

Dickens and Italy:
Little Dorrit and Pictures from Italy

Edited by

Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano

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Edited by Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

THEATRE AND DREAM-VISION:
VENICE, DICKENS, AND THE MODERN CITY

MURRAY BAUMGARTEN

The chapter on Venice in *Pictures from Italy* entitled “An Italian Dream” departs from the descriptive habits of the other episodes, in which Dickens details the journey to and from place or city. Instead we have a dream-vision in which the narrator makes the reader his companion on the journey through a shifting dreamscape. “I had been travelling for some days; resting very little in the night, and never in the day. The rapid and unbroken succession of novelties that had passed before me, came back like half-formed dreams; and a crowd of objects wandered in the greatest confusion through my mind, as I travelled on by a solitary road” (PI 77). The first person narration brings the experience into the foreground of consciousness. Objects and places dissolve as they meld into the rhythm of the journey.

At intervals, some one among them would stop, as it were, in its restless flitting to and fro, and enable me to look at it, quite steadily, and behold it in full distinctness. After a few moments, it would dissolve, like a view in a magic-lantern; and while I saw some part of it quite plainly, and some faintly, and some not at all, would show me another of the many places I had lately seen, lingering behind it, and coming through it. This was no sooner visible than, in its turn, it melted into something else. (PI 77)

Unlike the other episodes in this book, this one does not list places visited, lodgings and food endured, or encounters with notable and historical monuments and tour-guides, amateur as well as professional. That is one of the signals of its significance.

Many of the sections of *Pictures from Italy*, we know, grew out of letters Dickens wrote to friends, especially John Forster, which he then collected upon his return to England, and used as first drafts for his book.

Here too the letter to Forster of 12 November 1844 differs from the other Italian letters. Again, there is no recourse to verisimilar description but rather a sustained comment on the impossibility of describing Venice, which is figured as a dream-vision, magic lantern, and mysterious presence. “Nothing in the World that ever you have heard of Venice, is equal to the magnificent and stupendous reality. The wildest visions of the Arabian Nights are nothing to the piazza of Saint Mark, and the first impression of the inside of the church. The gorgeous and wonderful reality of Venice is beyond the fancy of the wildest dreamer” (*Letters IV 216*). Dickens contrasts hallucinogenic visions, whether induced by drugs or truth-telling or fictional narratives, to his present experience. “Opium couldn’t build such a place, and enchantment couldn’t shadow it forth in a vision. All that I have heard of it, read of in truth or fiction, fancied of it, is left thousands of miles behind” (*Letters IV 216*). Seeing Venice yields a personal impact. “You know that I am liable to disappointment in such things from over-expectation, but Venice is above, beyond, out of all reach of coming near, the imagination of a man. It has never been rated high enough. It is a thing you would shed tears to see” (*Letters IV 216*). The sequence – “above, beyond, out of all reach” – reaches for a metaphoric superlative for Venice. It leads Dickens in this letter to sketch the impact of arrival not just once but twice.

When I came *on board* here last night (after a five miles’ row in a gondola; which somehow or other, I wasn’t at all prepared for); when, from seeing the city lying, one light, upon the distant water, like a ship, I came plashing through the silent and deserted streets; I felt as if the houses were reality – the water, fever-madness.” (*Letters IV 216*)

And here is the second arrival, which reinforces the superlative mood with a gesture toward religious imagery: “But when, in the bright, cold, bracing day, I stood upon the piazza this morning, by Heaven the glory of the place was insupportable” (*Letters IV 216*). Dickens does not elaborate the religious note. Instead, the visual impact – Dickens staring at the scene – moves him to engage Venetian history, imagined as subaqueous and subterranean, and register it as a personal experience.

And diving down from that into its wickedness and gloom – its awful prisons, deep below the water; its judgment chambers, secret doors, deadly nooks, where the torches you carry with you blink as if they couldn’t bear the air in which the frightful scenes were acted; and coming out again into the radiant, unsubstantial Magic of the town; and diving in again, into vast churches, and old tombs... (*Letters IV 216*)

The breathless incomplete sentence is a sequence of events and feelings that becomes a crescendo. It culminates in an acknowledgment of change, a conversion almost. Venice has generated “a new sensation, a new memory.” Dickens states the change: “a new mind came upon me. Venice is a bit of my brain from this time” (*Letters* IV 217). To read these Venetian letters in tandem with the Venice chapter in *Pictures from Italy* invites us to interrogate the dream-work Venice performs in Dickens’s writing, for it has become a new pathway for his imagination.

