences of more than one language and culture. In this sense there is not so much a cultural divide that must be bridged, but a cultural hybridity to be explored. At the heart of both practices however—whether it is translation involving different parties or auto-translation involving the single writer-translator—is the need to engage with the various possibilities that putting a text into translation offers, as well as the desire to create a relationship between one text-in-translation and another. For this reason Eco contends that the translator must keep in sight a reasonably fixed, shared meaning between two texts-in-translation—what he terms the ‘deep story’ (2003, p. 71). Negotiation instead focuses attention on how the translator must move across and between texts to try and construct a deep, harmonious and believable relationship between them. Eco observes that

there are source texts that widen out in translation, and the destination text enriches the source one, making it enter the sea of a new difference with the kind of metalanguage that he sees as transcending the everyday practice of translation (1996)—an idea akin to Benjamin’s notion of pure language, as discussed above.

I have chosen to adopt Eco’s approach over that of Derrida because of its more pragmatic approach: for Eco, despite encountering cultural and linguistic differences the translator continues to practice his or her craft, exploring and even reveling in the possibilities this entails, rather than succumbing to the ‘psychologically mutilating’ effect Derrida associates with shifting between languages and the cultures they represent (Hokenson and Munson 2007, p. 210).
intertextuality; and there are delta texts that branch out in many translations, each of which impoverishes their original flow, but which altogether create a new territory, a labyrinth of competing interpretations (2003, p. 102).

In this way he represents translation not as a narrow and constricted one-way flow of meaning from one text to another, but rather as an estuarine delta in which many meanings and effects circulate. Accordingly, translation may result in a new kind of textual ‘territory’; a labyrinthine but interconnected space in which the hybridity of texts-in-translation reflects the hybrid, inter- and transcultural identities of those who produce them.

**Self-translation and linguistic nomadism**

I am conscious of the way my own subjectivity is negotiated across two languages, cultures and histories, and it is this ‘deep story’ that is central to my poetry. From the perspective of an author who consistently uses a first-person poetic voice in his work, this shift away from notions of source, origin, equivalence, loss and so forth also signifies a shift away from conceiving of subjectivity in similarly derivative terms. For me it demonstrates the notion of the self-in-translation as functioning in a space where a doubling and “building up” occurs: here, the textures of a life lived across two languages/cultures entwine.

I therefore wish to extend the traditional definition of self-translation beyond the simple transposition of one’s own writing into different languages. For me, auto-translation also refers to the practice of translating the self in new and interesting ways. The capacity to write and translate one’s own work across languages is a signifier of the capacity of the poet to be unshackled from strict identifications with a native tongue, an “original” nationality or a fixed sense of home. No one language or culture or text is “first” or more authentic for me: it is the movement and *negotiation* between them that best reflects a life lived between, within and across more than one place or culture.
Elsewhere in this exegesis I have referred to Rosi Braidotti’s theory of the nomadic, non-unitary subject who identifies with more than one culture, language or home (2011a, 2001b). The idea of nomadism is also a way of understanding the kind of negotiated movement between languages and texts that Eco describes. While in the first and second chapters I have written of literary and physical nomadism respectively, here I wish to propose the idea of linguistic nomadism: a reflection of the continuous movement between languages that is a feature of my life and my writing.

Braidotti draws upon her own experience as a migrant and a multi-lingual philosopher to argue that ‘the polyglot is a linguistic nomad’ (2011b, p. 29). Bobis, reflecting on her own practice of writing multi-lingual poetry, refers to this movement between languages as ‘shuttling’ (1995, p. 7). When writing/translating poetry I am reminded of my own translocation— physical, psychological, historical, linguistic, cultural—required by my dual identification with the home of my birth and the home of my ancestors, Australia and Italy. This shifting and ‘shuttling’ entails a linguistic nomadism, an ongoing process of moving backwards and forwards between English and Italian (and even dialect) in which my poetic voice is never entirely at home, rooted or identified with one single language.

Indeed, Braidotti points out that a nomadic consciousness de-emphasises ‘nostalgia for the site of cultural origin’ (2011b, p. 39). In line with this thinking, the bilingual poet is therefore positioned as ‘a person who is in transit between...languages, neither here nor there’ (p. 39). As such, the bilingual poet is ‘capable of some healthy scepticism about steady identities and mother tongues...[B]eing in-between languages constitutes a vantage point in deconstructing identity’ (p. 39). Thus, the in-between-ness of translation practice opens a space in which the fixity of national, cultural and linguistic identities comes into question. While the migrant may possess the sense of a home left behind, a history of belonging and a mother tongue that precedes the culture of their host nation or culture, the first generation migrant exists in a state of mixed allegiances to culture and place. In effect
their is a life lived in translation, in what Homi K. Bhabha calls a ‘Third Space of enunciation’, ‘the “inter”—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the \textit{inbetween} space’ in which it is possible to enunciate the splitting and doubling of identities that connect across more than one text, history, nation or language (1994, p. 56, italics in the original).

