

# "EXCUSE ME, WHERE'S THE PAGODA?"

## GLOBALIZING THE GHETTO IN THE CONTEXT OF RECENT WRITING ABOUT VENICE

presentation by Shaul Bassi, 12 vii 2006

1. The last 25 years have produced a tidal wave of writing about Venice. Why?
2. Thomas Corryat and Goethe were precursors of such writing. Goethe said that, in the end, we don't need more writing about Venice, just more about our perceptions of Venice.
3. Can anything new be said about Venice now? Shaul noted that Venice itself has changed significantly in the last 25 years.
4. He mentioned the "touristing of Venice" phenomenon described in Davis and Marvin's recent book.
5. Wordsworth saw Venice as a thing of the past, where people go to die. Cf. Paul Weideger.
6. Venice is a gold mine (of inspiration) and a black hole (of kitsch) for literature, especially British and American writers since the 19th century.
7. The CONSORZIO VENEZIA NUOVA is one effort to "save Venice." In addition to the MOSE project, which is very expensive and controversial, CVN has sponsored much of the recent writing and publishing on Venice in recent years: Joseph Brodsky (*Watermark*), probably the best; Harold Brodkey (*Profane*); Derek Walcott (*Tiepolo's Hound*); Anita Desai (*Baumgartner's Bombay*), Acheng (*Diario Veneziano*), Donna Leone.
8. In 1961, Lorenzetti's guide gave five lines to the Ghetto, which he said was gone. In 2004, the Ghetto was called the "focus of foreign investment" in Venice.
9. Caryl Philips' "A Walk in the Ghetto" (1987) pointed out that the plaques in the campo are in three languages, a sign of the internationalization of the Ghetto. Blatas' works were originally designed for the Holocaust TV series—a sign of the commercialization of the Ghetto? (Music in background: Elvis singing "In the Ghetto")
10. Shaul noted the tendency of writers to project themselves on to Venice, and suggested that there are several additional "Venices" that could be added to the six he had outlined in a previous lecture.
11. Many writers (Phillips, Erica Jong, etc.) are brought to Venice by Shakespeare. The results are not always good.

12. Others were brought to Venice by Grand Tour, "Love Affair with Italy" motives. Venice is a city floating on water (which appears deeper than it is), a kind of pre-Atlantis.
13. Regis Debray's *Against Venice* (1995) is a counterattack on the "Venice religion" as a mark of social distinction.
14. Another Venice is the "Photogenic Venice," of millions of tourist pictures.
15. Then there is the "Sinking Venice" of the alarmists, which often diverts attention from the real changes and problems of contemporary Venice, i.e. social issues, declining population, and so forth.
16. It was suggested that Venice is like Pesach; the rest of the world is the rest of the year. (Miriam Shein)
17. Shaul referred to the metaphor of Deirdre McCloskey's autobiography: "Everybody wants to go to Venice, some go there to live."
18. James and others are both positive and negative about Italy and Venice: the duplicity theme. The traveler sees the facade: what's behind it? What's authentic?
19. Venice also raises nostalgia issues.
20. Various people in our seminar are writing novels, movie scripts, and so forth related to the Ghetto. Why? Venice seems to provide some sense of connection, a world of untold stories, a powerful history.
21. Shaul referred to Eric Katz's piece about Venice, which he dislikes. Why? Katz seems cavalier about numbers and data. In the end, Katz is a cultural anthropologist who doesn't get it and romanticizes what he doesn't understand. The mystique of place seems to swamp the experience of the place. (Cf. Ruth Gruber's *Virtually Jewish*, which tries to come to grips with this for Poland.)
22. Paul Weideger romanticizes, misunderstands, and gets important details mostly wrong. Is this a big deal? (Cf. postmodernism)
23. He contrasted Weideger with Phillips: the later romanticizes and doesn't care about the facts; the former addresses the big issues and does his homework.
24. The most egregious offenders are American Jews. Hmm.
25. What we are faced with is a sort of "translation" problem for Venice as well as authenticity issues.