The Romantic trope of Venice as a dream vision defines Dickens’s preliminary evocation of *La Serenissima*. Both *Pictures from Italy* and the letters he wrote during his visit, which formed the materials for his book, are shaped by this conventional expectation. But rather than Dickens manipulating this trope of the dream of Venice, both letters and completed chapter reveal that Venice assaults and invades Dickens’s imagination. As Tore Rem notes, “Venice made an impression on Dickens beyond anything else he had experienced. The man who controlled everything in such confident imaginative ways with his pen had to admit” his amazement, which is registered throughout his letter to Forster (Rem 148). Rem calls our attention to how Venice elicits superlatives from Dickens and then adds to the citation from Dickens’s letter. He notes how Venice enters into Dickens’s imagination: “But the reality itself, beyond all pen or pencil. I never saw the thing before that I should be afraid to describe. But to tell what Venice is, I feel to be an impossibility” (*Letters* IV 217).

Dramatising his traveller’s role as explorer and recorder of new worlds, Dickens yet acknowledges his inadequacy to Forster.

And here I sit alone, writing it: with nothing to urge me on, or goad me to that estimate, which, speaking of it to anyone I loved, and being spoken to in return, would lead me to form. In the sober solitude of a famous inn; with the great bell of Saint Mark ringing twelve at my elbow; with three arched windows in my room (two stories high) looking down upon the Grand Canal and away, beyond, to where the sun went down to-night in a blaze; and thinking over again those silent speaking faces of Titian and Tintoretto; I swear (uncooled by any humbug I have seen) that Venice is *the* wonder and the new sensation of the world! If you could be set down in it, never having heard of it, it would still be so. (*Letters* IV 217–18)

He brings Forster into the situation he is constructing: “With your foot upon its stones, its pictures before you, and its history in your mind, it is something past all writing of or speaking of – almost past all thinking of. You couldn’t talk to me in this room, nor I to you, without shaking hands and saying ‘Good God my dear fellow, have we lived to see this!’” (*Letters*

IV 217–18). Before Venice, words spoken and written fail Dickens. Even his thinking is overwhelmed by his experience of Venice. Addressing Forster in his letter, Dickens expresses his awe at the magnificence of Venice, which is “past all writing or speaking of – almost past all thinking of” (*Letters* IV 218).

Venice, Dickens insists, is not only beyond his powers of description but an “impossibility.” Were Dickens a religious thinker he might have accounted for his response at the impossibility of describing Venice by invoking transcendence, and he does edge in that direction when he says that “by Heaven, the glory of the place was insupportable” (*Letters* IV 216). However, neither in the letters nor in the Venice chapter in *Pictures from Italy* does he invoke a mightier, more-than-human power. How then to make sense of the palpable awe he feels? What then I am led to ask does this “impossibility” mean for Dickens and his writing, both of them insistently grounded in this world. Note that *Pictures from Italy*, especially the Venice chapter, is a turning point in Dickens’s exploration of modern urban experience. Considering his response in context of his other writing I am led to suggest that in Dickens’s work Venice becomes a trope for the vision of the indescribable and awesome modern city, which figures so prominently in his later fiction.

Synecdoche and Trope: Venice and the Modern City

Instead of verisimilar description, Dickens will turn to other rhetorical strategies including that of negation – think of the opening sequence of *Our Mutual Friend* – to evoke the mysteries of the modern city. As he called on Forster to imagine Venice with him, so too Dickens will engage the reader in the effort to imagine the modern city as a dream-experience. This city is a dream-vision, a palimpsest of the imagination, where actions, events, and experiences are at once sequential and simultaneously present, evident even as they are invisible.

To call the city invisible is to conjure up Italo Calvino’s novel, *Invisible Cities*, and serves also to situate Dickens’s representational evasion of Venice in a literary history whose parameters are defined at one pole by the realist, anthropological tradition exemplified by William Dean Howells’s *Venetian Life*, for example, and at the other by Calvino’s synecdoche. Like Marco Polo, who in Calvino’s novel admits that every city he has been describing is actually Venice, though he has not named her, so too Dickens. In fact Dickens delays naming Venice in his account. He ends this sustained dream-vision with its name: “I have many and

many a time, thought since, of this strange Dream upon the water: half-wondering if it lie there yet, and if its name be VENICE" (PI 85).

