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IMAGINED TERRAIN

Literary nomadism in Venice and the Veneto

Many poets and writers have used Venice and, to a lesser extent, the Veneto as a creative topos. There is both the writing that might be said to belong to the Italian/Venetian literary tradition, as well as the non-Italian tradition of writing Venice, a phenomenon that spans English literature, in particular, from William Shakespeare’s time, to the Romantic period and into the present day. This paper explores my relationship to this creative topos and the writers and writing that are associated with it. In particular, it focuses on the notion of literary nomadism: a method for interacting with the literature of Venice and the Veneto that allows me to find intersections between my own work and that which already exists in a broad historical and literary terrain. Moving between and across the literatures of this region, I argue that it is possible to find multiple points of reference that guide and inform my own poetic responses to it, and which reflect my own subjective nomadism and in-between-ness. By taking such an approach I am able to map my hybrid, transnational and transcultural identity into this space, in order to locate myself—and my writing—in the ‘imagined terrain’ I have chosen as a creative topos.

Keywords: Venice - Veneto - poetry - literature - terrain - nomadism

No one, wise Kuhlai, 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: 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, my own poetry 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, already created and represented through writing.

This paper explores the relationship I have to Venice and the Veneto as a creative topos, and the negotiations I make with other writers’ representations of this space. While I am conscious that the literature of this space creates dominant or popular ways of imagining it, I am interested in exploring how my own creative practice in poetry does not attach itself to or spring from a single, particular way of writing about Venice and the Veneto. Instead, I take the approach of a literary nomad who ranges across a number of different poetic responses to this space, finding an ‘in-between’ approach that mirrors my own subjective ‘in-between-ness’ as an Australian-Italian-Venetian writer.

In Nomadic Subjects Rosi Braidotti describes her own journey as a ‘migrant who turned nomad’ (2011: 21). That is, she describes a personal and intellectual experience of living and working between countries, cultures, languages and philosophical traditions. 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 Italy, both physically and creatively. My poetry, set in Venice and the Veneto, can therefore be thought of as a form of literary cartography in which I attempt to map my relationship to this site, both real and imagined.
In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha argues that any place or space is both physical and created through what we say, think and write about it (1990: 1-7). Similarly, Braidotti points out that 'Territories are powerful locations...all communities are imaginary constructions—they are all 'imagined' to a large extent' (2011: 31). I am therefore interested in the nomad's way of imagining the territory they survey. This is because, as someone who moves between one cultural space and another, I am interested in the possibility of locating my poetry somewhere between Italian and non-Italian responses to Venice and the Veneto. In this manner, this literary, linguistic, national and cultural terrain represents for me what Bhabha terms a Third Space; a 'split space of enunciation' (1994: 56) in which I attempt to account for my own split and multiple identifications with one place and another.

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' (2011: 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 part of the world. In my poety, to which I will refer in more detail below, I practice what might be termed a literary nomadism, moving between one tradition or approach and another. For this reason I take an itinerant, mobile approach in which I roam across a wide literary cartography to find intersections between my own work and that of others.

In this paper I will describe the way in which I encounter both Italian and non-Italian writers who populate this space and bring it to life in their writing. I focus in particular on my responses to the life and writing of three poets connected to Venice and the Veneto: Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), Andrea Zanzotto and George Gordon 'Lord' Byron. In their literary relationships to this space I see precedents for my own in-between, hybrid and transcultural identity that is revealed here. As I will argue, by responding to these literary figures I am able to traverse historical examples that stretch across space and time, looking for ways in which the literature of the past might intersect with my own 'imagining' of Venice and the Veneto in the present.

Literary mapping, from a Venetian perspective

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, in order 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, and it inspires me to roam about this space, describing and mapping my relationship to it through poetry.

