

Each morning now during what must be the world's most glorious commute up the Grand Canal to the Ghetto, I've been pondering the supposed subject of my presentation: "Venice in the Jewish literary imagination." Whose literary imagination, I ask myself? The topic is vast. In the modern French corpus, then, my own field of inquiry? I could have spoken about Proust, for instance. After all, A La Recherche du Temps Perdu is one of the great novels of modern Europe's assimilated Jewry, and the character of Bloch, the denying, self-hating Jewish snob, exposed by the writer in all his conflicted inauthenticity by the ravages that the Dreyfus affair wreaks on French society, is one of Proust's most successful personality studies, not to mention the even better known Jewish character, Swann. But Proust's reveries on Venice – and there were many: he was, after all, an avid reader and translator of Ruskin. Proust's Venice, at first only avidly imagined and desired, interspersed throughout Marcel's monologicistic imaginings, then demystified by the protagonist's actual visit there with his Mother, and lastly, remembered in the epiphany of his artistic vocation that is Le Temps Retrouvé – these reveries are remarkably devoid of any allusion whatsoever, even indirect, to Venice's Jews. The Ghetto – Rilke's, Gautier's, Goethe's – simply doesn't figure on Proust's map of Venice. In the volume La Fugitive, Marcel in Venice discovers Carpaccio's "The Patriarch of Grado exorcising a demoniac," and writes:

"Before leaving the picture, my eyes came back to the shore swarming with the everyday Venetian life of the period. I looked at the barber wiping his razor, at the negro humping his barrel, at the Muslims conversing, at the nobelmen in wide-sleeved brocade and damask robes and hats of cerise velvet."

In this catalogue, the Jews of Venice are conspicuously absent. Are they just not in Carpaccio's painting, or is Marcel not interested in seeing them? Here and now I am no longer compelled by an analysis of what might be yet another example of his hyperbolic synecdoche (the term is G. Genette's), and Proust's Venice seems to me to participate in his entire desiring mechanism, where metaphor, when scratched, proves to be only degraded metonymy, a bit like certain badly plastered Venetian renovations. Proust's Venice, aside from its artistic monuments, functions as yet another locus where his neurotic umbilical attachment to his Mother and his pathological need to possess Albertine get played out again like so many reflections on its canals. Perhaps, too, Venice in Proust is only a watery Paris:

"Thus, any outing, even when it was only to pay calls or to leave visiting cards, was threefold and unique in this Venice where the simplest social coming and going assumed at the same time the form and the charm of a visit to a museum and a trip to the sea."

Whose Jewish literary imagination, then? I could have chosen to explore with you Marek Halter's 1996 novel, Le Messie (The Messiah), which has been my "livre de chevet" these past five weeks. Halter, a French Jew of Polish origin, better known to Anglophone readers as the author of The Book of Abraham, has written a meticulously researched, richly imagined and skillfully constructed historical novel set, in part, in 16th century Venice. It is based on the fascinating and little known historical character of David Reubeni, a Jewish "prince" from a mysterious Jewish kingdom somewhere in the

Arabian desert, who came to Europe as his brother the King's messenger, showing up first in Venice in 1523, with the ambition of convincing the Christian sovereigns of the West to allow him to raise an army of Jews to take back the Holy Land from the Muslim Turks and reestablish a Jewish state in Israel, thereby fulfilling the biblical promise. David Reubeni was a military strategist turned diplomat. But in the eyes of the despairing Jewish populations of Western Europe, expelled, persecuted, ghettoized, he took on the aura of a messiah, despite his constant refusal of that identification.