Simultaneous or consecutive self-translation, as I have suggested, challenges the discipline’s dominant discourses of authenticity, originality, unity, equivalence and diminishment. This practice offers what Bhabha describes as an ‘intervention’ that ‘properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past’ (1994, p. 54). Indeed, this chapter can be understood as an intervention into the pre-established discourses about translation, one that transcends the idea of an original subjectivity shaped by birthplace and first language.

The movement between texts that translation requires is representative of the linguistic movement I make between and across English and Italian, but is also a signifier of the various poetic journeys, both imagined and real, that I make around Venice and the Veneto. As I have argued above, the self-translation of poetry is indeed an activity that goes beyond the crossing of words from one language to another, for it is also about the crossing of the self into various physical, cultural and historical territories. Translation is therefore a means through which to test and explore my relationship not only to language, but also to culture and place—it is thus a means through which to explore myself.
Chapter Four

Shaping the self through poetic form

In a small village called Pieve di Limana, in the province of Belluno, is a stone house dating back to the 1700s. Up a narrow flight of stairs, on the second floor of this house, there is a small room that has become a “home away from home” for me. It is simply furnished, with a single bed, desk, lamp and a wall covered by a large bookshelf, containing volumes in both English and Italian. From the window in this room I can see down into the village piazza, and out above the tiled roofs of the nearby buildings to the snow-capped peaks of the Dolomites. The thickly insulated walls mean that few sounds reach me in this warm eyrie; little more than the noises my aunt makes as she percolates coffee on the stovetop on winter mornings.

The Italian word for room is stanza, and it strikes me as perfectly apt considering the degree to which this small space has and continues to be the environment in which so much of my creative writing takes places. It is a sanctuary in which the word-sketches I have made in my well-worn notebooks come to life. It is where I have shaped a sense of my relationship to northern Italy, my father’s family, and their language. Just as a poetic stanza groups together particular ideas within a single poem, and contributes to its overall form, this room has allowed me to “give shape” to my relationship to Venice and the Veneto.

Form and genre have become critical to this “shaping” in my poetry, in so far as they have offered opportunities for me to explore my relationship with this space. I have chosen two elements in particular for further study in this chapter: my use of the poetic or lyric “I”, and my interest in and experimentation with the Petrarchan sonnet. My aim here is to investigate how these elements of poetic form and genre communicate a solipsistic interest in the self and its relationship to the places and spaces in which the poetry is set.
To do this I will first turn my attention to how the use of poetic form offers opportunities for contemporary poets to reinvent or experiment with pre-established poetic modes, creating links between author, subject and socio-cultural settings. I will then examine my use of the “I” and the sonnet, arguing that these two features of my writing combine to create subjective environments or “poetic islands” in which different versions of myself can be imagined and staged. In consideration of these poetic “islands” created through writing, I propose that the manuscript as a whole can be understood as a new form of the Venetian “island book”: that is, a way of writing myself into the geo-historical and geo-cultural terrain at the core of my poetry.

**Finding form**

All poetry contains elements of prosody and form, in so far that the putting down of words in a particular order is itself a creative act that involves decision-making about shape, length, stress and other poetic elements. However, the use of prosody, form and genre in the contemporary era is particularly associated with the poetic movement known as New Formalism that came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s and included work by poets such as Timothy Steele and Dana Gioia. In his attempt to answer the question ‘What was New Formalism?’ David Caplan notes that this movement was primarily theorised as a return to poetic techniques lost or overlooked in the late modern and early post-modern periods (2012, p. 19). Accordingly, New Formalism included the revival of poetic forms such as the sestina and the villanelle.

Caplan describes the “poetry wars” that swirled ‘about the relation of literary technique and politics’ that came to be associated with New Formalism (2012 p. 19). On one hand was the idea that form is ‘socially, politically, and
aesthetically neutral’ (p. 20), an idea supported by Dana Gioia who argues that ‘Formal verse, like free verse, is neither intrinsically bad or good…Nor do these techniques automatically carry with them social, political, or even, in most cases, aesthetic values’ (Gioia 1992, p. 30 as cited in Caplan 2012, p. 20). On the other hand, however, critics such as Timothy Steele proposed that certain poetic forms and techniques are linked to particular aesthetic, moral or value-based ideals. For instance, Steele argues that metrical verse nourishes values to do with nature, balance, joy and an interest in the past (Steele 1990, p. 294 as cited in Caplan 2012, p. 20). Running alongside this kind of thinking was the concern that New Formalism, with its focus on the rejuvenation of neglected poetic forms and techniques would result in the reproduction of ‘museum curiosities’ isolated from their original cultural, political, historical, social and linguistic contexts (Caplan, 2012, pp. 30-31).