If the Venetian archipelago can be thought of as a kind of literary map that the creative writer traverses, then it is signposted by the writing of some of the world’s great literary identities: Petrarch, Shakespeare, ...
Byron and Mann among them. Below I shall explore the influence of some of these writers and their work on my own project to map this space through poetry. To begin with, however, I wish to explore for a moment the idea of a ‘native’ or local literature, and what this might mean, in particular, in the Venetian context.

Tony Tanner argues that Venice is a city without a single, iconic, author: ‘London has Dickens; Paris has Balzac; St. 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: 4). However, this is not to say that there does not exist a Venetian literature, albeit a literary tradition that stretches beyond the confines of the city of Venice to include the region of the Veneto that surrounds it. 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.

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, a notion that mirrors my own personal relationship to this terrain. 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: 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. After suffering a public insult from a Venetian youth he left the city abruptly (Norwich 1982: 236) and his final years were spent in the Veneto town now known as Arquà Petrarcha.

I am attracted to the story of Petrarch’s complex relationship to the Venetian Republic and Italy more generally as it reminds me of my own insider/outsider relationship with this part of the world, as one who is/is not Venetian/Italian. In order to explore this relationship with Petrarch and his writing I decided therefore to address him directly in poetry, the result of which is the poem transcribed below:

‘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.

The implied reader of this poem, it could be argued, is Petrarch himself: in this sense it is a direct address that picks up the interrogative tone he so often addresses to himself in the *Canzoniere* (1999). It begins with a description of Petrarch’s first meeting with Laura, his unrequited love. The series of irreverent questions in the octet are then used to set up an image of an unblemished ‘intoxicating youth’ with which to compare Petrarch’s experiences in later life when his dream of an Italian republic came to nothing, as described in the final stanza.

Petrarch was himself a nomad: though born in Arezzo, Tuscany he spent much of his early adulthood in France, and his unrealized aims for a united Italian Republic and his deep interest in Italian history led him to sojourn in various cities throughout the peninsula (Foster 1984). Though he does not write of Venice directly his provisional relationship to the Veneto and his deep interest and attachment to it remind me of my own ‘wandering’ in this space. In particular, this relationship reminds me of my own status as an insider/outsider in the Veneto: though not born there, I nevertheless belong to its land and its culture.

The sonnet ‘To Petrarch’ was the starting point for me to explore, through poetry, my relationship to a number of writers associated with Venice and the Veneto, and to be ‘in conversation’ with them. One of these literary figures, whose footprints remain embedded in the cultural soil of this terrain, is the twentieth century Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto, famous for his experimentation with language and the creation of a hybrid Venetian dialect called *petòl* (Caesar 1997: 574).

Zanzotto’s formulation of a hybrid dialect reflects the variety of diverse linguistic histories that belong to this terrain. This begins with the Latin historiography focused on the creation of the Venetian Republic (Rosada 2003: 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). However, I am particularly interested in Zanzotto’s creation of a hybrid dialect in so far as it relates to my own linguistic hybridity or ‘in-between-ness’, whereby I am constantly shifting between one language, or dialect, and another. Indeed, transposing Italian/dialect into poetry in English (and vice-versa) highlights the connection between my own translocation and a much longer tradition of multilingualism associated with the *letteratura Veneta*.

When addressing Zanzotto in poetry I therefore wished to highlight his forensic interest in language, and his tendency to think of it as a kind of microbiology of words (Caesar 1997). This is because I am interested in the connection between terrain that I traverse and the words that spring from it:

‘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,
or 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.

Writing on the poetry of Zanzotto, Patrick Barron observes that his use of dialect was a means by which the poet created an ‘archipelago di luoghi’ or archipelago of sites (2006: 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, historic, geographic and literary terrain in which to locate my poetry.

Venetian by choice: Foreign writers and the mythology of Venice

Despite the literary output of the Italian writers I have just mentioned, to a great extent the ‘archipelago di luoghi’ of Venice and the Veneto is imagined for us by literary figures 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 many non-Italian writers who have written of, about and in Venice.

