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# Taking the Traghetto to the Ghetto; or, Performing Jewish Culture in Venice

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“The weight is always drawn by an equal  
hunger for what lies below it, and the will to  
fall remains with it always. If at some point its  
will were satisfied and it could *possess* in one  
point the infinite descent of the infinite future,  
at that point it would no longer be what it  
is — a weight.”

Carlo Michelstaedter, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*<sup>1</sup>

I am tempted to engage in the pun that is announced in my title, but it would give the wrong impression. One is clever and in full control when punning. That isn't how I feel here. Oh, I think I could pull it off all right. It would go something like this.

In an especially enlightening passage of his book *The Other Venice*, Predrag Matvejevic describes the differing terms used to refer to the evening light on the two sides of the Adriatic Sea. “In the east,” he writes, “the twilight is called the *suton*, from the Slavic phrase *sunce tone*, ‘the sun is sinking.’ In the west it is the *tramonto*, from *tra i monti*, ‘across the mountains.’ The words on either side,” he concludes, “attune themselves to the sun.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carlo Michelstaedter, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, translated with an intro and commentary by Russell Scott Valentino, Cinzia Sartini Blum, and David J. Depew. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Druga Venecija*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Zagreb: V.B.Z., 2004), p. 24.

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Imagine my surprise when, on arriving in Venice, I found that the whole city seemed to be attuned to the ghetto I had come to study. For everywhere I looked along the Grand Canal, which seemed to function as a great dividing line between the areas in proximity to the ghetto and the rest of the town, I found signs indicating the way across and even special boats to take one there. In short, just as on the western side of the Adriatic the sunset was across the mountains — *tramonto* — so everything within Venice itself seemed to be across from the ghetto — *traghetto*.

As I said, that's the pun I am tempted to engage in, but I'm concerned about the impression it would give. It's something of a trick really, a little like the minor deception that philosopher Eric Katz prides himself on employing in order to get himself into the temple.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that there is a kind of truth in it, the pun that is. So while, on one hand, I'm not ready to lift the weight of identity suggested in my epigraph, the weight that cannot be anything but itself and, in Michelstaedter's striking image, is always defined by its own want of fulfillment, the pun, on the other hand, is far too light for my purposes. It provides no ballast at all. Let me try a middle way instead, to perform the weight without becoming it, to engage not in identification but in a kind of creative understanding.<sup>4</sup> For that, I need my boat.

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<sup>3</sup> "The authenticity of place in culture and nature: thoughts on the Holocaust in the Spanish synagogue of Venice," *Philosophy & Geography*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2002, pp. 195-204.

<sup>4</sup> Performance here is not a stand in for being, in the contemporary psychological or sociological sense, as assumed by many if not most social scientists who address

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Let's say for the moment that the etymology of *traghetto* as being across from the ghetto is a load of pasta and beans. It would not automatically follow that the thought is too, would it? A false etymology, like a false hope, can get one across just as well, can't it? It only has to float temporarily after all.

I came to Venice only to study the ghetto. I would not have come otherwise. Other visitors to Venice, and I too at other times, might have different points of focus, but my orientation in coming on this occasion was the ghetto alone. Everywhere I went, I was in a sense always across from it. Even in other places during my stay, visiting the cities of Conegliano, Padova, Ferrara, or Trieste, I thought about the ghetto of Venice, oriented myself and the things I was encountering, made sense of places, facts, dates, books, and people all by relation to it. One encounters all sorts of random things while traveling, far too many to remember. The ghetto provided me with a principle of forgetting, a path or *halakbah*, as Yerushalmi suggests.<sup>5</sup> Whatever did not relate to it fell by the wayside. Across from the ghetto.

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questions of identity today, who claim that we perform a self, or multiple selves, and that this is both perfectly healthy and the only real sense in which identity functions. See, for instance, Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (NY, 1995), pp. 258-269.

<sup>5</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies)*, foreword by Harold Bloom. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1982, p. 115.

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As a non-Jew, it’s unlikely I could ever be *of* the ghetto. Across from the ghetto.

By some coincidence, my apartment turned out to be in San Polo near the Rialto market, across from the ghetto, so most mornings on my way, I would take the *traghetto*, the “poor man’s gondola,” as some like to call it, which lands at Campo Santa Sophia, and, standing with the locals or sitting with the tourists, I could not help but see them too against the backdrop of the ghetto and the ghetto’s inhabitants through time. There they were after all, moving, perhaps unwittingly, “to the right, to the right,” as one of Rilke’s narrators puts it,<sup>6</sup> toward that real and imaginary demarcation that has had such resonance in modern European and American life, especially since the early part of the twentieth century.