In the middle ground of this debate was the notion that New Formalism heralded the possibility of new, hybrid ways of engaging with traditional or pre-established ways of writing poetry. For example, Brunner argues that for African-American poets of the post-modern era, ‘the sonnet was a powerful device associated with their heritage: a form specifically deployed for its ideological and political significance by poets of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s’ (2013, p. 71). Brunner goes on to suggest that the neo-formalist experimentation with the sonnet form in the 1970s and 1980s was a means by which poets, particularly those belonging to migrant or diasporic groups, could connect their work to a pre-established poetic tradition and in so doing create for themselves a literary ancestry when faced with new or host cultures (2013, pp. 71-95).

Although my engagement with poetic form is not intrinsically political, using form enables me to explore my relationship with a culture/space which is/is not my own. My work with the Petrarchan sonnet, for example, positions me as an ancestor to or inheritor of a poetic tradition already associated with Italy. At the same time, the experimental approach I take to this poetic genre means
that I am better able to reflect the kind of hybrid, transcultural subjectivity I have described in detail throughout this exegesis.

As a movement New Formalism highlighted the broad range of poetic techniques at the poet’s disposal, and the various effects these elements of prosody, associated with movements and styles of the past, might have when deployed in contemporary poetry. While my own poetry sits just outside of the historical framework with which New Formalism is usually associated, I share the willingness of its exponents to explore the possibilities that working with poetic form might offer. Far from wishing to reproduce ‘museum curiosities’ (Caplan 2012, p. 31) I am interested in how the use of form might enable me to create both a connection between my poetry and the historical, geo-cultural and literary terrain it describes. For this reason my aim here is to answer the question: how do poetic forms and techniques associated with the past enable me to discover and explore my own subjective relationship to Venice and the Veneto in the present?

**Setting the poetic “I” in motion**

I have consistently referred to *Archipelago* as a subjective response to Venice and the Veneto, one that is developed from literary, physical and linguistic explorations in this space. On the level of poetic form this is no less the case: in fact, as I will suggest below, the use of the poetic or lyric “I” is one of the most significant ways in which I signpost this very personal approach in my poetry. It is a way of positioning myself—in different places and at different historical moments—within the landscape I describe.

The poetic or lyric “I” refers to the use of a first person perspective, often characterised by the use of the pronoun “I” in order to suggest a subjective voice or viewpoint mobilised within a poem. Mutlu Konuk Blasing, writing on the ‘Lyric Subject’, argues that while the speaker in a lyric poem is ‘a generic “I”’...the poetic “I” is also heard as an individuated voice, for we can “hear” the distinct voices of different poets working in the same language and at the same
Chapter 4: Shaping the self through poetic form

historical moment, with the same linguistic and cultural necessities and resources’ (2007, p. 27). In this manner, the lyric “I” may imply a general, universal subjectivity and/or a specific, authorial presence in a poem.

As I have argued earlier, Romantic poetry has a strong literary connection to Venice, not least because many of the Romantic poets—Shelley, Wordsworth and Byron, in particular—responded to the city through their own personal engagement with it. Romantic poetry is notable for its use of the lyric “I”, as part of a tendency to promote a subjective voice or viewpoint, itself a characteristic of the modern era and the rise of an intellectual interest in the individual and his or her relationship to culture and nature. In ‘Romantic lyric voice: What shall we call the “I”?’ David Perkins sums up this approach up by arguing that the ‘Romantic convention’ of using the lyric “I” is commonly understood as a form of ‘personal self-expression’ (1993, p. 226).

Perkins (1993, pp. 226-227) and Huhn (2005, pp. 21-24) both use Wordsworth’s poem ‘Daffodils’ as an example of the Romantic interest in self-expression. In this poem Wordsworth writes: ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’, ‘... I saw a crowd’, ‘I gazed—and gazed—but little thought’ and ‘For oft, when on a couch I lie’. Indeed, in letters and other biographical material, Wordsworth ‘identifies himself as the speaker of his poems’, thinking of himself as “‘the poet in his own person’” (Waldorf 2001, p. 15). Huhn describes the ‘speaker’s specific experience of nature as the source of joy and inspiration’ in the poem (2005, p. 24). Following the convention I have cited above, it is therefore possible to ascribe this ‘specific experience’ to the author/poet, Wordsworth. And yet this speaker is also constructed, a poetic voice unbound by constraints of time or space, that ‘floats on high o’er vales and hills’, and is able to see through an ‘inward eye’ as much as a real one. In this sense, it is possible that ‘the speaker is not really the poet but rather a self-representation, partly autobiographical and partly fictional’ (Waldorf 2001, p. 1).