Using Reubeni's own Hebrew language diary, a copy of which is in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, Halter imagines the ruling "Va'ad Hakatan" of the Ghetto as a conservative force, posing obstacles to Reubeni's plan and, although there is no historical record of this part of the story, eventually delivering him into the hands of the Inquisition, on the grounds that he was reconverting Marranos and New Christians. In their deliberations, Venice's rabbis and "machers" set the terms of the debate:

"We haven't been elected to deliver the Jewish people, but to oversee its daily life here in the Ghetto. To protect it. This David Reubeni represents a danger for the fragile equilibrium that we have acquired at such great cost. It's quite clear. I therefore propose that we denounce him as an impostor before the Council of the Doges." (Translation mine)

In other words, for the rabbis waiting for the Messiah, taking back Jerusalem by force isn't good for the Jews. Reubeni has better luck with Pope Clement VII, João III of Portugal, François the First and even, finally, Emperor Charles Quint, who are all willing to finance his project to liberate Jerusalem for the Jews and give Christian rulers sovereignty over their holy sites.

In the course of the novel, we also meet the artists Moses de Castellazzo, Titian, Michelangelo – who uses Reubeni as the model for his Moses – as well as Machiavelli, Castiglione's brother, several doges and inquisitors, and not one but two love interest. The scenes in the ghetto are lively and convincing, the protagonist a complex and compelling character, and the political and historical fresco richly painted. Why not, then, make this novel the subject of my presentation? It's good literature, it has not yet been translated into English, I could be a conduit for the non francophones among us. A growing malaise, even an irritation, set in as I progressed through its 500 pages. I had to admit to myself that what I was reading was only a very slightly veiled allegory for the Zionist project, and that Reubeni's dialogues about forcing God's plan through military action sounded more and more like propaganda. I felt manipulated as a reader.

And then came the extraordinary morning when we saw the film "Rice and Potatoes" together. Olga's beautiful face, gently lined by an infinite sadness, her bitter-sweet rhetorical question to her young interviewer, "what would you have done?" I cried through much of that film, as many of us did, and then rejoiced in those survivors' voices as most of us must have, and I was my way in sweet silent thought to the Palazzo Grassi to see the Pinault collection exhibit "Where are we going?" when somebody cried out, "Israel has bombed the Beirut airport!" Shaul turned the "Rice and Potatoes" t.v. monitor back on and there were the images, unbearable in their barbaric violence after what we had just witnessed. And it's Iraq and its Kosovo, it's Afghanistan and it's Darfur, it's Vietnam and Babi Yar too, of course, all of it, over and over since the beginning of time, but these young Israeli soldiers in camouflage fatigues are my people. My stomach is in knots. I'm sweating in terror and horror. Golda Meir once said something about Israel's

Arab enemies: “I can forgive you for killing our children, but I can’t forgive you for making our children into killers.” This formula strikes me now as insane. I run from the Jewish Community Center, hoping to find anesthetic in the aesthetic. “Where are we going?” indeed! At the gorgeous Palazzo Grassi, so lovingly restored to house, temporarily, this contemporary collection that dialogues so richly with its 18th century setting, I am struck dumb by an enormous photograph by Jeff Wall entitled, “Dead Soldiers Talking: Afghanistan.” The photo is a powerful, ironic *mise en scene*, a staged simulacrum of blood and gore that forces us to question the truth value of the image, our voyeuristic hunger for horror and violence. This one day has traced an actual genealogy of killing and death that somehow makes Proust and Halter impossible subjects.

What I really want to say is this: as the weeks weave our connections to each other, my own imagination has come alive. More and more, I am inhabited by voices – ours, others, from the joyous cries of “vai, vai, vai, viva!” as we watched those soccer matches, to our cacophonous kvetching on that unforgettable noon-day climb to the Castello of Conegliano where we were rewarded by a storm to rival Giorgione’s and breathed a collective sigh of “ahh, a mechiah,” to Rabbi Richetti’s uncanny musical capacity to modulate between communities, reproducing particular tropes, to our quiet Kaddish in the Jewish cemeteries.

I cherish our voices in the Aula, our particular chorus, commenting, debating, challenging, laughing, interrogating, exchanging, schmoozing. From voices to voice. I thank you all for yours, which have given me the courage to use mine. Voices. Poems. Plays and play. Prayer. Translation. Transmission.