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. In the English writing of this period Venice became synonymous with ‘sex, revolution and possible models of government’ (Beatty 2012: 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. 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 became a literary topos; including the work of Robert Browning, Henry James and Thomas Mann. Robert’s Browning’s ‘A Toccata of Galluppi’s’ is an exemplar of this kind of writing, in which the fall of the Republic is linked with romantic and sexual ‘folly’.
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: 550-552)

This notion of Venice as a nexus point between debauchery, excess, personal ruin and death was then further promulgated in the modern era in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912) and its subsequent intertext *Night Letters* (Dessaix 1996) in which sexuality and mortality, so prominently linked in the Romantics’ view of Venice, were restated and embellished (Bennett 2010).

This brief sketch of the way Venice has been imagined in literature from outside the Italian tradition will be familiar to anyone familiar with modern representations of this cultural and physical terrain. I provide it here, however, to illustrate that such writing represents an overlay or dominant set of coordinates for mapping this space with words. The tropes of sexual excess, political decline, physical and personal ruin and death so prevalent in this literature become almost impassable topographical features on any literary journey into this storyscape.

As a writer in Venice this presents a dilemma: does one try and slip by such dominant imaginings as quietly as one gondola passes another through a narrow canal, or does one face up to them, as a bold tourist takes photos of a church façade? As I have mentioned above, my conception of nomadism is both literary and subjective or, more accurately, literary because it is subjective. As such, my dual identifications as insider/outsider, Australian/Italian mean that I seek ways to navigate my way through the Italian and ‘foreign’ literature of this space, as well as around, between and across the dominant images and mythologies that represent it. My approach then is to embrace the idea of Venetian literature—both Italian/non-Italian—as a series of entry and exit points, much like the waterways and calle of Venice itself, that lead me in unusual directions, and which reveal certain landmarks of identity and selfhood as I move about this topos in my writing.

Mapping the self in Venice and the Veneto

Northern Italy is a place in which my sense of belonging and alienation is amplified: I have deep ancestral connections to this space, I speak its language and have lived and worked in this area at various points over two decades. For me, writing bilingually and practising self-translation of my poetry is a means to explore the connection between language, literature and national identity. Yet I am still acutely conscious that I was not born in the Veneto, and that I have a dual identity that includes a land and its culture many thousands of kilometres away.

That so many well-known writers from outside Italy chose Venice/the Veneto as an adopted, creative 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*. In particular, the young Miss Tina represents a 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. The narrator of the novel even goes so far as to observe 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: 29).

This kind of transnationality has particular significance for me in so far as I recognize in the description of these characters my own capacity to move through Venice and the Veneto as both an insider and an outsider, as one who does not belong simultaneously, and who is neither entirely Italian nor Australian. This is an enjoyable and productive kind of transnational camouflage: it is as if Venice is a stage upon which a masquerade of multiple identities can be played out. In line with this kind of thinking, the narrator of The Aspern Papers observes that the city

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. It allows for a mobile ‘troupe’ of possible identities that take up position in different times and places. As a literary nomad this also grants me the capacity to stage interactions with the writers who have come before me in the space, just as I have described in those poems addressed to Petrarch and Zanzotto described above.

It is therefore worth noting the poetic interaction I have made in this regard with the life and writing of George Gordon Byron. Byron famously approached Venice as a stop on his poetic Grand Tour, in ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ (1841). 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: 220). Byron’s representation of the city is in this sense a literary pilgrimage through which he encounters it as a place already 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; while Otway, Shakespeare and others shaped Byron’s view of Venice, Byron’s words have, to a degree, shaped my own.

For this reason, I attempted, through writing, to ‘encounter’ Byron in the context of the 19th century Venice he inhabited. My poem ‘Shelley, out riding with his Lord Byron’ is a response to Shelley’s ‘Julian and Count Maddalo’ (1824), and is an attempt to position myself, for a moment, in their adopted environment:

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. Asweat 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.