Writing on ‘The Shape of the I: A Poetics of Form’, Julie Carr and John-Michael Rivera suggest that literary scholarship on the use of the “I” generally falls into
two camps: one that sees the self as fragmented; the other as coherent and unified (2011, pp. 1-4). I would argue that my deployment of the poetic “I” has the potential to reveal the self as both unified and fragmentary. That is, like Wordsworth I am keen that the reader identifies the speaker within my poetry as subjective, a representation of my own experience of the terrain about which I write. However, this “I” is positioned in different places and times and, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, is used to describe multiple, potential selfhoods that I plot into this landscape.

Another possibility is also evident: that the poetic or lyric “I” can be deployed both to locate the enunciator/self in a specific time or place, and to represent it as a kind of vessel in which subjectivity might travel about a literary or imagined terrain. I am therefore interested in the idea that the “I” of my poetry is quintessentially mobile, for ‘Just as a poem is not an object but an action, the forms we choose to imagine ourselves inhabiting are no longer objects but temporalities, movements, experiences, even “energies”’ (Carr and Rivera 2011, p. 4). Such a poetic persona is inherently free to “roam about” in time, place and history. In line with this thinking, I have used the “I” to speak myself into the history and landscape of northern Italy both within and beyond the framework of my own lifetime. In so doing my poetic voice is able to inhabit the world of a fourteenth century monk (as in the section of poetry titled ‘The Clerical Sonnets’), or go out riding with George Gordon Byron on the Lido di Venezia (as described in the poem ‘Shelley, riding out with his Lord Byron’), or be an observer of the infamous catastrophe of Vajont in 1959 (as imagined in the poem ‘Vajont’ in which I describe the devastation caused by the collapse of a gigantic dam wall and its commemoration fifty years later).

My writing, therefore, is not confined to autobiography: it also involves imagined lives, mobilised by the use of the poetic “I”, beyond the limitations of the present. Walter Benjamin observed of his writing about Berlin that ‘Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography...for autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life...I am talking of a space, of moments
and discontinuities’ (2006, p. 316). This notion of a space in which moments and discontinuities are experienced is an apt description of the jumps forward in time and place that are possible through the use of a poetic “I” that is not confined to a single era or site. Through it the self becomes unfixed, multiple, and mobile.

**The sonnet re-imagined**

The idea of deploying the “I” and making it mobile relates to the way in which the manuscript puts into play a subjective relationship to the real and imagined terrain of Venice and the Veneto. However, this is not the only aspect of form that I use in order to position myself within this landscape. While the manuscript of poetry that accompanies this exegesis includes poems of different lengths and styles, some lyric and others narrative, the first section of the manuscript *Archipelago*, upon which I will momentarily focus my attention, is a series of sonnets. These sonnets trace the life of a young cleric who finds himself living in the religious communities of the Venetian lagoon in the 1300s. From his first-person perspective, the sonnets provide a means by which to imagine myself as this character and to explore the history of this area that is familiar to me through my experience living and researching in this space.

In this sequence of sonnets, as in other sonnets in the collection as a whole, I have chosen this poetic genre for its association with Italy through the work of the great humanist Francesco Petrarca and because it has been used—not least by Petrarch—as a means to investigate subjectivity. For this reason, I wish to investigate the intersections between my own use of this particular poetic form and the broader agenda I have to connect myself to the environment in which these poems are set.

Fussell defines the sonnet as ‘a fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter: the rhyme scheme and the mode of logical organization implied by it determine the type’ (1979, p. 114). By ‘type’ he means either Italian—Petrarchan—or
Shakespearean, depending on the rhyme scheme and the ways ideas are developed within the sonnet itself. Whereas in the English style the sonnet is usually broken up into three quatrains followed by a rhyming couplet, in the Italian sonnet, the first section or stanza—the eight-line octave—is followed by a six-line sestet (Fuller 1972, pp. 2-14). In the English model a turn, change of focus or reply to an idea developed in the sonnet generally occurs in the final two lines, while in the Italian model the octave sets out a terrain for study or consideration, and the last section or stanza—the six-line sestet—is a space in which some kind of conclusion about this concept is drawn.

The antecedents of the sonnet, and its development into a form familiar in both the Italian and broader European contexts, demonstrates its durability as a poetic form. Amanda Holton (2010) argues that the earliest Sicilian sonnets were derived from fourteen-line compositions to be sung, and indeed the word “sonnet” is derived from the Italian word *sonnetti*, meaning “little songs”. These “little songs” were transformed into purely poetic compositions ‘by a small group of poets working and writing at the court of the Hohenstaufen Emperor Frederick II of Sicily, who reigned from 1208 to 1250 over the southern half of Italy’ (Spiller 1992, p. 13).