Voices. Voice. I am sitting in the Chiesa San Trovaso. A German chorus is giving one of those magical early evening church concerts one finds especially in Venice. The young soprano’s aria floats down from the balcony like a balm, sculpting silence. Beside me, my dear old friend, a self-exiled Algerian visiting me with his wife, is quietly sobbing. The aria is called “Ama et Spera,” Love and Hope, by the 18th century composer GianFranco de Mayo. “Love and Hope.” Our friendship has always embraced a mutual agonizing over Israel/Palestine. In this church in Venice, an Arab and a Jew can weep to the strains of an Italian composer’s aria sung by a German.

Voices. Voice. Caryl Phillips’s, that amazing ventriloquist, in The Nature of Blood (1997). I hear Othello, achingly imagined in the first person, complicated by a violent address in the second person at the end of his chapter, Phillips slipping out of what he has created, breaking character - auto-critique of the seduction of the alter ego – to judge him, warn him, a cautionary tale to us all as we struggle with appropriate ways to appropriate Venice, to reinvent it for ourselves, make it ours, glide across its surface, sound its secret depths. “Get lost in Venice,” Phillips might be saying, “but beware of the illusion of losing yourself, of losing your own identity, in Venice”:

“And so you shadow her every move, attend to her every whim, like the black Uncle Tom that you are. Fighting the white man’s war for him/Wide receiver in the Venetian army/The republic’s grinning Satchmo hoisting his sword like a trumpet/You tuck your black skin away beneath their epauletted uniform, appropriate their words (Rude am I in speech), their manners, worry your nappy woolen head with anxiety about learning their ways, yet you conveniently forget your own family, and thrust your wife and son to the back of your noble mind. O strong man, O strong arm, O valiant soldier, O weak man. You are lost, a sad black man, first in a long line of so-

called achievers who are too weak to yoke their past with their present; too naïve to insist on both, too foolish to realize that to supplant one with the other can only lead to catastrophe. Go ahead, peer at her alabaster skin. Go ahead, revel in the delights of her wanton bed, but to whom will you turn when she, too, is lost and a real storm breaks about your handkerchiefed head? My friend, the Yoruba have a saying: the river that does not know its own source will dry up. You will do well to remember this” (pp.180-81).

Here, one voice punctures the other, the repressed vernacular deconstructs the aestheticizing pretention. Keeps it honest. It is Shaul’s voice that I’m hearing.

Our voices, diverse, in chorus, like the multiple entry tickets to the churches of Venice: the Baroque, Gothic, Romanesque, Renaissance. Our voices, cacophonous in our probing – *provare* – pushing, with the hunger to understand, to communicate. And all of our languages: Hebrew and Yiddish, Ladino and Italian, Arabic, Farsi, Rovignese, Urdu, French, Spanish, Judeo-Venetian, Neapolitan and, of course, Romanian.

In Hebrew, welcome is “*Baruchim Haba’im*,” literally, blessed are those who come. And we are, indeed, all of us, blessed to be here, blessed by Murray and Shaul’s remarkable vision. In this Ghetto, this foundry, we have recast each other, transformed each other, from motley crew to happy few. Felix Adler, the assimilated German Jew who founded the American Society for Ethical Culture, once said that, “where people meet to seek the highest is holy ground.” It is in this sense that I dare to offer these remarks as a midrash on our work here (“*pace*,” rabbis among us). “Midrash,” from the Hebrew root to explore, to probe – *provare*, again – all of our tongues are true tongues. And it is in this spirit that I feel we have effected a kind of secular consecration of this space, of this place, of community, and that I hope we have, in part, responded to Shaul’s initial challenge.

In my Jewish literary imagination, Venice is a verb: *Veneziare* – to “Venitiate.” *Qui, nel ghetto, per la primera vola, abbiamo veneziano insieme.*

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