In the original poem Shelley recalls his time spent riding with Byron on the beach at the Lido, where Byron stabled horses. I have concentrated on this detail, using it as the basis to take up Shelley’s perspective on Byron’s relationship to Venice. From this standpoint I am able to refer to Byron’s incongruous 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: 24-25).

I am attracted to this sense of duality for two reasons. The first has to do with the notion of ‘staging the self’ that I have mentioned above. By employing a first person poetic voice I am able to take up, for the duration of the poem, Shelley’s perspective on his friend and fellow poet: it is a means to inhabit this point and place in history. At the same time this poem also acknowledges Byron’s own embodiment of multiple identities, for in Venice he could be the religious student and sexually promiscuous lover simultaneously.

The second reason is that Byron’s reputation as a philanderer coincides with one of the dominant ways of imagining Venice that I have mentioned earlier: as a space synonymous with sexual freedom, if not debauchery. On one hand I am somewhat reluctant to engage with the rather clichéd literary tradition that connects Venice with sexual intrigue, personal ruin and death, a trope already well noted by research such as Tanner (1992), Pfister and Schaff (1999) and others. And yet I must also acknowledge that this mythology is a pathway to other poems in which I describe sex, sexuality and eroticism in this space from a more subjective perspective. As in ‘Shelley, out riding’, I have often used the technique of first person poetic narration to explore sex and sexuality, desire and the erotic in more obviously autobiographical representations of sex and sexuality set in Venice and the Veneto.

While I might strive to avoid the more obvious and clichéd mythology that connects sex and death in this context, searching for broad ranging and indeed personal ways of representing this topic, the example above demonstrates that my poetry is, in various ways, engaged with the literary history it encounters. This imagined outing with Shelley and Byron, with its insight into their relationship to Venice, is therefore an entry point into thinking about my own subjective relationship to this terrain. It allows me to travel in both space and time, mapping myself into a literary cartography that stretches back and forth in time. In this manner I have created my own ‘archipelago di luoghi’ (Barron 2006: 194) and a ‘genealogy’ (Braidotti 2011: 27) of images and representations in which I locate myself, through the practice of literary nomadism.

Venice and the Veneto, re-imagined

It is not uncommon in Venice to find twin yellow signs pointing in opposite directions but giving directions to the same place. This is because landmarks such as the Rialto Bridge, or the Piazza San Marco, can be reached in numerous ways. Indeed, it is often best to surrender to the interweaving nature of the calle, and trust that, in the end, one’s orientation in the city will take care of itself. Over time the visitor and citizen alike will find themselves criss-crossing the same streets, bridges and waterways: this is a space that welcomes the patterns of the nomad and the wanderer. This notion reminds me to embrace the idea of intersections and encounters with the literary terrain I traverse when I practice writing in this locale, and to welcome the accumulation of an embodied knowledge that comes from spending time here and reading about its characters, its stories and its histories.
Experience has led me to understand that the creative practitioner who takes Venice and it surroundings as a literary topos also faces the danger of becoming mired in the various dominant themes, motifs and narratives that already characterise this space. Indeed, writing that refers to the popular imagery/imaginary of Venice—its faded glory, its masked Carnival its and funerale 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.

At the same time, the imagined terrain of Venice provides a powerful and unavoidable context for my own relationship to this space. Both the Italian and non-Italian literary traditions that have evolved here provide 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 a hybrid literature, born of the nomadic explorations of the poet working in this space.

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Paul Venzo is a poet and lecturer working in southwest Victoria. Over many years he has published in the areas of media and communications and literary studies. He was recently conferred as a Doctor of Philosophy after the successful completion of a manuscript of poetry about his relationship to Venice and the Veneto titled *Archipelago*, which was accompanied by an exegesis exploring aspects of his poetic practice, including self-translation.