Dickens encounters the same urban mystery in his Venice letters, his Italian travel book, and his fiction. Together the three accounts indicate something of the range of his linguistic and literary register, as they range from second person address, first person self-dramatisation, and third person narration. They are ways of defining the pathway of this new imaginative possibility. How ironic that Dickens finds but a brief citation in Tony Tanner's wide-ranging study *Venice Desired*, and then only to indicate that it is only London which Dickens has made his own urban realm.

Venice as synecdoche, trope, and dream-vision has become "a bit of my brain" – that is, a pathway for Dickens's and the reader's imagination. *La Serenissima* has come to infringe upon and color his central fictional subject. When Dickens designates the London streets as a "Venetian mystery" in *Our Mutual Friend* (OMF III ch.x) he transubstantiates the materiality of London into the realities of myth. Dickens has added a psychic dimension to the physical and geographical reality of the modern city.

The over-determined figure of Venice, it is evident from a close reading of this chapter of *Pictures from Italy*, shapes central aspects of Dickens's urban writing. As dream-work, Venice asks us to attend to the over-determination and condensation implicit in a poetic and mythic representation, as we scrutinise the dramatic structure of his chapter in *Picture from Italy*. A similar experience and narrative strategy as we have seen is anticipated in his letter to Forster of 1844.

For Venice dissolves before his eyes, Dickens tells Forster and the reader of this chapter in *Pictures from Italy*, like "a view in a magic-lantern" (Thomas 39). The comparison to the magic-lantern view indicates the proto-cinematic power of Venice, which generates images and moving pictures in and for the imagination. The evocation of the magic-lantern reminds us how much Dickens was fascinated by it, and how often he evokes its technological wonders and those of the diorama and panorama.

As Dickens approaches Venice, he dramatises the traveller's dream-experience. He compares his experience to the magic-lantern-show. The dissolving views of this technology become an implicit analogy in his urban representations. A year later he wrote from Lausanne, while composing *Dombey and Son*, that he could not function for long in quiet seclusion, but needed the constant procession of scenes in front of him: "the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern, is IMMENSE" (*Letters* IV 612–13). His description of the visual power of

London's streets now depends on the reference to the magic lantern. It is worth noting for analytic purposes that the magic lantern image divides panoramic scenes into foreground, middle-ground, and background, and thereby projects a three-dimensional image. Like the stereoscope, the magic lantern projection brought the illusion of three-dimensionality – of verisimilar experience – into the Victorian parlour and made it a feature of the representational imagination. This magic lantern image becomes a talisman of his writing. By its means Dickens takes the Wordsworthian mingling of perception and imagination, commented on by Kate Flint in her introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Pictures from Italy* (PI xiii) into a new register.

Venice and the Psychic Geography of Dickens's City

In his letter to Forster Dickens insists that Venice is a previously unknown sensation for him, which has generated a new understanding that is now a permanent feature of his consciousness. Venice has overwhelmed his descriptive powers and transformed them. Throughout his letter to Forster Dickens refers to the difficulty of *picturing* Venice with "Crayon, Pen and Pencil" (*Letters* IV 217). In the novels that come after 1846, when *Pictures from Italy* was published, Dickens puts these images into motion, into an extended conversation. The external images he encounters during his visit – the images generated by his being there in the actual Venice – now have become psychic phenomena. This new pathway of Dickens's imagination will carry him into the powerful explorations of the psychic geography of the novels that come after. In them the city functions as a psychological geography.

Some of Dickens's most famous London scenes reverberate with a Venetian subtext. I cannot in this brief essay elaborate the evidence; an example will have to suffice. Consider the labyrinthine chase on which Eugene Wrayburn leads Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*.

"Then soberly and plainly, Mortimer, I goad the schoolmaster to madness... I do it thus: I stroll out after dark, stroll a little way, look in at a window, and furtively look out for the schoolmaster. Sooner or later, I perceive the schoolmaster on the watch; sometimes accompanied by his hopeful pupil; oftener, pupil-less." (OMF III ch.x)

Sexual rivalry and class contempt are bundled into this urban cat and mouse game.