Rajan Barrett describes the sonnet as ‘resilient’ due to its mixed origins: ‘Half the form is said to have a native Sicilian origin in the eight-lined *strambotto* of the peasants. The six lines grafted on to it are said to be of the Arabic *zajal*’ (2010, p. 8, italics in the original). In his book, the *Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction*, Michael Spiller notes that this hybrid form spreads out from southern Italy and into Europe:

> The sonnet was invented about the year AD 1230, in southern Italy; and by the end of the thirteenth century about a thousand sonnets had been written, almost all in Italian (that is, in one of the dialects of it), exploring most of the varieties of its form and most of the possibilities of its subject matter. Francis Petrarch (1304–74), writing in the middle of the century following, inherited an already very sophisticated poetic instrument. The sonnet came into the vernacular of Spain in the mid fifteenth century, into
the vernaculars of Britain and France in the early sixteenth, and into
German in the early seventeenth (1992, p. 1).

I am drawn to the sonnet not simply because it has an Italian ancestry, as I do, but also because this lineage is mixed and its “identity” hybrid, as mine is. However, it is the capacity of this particular poetic form to be a vehicle for self-examination and expression that is of particular interest to me, a reputation that clings to the sonnet primarily because of the use of this form by Francesco Petrarca. It is in the hands of Petrarch that the Italian sonnet, and its introspective, solipsistic focus, really takes shape. Margaret King writes that ‘whenever Petrarch wrote, he wrote about himself...he was the subject of all his books’ (2005, p. 537) while Michael Spiller concurs that in Petrarch's sonnets 'the enunciating self is the subject of its own enunciation' (1992, p. 58). For example, the octave of his sonnet seventy-four begins with a typical self-examination: 'I am already tired thinking how/my thinking is not tired of you' (Petrarch, as cited in Spiller 1992, p. 58). Even when his thoughts are addressed to an implied reader—a “you”—the voice of the sonneteer is still introspective.

Petrarch uses the lyric “I” to address his own relationship to his beloved Laura, or to God, or to the world around him, or indeed himself: it is a means by which he comes to terms with his humanity and existence. The sonnet, with its particular stanzaic partitions, seems particularly apt for this purpose. John Fuller, writing on the particular stanzaic characteristics of the Italian sonnet, writes that ‘The turn after the octave, sometimes signalled by a white line in the text, is a shift of thought or feeling which develops the subject of the sonnet by surprise or conviction to its conclusion’ (1972, p. 2). Fussell develops this idea further in his description of the particular features of the Petrarchan sonnet:

The standard way of constructing a Petrarchan sonnet is to project the subject in the first quatrain; to develop it or complicate it in the second; then to execute, at the beginning of the sestet, the turn which will open
Fussell believes that at the turn or *volta* ‘we are presented...with a logical or emotional shift by which the speaker enables himself to take a new or altered or enlarged view of his subject’ (1979, p. 116). For me, as for Petrarch, the primary subject is the self and thus, the *volta* of the sonnet is a point at which the self can be “turned over” and thought of anew. In my sonnet sequence using a young cleric as a first person narrator I have sought to exploit this feature of the sonnet form to demonstrate how the examination of the self and its relationship to its environment can transform even the most painful experiences into an existential richness:

In the middle of the cloister
Is a nectarine tree which,
Faithful to our ministrations,
Has given fruit these three years
Spent here on San Lazzaro.
Each time I eat the stringy, pale
Flesh I realize I have forgotten
Its taste, from one year to the next.

It was like that when I saw you
In that same courtyard, after months
Of duty on the barren marshes.
My happiness was as ripe as a
Mid-summer nectarine;
Its juicy tears ran down my face.

In this poem, the turn is clearly demarcated by the full stop at the end of the octave. Here, the turn announces a shift in focus within the subject that enunciates the poem whose thoughts shift from the nectarine tree and its fruit to the emotion caused by seeing an unknown addressee after time apart; the analogy between the wetness of the nectarine/tears of happiness is then completed in the final line. Fuller notes that in the Italian sonnet the octave is
sometimes referred to as ‘Piedi’ or steps (1972, p. 2, italics and translation my own) and the shifts I have described signal a kind of step-by-step development of idea and action within the poem. Fussell also points out that the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet mirrors the build up and release of physical and emotional ‘pressure’ in the body:

The octave and sestet conduct actions that are analogous to the actions of inhaling and exhaling, or of the contraction and release of the muscular system. The one builds up the pressure, the other releases it; and the turn is the dramatic and climactic center of the poem, the place where the intellectual or emotional method of release first becomes clear and possible...We may even suggest that one of the emotional archetypes of the Petrarchan sonnet structure is the pattern of sexual pressure and release (1979, p. 116).