I prefer to veer off from the Rio Terra San Leonardo in order to enter the ghetto not from the Fondamenta but from the Rio Terra Farsetti, following the signs to the synagogues, through Calesele, the tiny Campiello Zen (a name I particularly love), into the Ghetto novissimo (which has the air of something plush and shiny—I guess it was once not the oxymoron it seems today), and across the wooden bridge of the Ghetto Novo, passing through the Sottoportego onto the unusually open space of the New Ghetto’s campo, where I imagine, alternately, little boys playing soccer, and Sara Coppio Sullam getting water from the well. I really only know that one of those things actually ever happened.

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<sup>6</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, “A Scene from the Venice Ghetto,” in *Stories of God*, trans.

Michael H. Kohn (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2003), p. 54.

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I am tempted to intervene — like some kind of local informant, a performance upon a performance — in conversations overhead on the campo. Some visitors are less interested in the so-called new ghetto because they want to see the “oldest” part. A perfectly reasonable position to take. “Why do they call this one the new ghetto?” I’ve heard people ask. “The Jews came here first and then went to the old ghetto? That doesn’t make any sense! Maybe the signs are wrong.” It’s a misconception bred partly in etymological confusion, of course, but it also tells us much about our tendency to see present meanings in past words, in fact, to project all meanings backward from present circumstances in a kind of retroactive ordering that eliminates from the past what is senseless for the present, and smoothes away any sense of contingency or coincidence that people in the past might have felt.<sup>7</sup>

Coincidence, in fact, seems to have been what threw the Jews and the ghetto together in the beginning. The Venetians needed a space for them; the so-called New Ghetto, a housing development on the grounds of an old foundry, seemed appropriate. Knowing this, do we even need to really care what the word “ghetto” originally meant? It was a place name, like Cannaregio, that already existed, that had already existed for at least a hundred years, probably more, before the land was

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<sup>7</sup> For scholarly explorations of this phenomenon, in the realms of history and literature, see Michael Andre Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); and Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).

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considered as a possible home for the Jews in Venice. How many of us have ever asked what Cannaregio originally meant?

But no, we need to ask. Probably because of a lingering sense that, despite some etymological fact — *gettere, gettare, getto, ghetto*, whatever — Jew and ghetto are somehow organically connected and not just, as seems to be the case, a metonymy that, like all figurative associations, merely lost its freshness over time and became mundane reality.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Most historians accept the derivation from *gettere*, to cast, on the assumption that the word *getto/ghetto* referred to the castings of a foundry. The apparent shift from the palatal *ge* to the velar *ghe* has puzzled some linguists, however. For this reason, Joseph Baruch Sermoneta offers an alternative derivation for the word from the Hebrew *get*, meaning repudiation or divorce. See J. Sermoneta, “Sull’origine della parola ‘ghetto’, in *Studi dell’ebraismo italiano*.” Rome, 1974. His suggestion might in some sense give the Jews greater agency in the association of themselves with the ghetto, providing a different overall sense of the connection between them (and falsifying my suggestion of a metonymy). The facts of the charters, rights, and privileges, accorded to them by the Venetians, and, more importantly, of the subsequent history of the term’s use, would be no less substantive than I have suggested.

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In his preface to Riccardo Calimani’s *The Ghetto of Venice*, Elie Wiesel suggests that tourists go to Venice to see the Rialto but Jews go to Venice to see the ghetto.<sup>9</sup> I am tempted to see an irony in the idea of someone coming to Venice to connect with roots but mistaking the root, the etymon, in the process. It’s a momentary thought — the professor chuckling to himself behind the podium — and I realize that this business of tracing etymologies can be a rather dry and, at root, lifeless activity.

Oh, the etymology helps explain the toponyms of course, filling out the story of how the Jews were settled in the Old Ghetto after the New Ghetto had become too populous. Fine. But doesn’t the thought of Jew and ghetto going together as some kind of a mistake also ring false? Of course it does. No one uses words with etymological purity. All words retain the germs of past users. And the germs on ghetto are legion. Etymology and ontology do not mesh. There is a living connection between Jews and ghettos that the etymological fact cannot erase, an almost organic form of life that is deeply imbedded in European history, an accretion of intentions, as in Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of the literary word,<sup>10</sup> though such an accretion in English appears to have begun relatively recently.

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<sup>9</sup> Riccardo Calimani, *The Ghetto of Venice: A History*, trans. Katherine Silverblatt Wolfthal (NY: M. Evans and Co., Inc.), p. xv. The implied juxtaposition of tourists and Jews deserves its own study.