"Having made sure of his watching me, I tempt him on, all over London. One night I go east, another night north, in a few nights I go all round the compass. Sometimes I walk; sometimes I proceed in cabs, draining the pocket of the schoolmaster who then follows in cabs. I study and get up abstruse No Thoroughfares in the course of the day." (*OMF* III ch. x)

In this narrative account Eugene articulates his identity as Byronic hero for Mortimer, as he defines Bradley's. Plot becomes trope as Venice enters the picture:

"With Venetian mystery I seek those No Thoroughfares at night, glide into them by means of dark courts, tempt the schoolmaster to follow, turn suddenly, and catch him before he can retreat. Then we face one another, and I pass him as unaware of his existence, and he undergoes grinding torments." (*OMF* III ch.x)

The dramatisation of character and motivation we see in this passage of *Our Mutual Friend* is vintage Dickens. It puts the images into conversation – and the sign No Thoroughfares functions as a calligraphic figure – a figural notation of aporia that brings outside impression and internal motive together into a fused experience – even we might say, an objective correlative. Venice now inhabits London as a pathway of the Dickensian imagination.

Venice as Visionary Journey and Pilgrimage

This process – the narrative magic of the novel – is already at work in *Pictures from Italy* in the already quoted initial dramatisation of the narrator's experience with which it begins. Central to "An Italian Dream" – the Venice chapter – is the traveller's report of his experience.

In short, I had that incoherent but delightful jumble in my brain, which travellers are apt to have, and are indolently willing to encourage. Every shake of the coach in which I sat, half-dozing in the dark, appeared to jerk some new recollection out of its place, and to jerk some other new recollection into it; and in this state I fell asleep. (*PI* 77)

This dynamic traveller's experience is (self-)dramatised in the letters as well as *Pictures from Italy*, as it is in *Our Mutual Friend*. Compare it to related letters of the same year – this one, for example, to Douglas Jerrold of 16 November 1844. "Come! Letter from a Gentleman in Italy, to Bradbury and Evans in London. Letter from a gentleman in a country gone to sleep, to a gentleman in a country that would go to sleep too, and never

wake again, if some people had their way" (*Letters* IV 219). The fun Dickens is having with this extended metaphor extends to his self-dramatisation. This persona defines himself by contrast, as does Eugene versus Bradley. The gentleman and the country have fallen asleep and now have their being in a dream sequence here that articulates the scene of urban self-presentation. And here is another self-dramatisation from the letters, of 20 November 1844 to Lady Blessington: "Pray say to Count d'Orsay, everything that is cordial and loving from me. His purse has been of immense service. It has been constantly opened. All Italy seems to yearn to put its hand in it. When I come back to England I shall have it hung up, on a nail, as a trophy" (*Letters* IV 227). We have entered a theatrical experience. Dickens, speaking in this letter to his friend, is an actor, working to dramatic effect.

And I think of gashing the brim like the blade of an old sword, and saying to my son and heir, as they do upon the stage – "You see this notch boy? Five hundred francs were laid low on that day, for post horses. Where this gap is, a waiter charged me treble the correct amount – and got it." (*Letters* IV 227)

Dickens pursues the declamation to a dramatic conclusion.

"This end, worn into teeth like a file, is sacred to the Customs Houses, boy – the passports – and the shabby soldiers at town-gates who put an open hand and a coat-cuff into the coach-windows of all Forestieri. Take it, boy. Thy father has nothing else to give." (*Letters* IV 227)

The travel narrative of the Venice chapter in *Pictures from Italy* evokes the traveller's dream-vision, right from the beginning, in the first two pages of his movement through a dream landscape. Suspended with him in the dream, the reader encounters a yet recognisable landscape, which Dickens evokes in an increasingly regularised iambic meter.

I was awakened after some time (as I thought) by the stopping of the coach. It was now quite night, and we were at the water-side. There lay here, a black boat, with a little house or cabin in it of the same mournful colour. When I had taken my seat in this, the boat was paddled, by two men, towards a great light, lying in the distance on the sea. (*PI* 78)

A description of an actual experience dissolves into an experience of dreaming as the magic lantern's proto-cinematic effect is invoked.

Ever and again, there was a dismal sigh of wind. It ruffled the water, and rocked the boat, and sent the dark clouds flying before the stars. I could not but think how strange it was, to be floating away at that hour: leaving the land behind, and going on, towards this light upon the sea. (PI 78)

The rhythm of tides and water-journeying articulate the process of seeing in this dream.