As I have pointed out in Chapter One on literary imaginings of Venice and the Veneto, my poetry uses sexual imagery to locate the body in time and place. Where the sonnets elsewhere in this collection are concerned, this is no less the case: ‘Sonnet for Paolo’, discussed earlier, uses the turn to bring the poem to its “climax”, drawing the reader’s attention away from the garden, to the bodies of ‘two young men’ who ‘might undress’ to ‘feel the nocturnal heat on their skin’. In the example below, taken from ‘The Clerical Sonnets’, the turn also coincides with a kind of physical release or sensation:

xv
Something strange happened last night,
Perhaps I should confess it? You see
I dreamt we were naked, bathing
Outdoors, at the big public well—
The one in the piazza, near the Arsenale.
You had a wooden bowl to scoop water
Over my head. I know it was you because
I recognized the little birthmark on your hip.
The people went about their business and 
Thought nothing of us two larking about in public. 
When I awoke my lower parts were wet 
And I felt tired, although I’d slept for hours. 
Surely it’s nothing to worry about—you don’t 
Think I might be ill with something, do you?

Although the *volta* occurs quite late in this sonnet, in the third line of the sestet, the “waking up” described in the poem is analogous to the self-conscious “waking up” of the poetic voice to the strange physical sensations encountered in a dream. In this manner, the sonnet can be thought of as a space in which the mind and the body speak to one another, “turning over” and looking into even the most intimate aspects of the self and its experience of the world. Accordingly, the *volta* is used to demonstrate the shifting nature of subjectivity and its capacity for metamorphosis and transformation.

In the discussion of the examples of my own sonnets cited here, I have concentrated on the capacity of the turn to create within my writing a transformative space in which subjectivity is described, examined and thought of anew. However, it is also worth noting that my formal approach to the Petrarchan sonnet is a hybrid, experimental and subjective one. The Petrarchan sonnet, while traditionally characterised by the division and transformation of ideas into the octave and sestet, is also typified by its rhyme scheme, as described by Fussell (1979, p. 115). The octave usually involves a rhyme scheme of A B B A A B B A, while the sestet is slightly more flexible, often alternating between the rhyme scheme of C D E C D E and C D C D C D. The fact that most Italian words end in a vowel means that finding rhymes for the Petrarchan sonnet is relatively straightforward. However, in English it is often not possible to reproduce such a rhyme scheme without significant changes to the syntactic elements and the semantic effect of this poem overall. For example, I have adhered to a traditional Petrarchan rhyme scheme in octave and sestet in the Italian version of ‘Pieve di Limana’, and yet in the English version I have sacrificed this rhyming pattern in order to preserve the
common semantic elements that exist between the two poems. In the sonnet titled ‘Suspension’, written in English, I have instead produced an A B B A C D D C E F F G E G rhyme scheme; another variation on the standard Petrarchan sonnet form.

Such decisions reflect the vicissitudes of translation I have canvassed in the previous chapter, whereby different elements of form and meaning are negotiated across two texts simultaneously. However, these negotiations and experimentations are also representative of my own mixed relationship to language, literature and place: I am a poet born in Australia, writing in English and Italian, describing a personal and provisional identification with Venice and the Veneto. Barrett argues that the sonnet is a malleable poetic form that can be adapted to suit a variety of contexts:

That the self finds the sonnet a form to express itself in and that the sonnet has been popular and is even getting popularity in cultures that are far removed in time and space from the primary roots of the sonnet is a fact that makes me think of the sonnet as a form which caters to the self of many cultures (2010, p. 347).

At the outset of this chapter I described the way New Formalism included the idea that working with a poetic form such as the sonnet was a means by which a poet might create for themselves a kind of poetic genealogy. In line with this, by taking up the sonnet I am able to establish and maintain an historical, literary link to a poetic form that is associated with the physical and cultural setting of my poetry. However, the experimental approach I bring reflects my own hybrid, bicultural identity described throughout this exegesis. The sonnet is indeed a space for the ‘self of many cultures’ in the sense that it allows me to imagine and locate my poetic voice, the representative of my mobile, nomadic subjectivity, in Venice and the Veneto, even when I am absent from it.
Creating poetic islands of the self

If the sonnet is a kind of poetic space in which the self is mobilised, examined and “turned over”, then it is also true to say that the octave and the sestet, divided and conjoined by the volta, are the stanzaic building blocks that make this possible. In Poetic Genre Debra Fried describes the poetic stanza as a ‘workhorse’ that is ‘Divider and connector, trellis and climbing vine at once’ (2012, p. 53). Fried argues that stanzas can accomplish a multitude of tasks: they can provide a formal and/or narrative scaffold for a poem; create links between one idea and the next; section off parts for particular attention and allow for pauses and reflections on behalf of the reader (2012, pp. 53-54). A stanzaic form may be governed by or hint at a rhyme scheme or it can be part of a genre in its own right, such as the haiku (Fried 2012, pp. 55-57).