26. How do we deal with this? Try to escape the "City as a Museum" approach.
27. What happened to the Ghetto? Is the Ghetto a real home for the Jews—"This place is ours". *Zakhor* addresses the memory issues.
28. We also have to deal with misunderstandings, deliberate and otherwise.
29. Venetians also feel, to some extent, "colonized"—dictated to by tourists, experts, and such.
30. Shaul doesn't oppose writings about Venice per se (the what), but is critical about the how and is interested in the why.

#### GROUP COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

1. Jonathan Malino served as commentator. He raised four questions:
  - a. Is a lack of control or certification (licensing, etc) typical here?
  - b. Did Jewish religious life happen elsewhere in Venice than in the Ghetto?
  - c. The 22nd Ezra Pound Conference will be in 2007. What about the Pound-Venice connection?
  - d. What is it like for you, Shaul, to exist in Venice, to create in Venice?
2. Shaul's responses:
  - a. Actually, Venice is highly regulated. Guides, for example, are strictly licensed. That doesn't mean there isn't a lot of ignorance around of the "Excuse me, where's the Pagoda?" type.
  - b. Mestre had a temporary location for worship, but in Venice proper it was always in the Ghetto.
  - c. Answered with a question: "Will the Poundies put the Ghetto on their map?"
  - d. Biographical accidents link him to both Venice and the American Jewish world. He thinks the latter might/will bring life to the Venetian Jewish community, which still lives.
3. Valentino: bad writing is usually bad because it tries to instrumentalize literature for other agendas. In the end, it's an ethical problem.
4. Thaler: raised the issue of "Memorials" which have little to do with what is being memorialized. What do Venetian Jews want to see here? Shaul: there are two groups. One wants to take the money and not the advice; the other wants to be connected to the larger Jewish or European Jewish world. They don't want to be another Ferrara.
5. M. Shein: the whole frame of her writing has shifted as a result of our discussions.
6. Sharfman: suggested teaching Phillips using the essay and the book as vehicles for exploring literary imagination.

7. Kaminsky: does knowing that Phillips is black make a difference? The issue of "standing" was discussed in relationship to authenticity. Shaul: relates this to Shakespeare—the use of race as a category is an American imposition on the text and misleading. However, it is interesting.
8. Baumgarten: we are in a different cultural situation that 25 years ago. There is a broader conception of literature, of American questions about literature. What about Venice as a way station to Palestine? What about ties to Israel today? Are there adopted towns there? (Shaul-no) Attitudes toward Aliya and Zionism? (Shaul-a good deal of support) Anti-Zionist identification of Jew and the Israeli state? (Shaul-a significant factor since 1982, especially in Venice which is left-wing. Some see Israel as a civil religion for Italian Jews. He also mentioned the Jews for Peace group, concepts of mythical Israel, and the 21 April partisan walk, which ended in the Ghetto).
9. Russin: are Reform Jewish contacts with the US helpful or not? (Shaul: important, but Reform is not viable in the Venetian context. Perhaps the models are.)
10. Skenazy: raised the source issue; Shaul is our "native" informant. Do we take him for granted? (Shaul: he recognizes this. However, he had been able to leave Venice, so he has a bit of perspective. He feels able to give voice to the native.) He also raised the authorization issue: are we that different from the (inexpert) tourists? However, inexperience can be useful; ditto misinterpretation.
11. L. Shein: just returned from Israel, where he had to explain what he was doing here. "My existence is a process of finding out what it means to be a Jew in a world of mostly non-Jews." He suggested reading Elon's *The Pity of It All*, on German Jews. He thought we might explore the many issues of Jewish/non-Jewish relations. (Shaul: Jew/non-Jew are not the only fault lines: age, experiences, academic perspectives, etc., also color our dialogue.)
12. Baumgarten: the plan of the institute is to have people be insiders some times and outsiders other times. Isn't this our condition in the modern world?

notes by Paul E. Michelson



Da Man!