It soon began to burn brighter; and from being one light became a cluster of tapers, twinkling and shining out of the water, as the boat approached towards them by a dreamy kind of track, marked out upon the sea by posts and piles. (PI 78)

This Venice dream vision is one of the longest dream scenes in all of Dickens, lasting for more than two pages. It plays changes on tenses, moving from gerund and future to past and past/present.

Going down upon the margin of the green sea, rolling on before the door, and filling all the streets, I came upon a place of such surpassing beauty, and such grandeur, that all the rest was poor and faded, in comparison with its absorbing loveliness. (PI 79)

How different from and yet similar to the letters: Venice here is de-realised and yet simultaneously reconstructed in the intersubjective space between narrator/traveller's sensation and outward realities. It is almost stream of consciousness. Compare it to the citation quoted earlier from the letter to Forster.

As he concludes "An Italian Dream" Dickens again avoids the descriptive tactics of the conventional nineteenth century traveller's account. Instead, he makes the past come alive in ways that lead the reader to encounter Shakespeare's Venice. The intersubjective space between narrator and traveller's internal sensation and outward reality has now become the reader's experience. The narrator here functions as a moving camera-eye. Thereby Dickens plunges us into a present-tense gerundive list that will lead to the literary heart of his Venice.

Floating down narrow lanes, where carpenters, at work with plane and chisel in their shops, tossed the light shaving straight upon the water, where it lay like weed, or ebbd away before me in a tangled heap. Past open doors, decayed and rotten from long steeping in the wet, through which some scanty patch of vine shone green and bright, making unusual shadows on the pavement with its trembling leaves. Past quays and terraces, where women, gracefully veiled, were passing and repassing, and

where idlers were reclining in the sunshine, on flag-stones and on flights of steps. Past bridges, where there were idlers too; loitering and looking over. Below some stone balconies, erected at a giddy height, before the loftiest windows of the loftiest houses. Past plots of garden, theatres, shrines, prodigious piles of architecture – Gothic – Saracenic – fanciful with all the fancies of all times and countries. Past buildings that were high, and low, and black, and wide, and straight, and crooked; mean and grand, crazy and strong. (PI 83-84)

Sequence has become simultaneous, as an ephemeral moment turns into eternal repetition in this account.

Venice, Modern City of Attraction of Repulsion

Paradoxical turnings, opposing possibilities, dialectical encounters – these are the building blocks of his urban scene of what Forster called the "attraction of repulsion" that so fascinated the young Dickens (Forster I 14). It is a theme echoed throughout *Pictures from Italy*, as Dickens describes city after Italian city with a glorious past now decaying under Hapsburg rule yet perhaps stirring to new life. What in this travel account is often comedic, in the novels swings from the laughter of the comic to the reader's repulsion at the grim experience of contemporary urban life. The Venice chapter, however, just touches on this paradoxical and oxymoronic emotion. The presentness of the past in Venice functions to remind the narrator and through him the reader about the ways in which dream can also become nightmare.

Invoking Shakespeare, the dream vision recalls the conflicting emotions that yield to catharsis in his tragedies and that served as models for Dickens's own ambitious literary program.

Twining among a tangled lot of boats and barges, and shooting out at last into a Grand Canal! There, in the errant fancy of my dream, I saw old Shylock passing to and fro upon a bridge, all built upon with shops and humming with the tongues of men; a form I seemed to know for Desdemona's, leaned down through a latticed blind to pluck a flower. And, in the dream, I thought that Shakespeare's spirit was abroad upon the water somewhere: stealing through the city. (PI 84)

Evoking Desdemona and Shylock via their Venetian context, Dickens has a new way of imagining them. Here perhaps is the seed that will grow into Lizzie Hexam and Riah of *Our Mutual Friend* – and redo the earlier novels' images of passive women and predatory Jews. The view offered by balconies and lofty windows, the reflection provided by canals, the

movement of boats and barges on the water-streets of Venice, all these provide the armature for the role-playing and masquerade of modern identity.

Venice moves at its own time signature, swinging its admirers through time into the theatre of history. Dan Pagis, Israeli poet of exile and holocaust, teases out implications in what Dickens glimpsed in Venice.