<sup>10</sup> The discussion is dispersed throughout the essay “Discourse in the Novel,” but I have in mind here the image of an intention sent out like a ray of light into “an

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Like empathy, ghetto seems to be a word that has been with us for so long that it’s difficult to imagine a time without it. It’s a false impression on both accounts, yet another instance of present associations impinging upon, or better overwhelming, past — what shall I say — absence, ignorance, meaninglessness. The word empathy simply did not exist in English before 1903, while ghetto did not have the associations it would later acquire. Initially, a toponym (I repeat, with its own meaning, initially unrelated to the Jews), but subsequently attached to the Jews in the minds of Europeans of the late sixteenth century such that, very quickly, by the time of the formation of the Ghetto of Rome, or better yet for our purposes, of the “Newest Ghetto” in Venice (the shiny one I noted above), to which new arrivals were consigned after the Old Ghetto too had become over crowded, the combination was no longer arbitrary or figurative: a ghetto had become an enclosed space inside an urban territory for Jews.

But English seems to have been oddly negligent of this term and this association for much of its history. The Oxford English Dictionary cites a scant three definitions, with not quite a page and a half of examples, none from Shakespeare, or Milton, or Byron, or Tennyson, or Browning, or Melville, or Austen,

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atmosphere filled with alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object...” In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press), p. 277.

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or Dickens, or Dickenson. This is worth pondering. In all its exhaustive thoroughness, the OED lists only four examples of English usage between 1611 and 1887, none from an author I’ve ever heard of. My suspicion, which others are welcome to refute, is that usage in French, German, and other west European languages paralleled English in this, and that one would be hard pressed to find the word used by contemporaries in any language other than Italian (and now I’ve grown quite curious about its frequency in Italian). The linguist Max Weinreich noted that the term was not used to designate the local Jewish living quarters anywhere in Central and Eastern Europe before at least the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

Israel Zangwill’s *Children of the Ghetto* of 1892 seems to have been a turning point in the history of the term’s usage. But his, we know, was a slightly archaizing, nostalgic, even precious ghetto. In his hands the term had slightly positive connotations, even if somewhat moribund ones. There are a few more examples following Zangwill’s momentary success. But it seems clear that this was a dying term, a word well on its way to becoming a historical curiosity, thank God, a descriptor for a bygone institution, fit for history text books or local color for literary effect.

It took the Nazis to give it new life. Others have told that story much better than I possibly could, while the term’s subsequent migration into the language of

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<sup>11</sup> Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble with Joshua A. Fishman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 177

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urban America, its adoption, in a sense, for and by African Americans in particular,<sup>12</sup> would take me even farther from my boat, which has to carry me a while yet.

*Traghetto*: noun, masculine; 1. crossing; 2. a vessel used for crossings. This explains the signs along the Grand Canal. But there is another word for crossing in Italian: *tragitto*. The difference seems to be nuanced. *Traghetto* is more concrete, a boat for instance; *tragitto*, more abstract — *The Crossing*, by Cormac McCarthy, for example, or something along those lines. Then there are the related verbs: *tragbettare* and *tragettare*, both deriving from the same Latin root, *transjactare*, or, “to cast across.”

Careful readers will have already seen where I’m headed: to *ghe* and *ge*, of course, for the point of articulation, whether velar or palatal, sometime explained as a local mispronunciation, and standing as a stumbling block for those linguists who refuse to give credence to the explanation that the area on which the Jews were settled was once a foundry (*getto*) hangs in the balance. Here we have a single Latin root *transjactare*, which happens to contain the same root as that for the activity of casting that would take place in a foundry (*jactare-gettare*), which gives birth to two parallel pronunciations in modern Italian, not one pronunciation that then shifts into the other over time (because that would present the problem of how you get from one to the other), but two contemporarily productive ways of transforming the old “ja” sound of Latin, one in your throat and one on your palate: *traghetto* — *tragitto*,

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<sup>12</sup> Caryl Phillips ruminates suggestively on the divide between a European Jewish conception of ghetto, with its oppressive history, and African-American anti-semitism, in his *The European Tribe* (NY: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp. 52-55.

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*traghetto* — *tragitto*, *traghetto* — *tragitto*, it’s almost enough to make you want to paint some soft watches.

There is nothing terribly ground breaking here. I don’t want to suggest that one of these words, either ghetto or *traghetto*, might derive from the other, or that everything in Venice should really be considered as across from the ghetto, for that would be a historical distortion. But that they exist in closer proximity than our initial wry-smiled rejection of the pun might lead us to assume, that is a modest claim I do want to make. And, that the *traghetto* might be a kind of vehicle that can help you get to ghetto, an even more modest one, I suppose.

And if, in the end, I still feel a little like I’ve snuck into the temple, then that is something I am willing to accept as the price of the performance.