The poem ‘Dopo Beuys—Fragile’/‘After Beuys—Fragile’, in the final section of the manuscript, is an example of the importance of stanzaic form in my poetry. The poem responds to an artwork by Josef Beuys, presented in the exhibition Fragile? as part of the Biennale di Venezia in 2013. The installation is titled ‘Terramoto in Palazzo’, and it was originally produced in 1981. It is essentially the reproduction of a space in which various objects appear as they might after an earthquake, precariously balanced around fallen sheets of glass that are smashed and splintered. The poems that respond to this scene are comprised of three short, four-line stanzas. When printed side-by-side, the stanzas in the two versions, in English and Italian, appear like oddly shaped fragments of writing: a reference back to the ‘shards of glass’ mentioned in the second line. In effect, the six stanzas are all different shapes, as if to highlight the differences in syllable and line across the two languages: in this sense they are themselves ‘precariously balanced’.

In the introduction to this chapter I noted that the word stanza is derived from the Italian word for room, and indeed the stanza may function as a space in which to “house” different ideas and make them stand out within the poem as a whole. In this manner, the stanza functions as an island within an island: a unit of poetry within the larger framework of an individual poem. However,
the individual poem might also be thought of as a kind of island, one that exists within, separate but connected to, an archipelago of other writing, such as the poet’s manuscript.

I have chosen this extended metaphor because of its particular suitability to the physical terrain in which my poetry is set. As mentioned earlier, in my chapter on poetic flânerie, there is a tendency in my poetry to make specific reference to real environments—the towns and landmarks of Venice and the Veneto—and as such construct a subjective mapping of this terrain. In this sense individual poems act as signposts or cartographic markers for the movement I make around this area and my various connections to it.

Venice is a city that is famous for its segmentation, in so far as it is built on a series of islands that have reasonably distinct geo-cultural characteristics. For example, the glass-making industries are centred on the island of Murano, separate to the commercial hub of Venice, in order to diminish the threat of fire. Although ‘By 1100 the Venetians had constructed almost seventy island parishes, whose overall form continued to evolve as tidal waters deposited silt’, in the modern era the main area of the city of Venice was partitioned into six *sestieri* or parishes: San Polo, San Marco, Dorsoduro, Castello, Cannaregio and Santa Croce (Ferraro 2012, p. 6).

As first stated in the introduction to this thesis, the physical layout of Venice and the Venetian lagoon, and my desire to plot myself into these various environments, helped shape my choice of a poetic topos. In addition, there is a literary genre associated with Venice that also frames and inspires this choice: the Venetian *isolari* or “island books” of the Renaissance era. These *isolari* were a combination of cartography, literature and travel guide, combining text and illustration to both map and embellish knowledge about the islands of the Mediterranean and the seas surrounding them. In ‘Talk, script and print: the making of island books in early modern Venice’, Anastasia Stouraiti describes how a burgeoning print industry, together with a maritime industry and its many different professionals ‘of print, cosmographers, map-makers, scholars, noblemen, monks, ordinary sailors and physicians’ (2013, p. 210), made
Venice an ideal city in which such a book-form might flourish.

Two aspects of the *isolari* are important to the manner in which I have conceived of and constructed a manuscript of poetry set in and around Venice. Stouraiti points out that the Venetian island books are not merely examples of textual hybridity, but also examples of social and cultural hybridity, through the ‘interaction of different communities and forms of knowledge in their process of production’ (2013, p. 211). I am drawn to this idea as a guiding principle for my own creative practice: the manuscript is a drawing together of different facets of my own hybrid, bi-national and bi-cultural identity that are connected to history and to experience within the archipelago of Venice and the Veneto. Secondly, the imaginative cartography of the *isolari* is a prototype of the kind of imaginative self-mapping and the “writing myself into” this space that is a fundamental part of the manuscript. In this manner, the poems are islands in a broad archipelago of writing, in which I mobilise different, possible selves and identities: as a writer, traveller, scholar, cleric, child, son, lover, flâneur-bricoleur—in short, a nomad.

Petrarch referred to his sonnets as “rime sparse” (scattered verses)’ (Spiller 1992, p. 46). With the introspective examination of his subjectivity he represented the self through fragments of poetry, rather than through a single, epic narrative that might figure it as knowable, coherent and complete. Through the use of the sonnet Petrarch produced a series of written spaces in which some of the most intimate aspects of his identity could be approached, tested, scrutinised, perhaps even resolved. In a similar fashion, I have created written spaces—an archipelago of poetry—in which to make my own investigation into various aspects of my hybrid identity.