As the stage sets on an olden play
 The palaces will slowly sway
 – pale greens, blues and scarlet –
 In the black waters, bowing
 To their own bubbles...
 Frozen in the past, these icons come to life in the viewer's gaze.
 At the top of
 A pillar a golden lion will doze, he is
 The axis around whom, with many props
 Like a stage the entire city moves
 With paper masks.
 The city lives in the mind's eye.
 And the foreign audience,
 In the thrall of the scene
 Of a magnificent city glowing once again,
 Hurrahs! And from all the balconies
 The actors will acknowledge, with hands on heart,
 And with graceful bow, flourish their caps.
 (Pagis "Venice")

The viewer brings it to life out of the pleasure of theatrical enchantment. Like Dan Pagis, Dickens has taken us by means of his dream-vision from the nineteenth century stereotype of Romantic Venice back into the Renaissance world of Venetian mystery, into the dark Venice of Desdemona, Othello, and Shylock. There we encounter the Other of Western civilisation, the Moor, the Jew.

Like Pagis, Dickens then takes us out of vital Venice to the depressed city dominated by foreign occupiers, especially the Austrians, who dominate the San Marco evenings. That dozing world figures throughout Dickens description of northern Italy. For contemporary readers *Pictures from Italy* perhaps hints at the discontents and nationalist stirrings that will generate a revolutionary uprising in 1848 and Mazzini's and Garibaldi's successful programme of Italian unification and Risorgimento two decades later. Unlike Pagis, Dickens the Victorian has not accepted exile unconditionally as a determining condition of modern life. The greatest practitioner of the English novel with its overarching theme of

transcendent homelessness as Georg Lukács has noted, Dickens yet imagines the possibility of home. Represented as the past of coaching England perhaps, as the idealism of Samuel Pickwick and Sam Weller, Dickens's writing suggests it might also be a possible future for English culture.

Nevertheless, for Dickens as for Pagis, Venice in the magic of her contradictions is the central topos of western literature and a synecdoche for the modern city. On its stage opposites encounter each other and generate the energy that leads to the modern world. It is the city famed as a democracy and also a police state known for the rigor of its surveillance, the city of romantic love *and* love for sale, an urban net that traps honesty and integrity in duplicity. Dickens like Pagis takes us into that difficult past, that murderous history, as he also suggests the more optimistic values of his era and its hope for progress via improvement. And throughout he reminds us that the modern city is the site of self-presentation, self-dramatisation.

Venice for Dickens as for Pagis is the self as exile, accepting of its situation in which identity is only a role played out for a time upon the boards of the theatre of self-presentation. Othello, Desdemona, and Shylock turn into psychological roles we get to play. They are pathways of our personal imagination like Bradley Headstone and Eugene Mortimer, because they are cultural and mythic figures prowling through the modern city of London and its Venetian mystery. So too the pilgrims Dickens, and his correspondent Forster, exuberant reporter and careful listener, invaded by the magnificence of Venice. They recognise how in this city founded by refugees and exiles, a home could be made out of art and artifice surpassing all others. Thus at the heart of this theatre of exile and homelessness, Venice generates what Will Wells calls "a hunger for home" that is threaded through Dickens's work. His poem evokes a city that underlines Dickens's insights into the contradictions of our modern condition.

As Vivaldi's children ply their bows, cases
 open for coins, the bronze Goldoni leans
 on his cane above the commedia
 of Rialto crowds, a city that passes
 and passes. Masks smirk from every third
 window, forged passports of the heart.
 If Venice changes us, it's as a thirst
 that can't be quenched, a thread that tangles
 etymologies, where the sea insists
 on the fundamental and the sottoportego
 tunnels to new light. In one yellow campo

shaped like a badge, walling in and walling
 out are balanced on wooden pilings
 a thousand years old, allegedly
 immune to decay. Green shutters are closed
 to eyes and afternoon, and muffle what
 the cantor invokes on the highest floor
 where prayers rise like heat or are scrawled
 and dropped, frail boats on the boundary canal.
 Across the stone pavement, soccer balls spin
 between boys careful to avoid the shrine
 where Auschwitz is whispered
 under a marble tally of deportees.
 And still the hidden Jew defies all counts.
 The rabbi burnt his list of congregants
 and swallowed poison, allowing time
 for most to escape to new identities.
 Survivors in the Hebrew Care Home toss
 and turn against Adriatic swelter
 as the fan intones "Baruch, Baruch."
 This Ghetto of confinement has become
 a place of haven, here, where language blends
 into babble, and babble, for an instant,
 rings clear. Along a narrow chute called
 Calle del Forno, impade cakes reward
 a taste for exile, a hunger for home.
 (Wells "A Walk to the Ghetto: Venice, 2006")

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