The manuscript of poetry to which I have referred throughout this exegesis is concerned, both in form and content, with islands: those of the Venetian lagoon, and those that are created when words are arranged in different ways upon the page to make poetry. These poem-islands provide small but interconnected spaces in which various possible iterations of myself can be imagined and mobilised. In effect, it is through poetic form that I am able to
make a series of *volte*—or turns—across time but also across the spaces and places of Venice and the Veneto, shaping myself through the process of shaping the poems that I write.
Conclusion

People who know Venice well will be familiar with the *tronchetto* service of the local public transport known as *vaporetti*. Its trajectory is essentially a vast loop connecting various parts of the lagoon with trains and buses to the mainland—for many of us its hour-long journey is a chance to salute our favourite buildings and landmarks and to prepare ourselves for onward journeys to the Po valley or the Dolomite mountains that loom to the north west of the city. I am very fond of the zig-zag motion of this service as it ploughs its way through the choppy waters of the strait between Dorsoduro and the Giudecca. It takes my mind off the necessity of farewells, and reminds me of the ongoing zig-zag of my own life lived always already between one place and another, one language and another, one people and another.

The loop of the *tronchetto* is also a fitting metaphor for the journey through my poetic practice that is the trajectory of this exegesis. It is essentially a movement from one aspect of my poetic practice in relation to Venice and the Veneto to another; it is itself a kind of wandering, flâneurial nomadism along a winding intellectual and creative pathway.

This intellectual voyage began with a study of the various ways Venice and the Veneto are already imagined in literature, both in the Venetian/Italian and English traditions. What became evident was that, despite certain features of this literature that are analogous to my own approach, ultimately the literature that I produce about it and in it is of a very personal nature: it is a subjective literature that sits somewhere between other, more dominant and popular ways of “writing this space”. Moreover, this in-between-ness is indicative of my own in-between position, as someone who is in constant movement between one country, and culture, and another.

The second chapter was focussed on the way my poetic practice is undertaken *in situ*, part of a physical navigation of the real terrain of the Veneto, including its most famous city, Venice. Conceiving of myself as a contemporary poet-
bricoleur-flâneur I discovered that my physical peregrinations in this geo-cultural space were a crucial part of my poetic practice: that is, they allowed for a piecing together of experiential fragments that allow me to inhabit this space—and write of it and in it—as a familiar-stranger, an insider-outsider. The physical nomadism that this entails is indicative of my provisional relationship to the real places of Venice and the Veneto: in effect I am “most at home” when I am “abroad” with my notebook.

Turning attention to my practice of simultaneous auto-translation demonstrated a different kind of nomadism, the shuttling back and forth between different languages. By sidestepping the tendency in translation studies to fixate upon notions of equivalence and origin, my own study revealed that the self-in-translation is always mobile, unfixed, and multiple. In my case, identity cannot be thought of as monolingual or defined by a mother tongue. Rather, the kind of translation I practice reveals that my sense of self, my subjectivity, is produced through an ongoing process of negotiation between two languages and cultures.

Continuing this subjective focus, the final chapter concentrated on the deployment of a lyric “I” in the context of poetic form and genre. Inspired by the solipsistic and transformative nature of the Petrarchan sonnet, I argued that my own experimentation with aspects of this genre enabled my work to investigate the private and mobile self. Moreover, this study of form and genre has revealed that the stanza, the poem and the manuscript as a whole function as the constitutive parts of an archipelago of writing in which different versions of the lyric “I” are staged, a reflection of the multiple ways in which I nomadically transition across this real and imagined terrain.

In the poem ‘Tribù’/’Tribe’, as I have previously mentioned, I depict my encounter in Italy with a young man who appeared to be my twin. In conversation with this young man, he enquired about my origins, perhaps expecting me to say I was from the nearby town of Bassano del Grappa or Pordenone or Verona. When I replied “Australia”, he paused, taken aback. “Really?” he said. “You speak very good Italian, for an Austrian”. This delightful
(mis)recognition of familiarity and strangeness sums up the crux of this exegesis and its attempt to answer the central question: what is my relationship to Venice and the Veneto and how do I represent it in my writing? In replying to this question I have discovered that my practice of writing and translating poetry is the finest means at my disposal to communicate an identity that is not wholly defined by its cultural or linguistic origins. It is my way of demonstrating that I belong and do not belong; that I move between presence and absence; that in Venice and the Veneto I am multiple, twinned, separate and connected, home and abroad. I am always in transit across this poetic land and seascape, this archipelago of experience, memory, history, literature and desire.
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