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## Modern Visions of Venice The city in three contemporary novels

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To Luca, who has taught me to love

Venice as much as he does.

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## Introduction

When starting a study about Venice, it is almost impossible not to be reminded at first of the opening lines of *Italian Hours*, Henry James's most famous travel book. In his first essay on Venice, James describes indeed the most serene city as "the easiest to visit without going there", adding moreover that "there is notoriously nothing more to be said on the subject". However, he also affirms that "the old is better than any novelty", virtually allowing every Venice-lover to speak freely and to provide his own interpretation of the city.<sup>1</sup> Several decades later, Tony Tanner still continues to echo James's words, by explaining that "Venice is always the already written as well as the already seen, the already read"<sup>2</sup>.

Venice represents indeed, at least in the literary landscape, the place where everything is already old, almost decrepit, starting from its history and architecture. However, it seems to be still possible, as James's affirms, to write about the city, especially by revising and reinventing the traditional tropes and figures which are typically Venetian, or usually referred to Venice. Despite being old and "already seen", the city on water proves therefore to be still alluring and captivating for both writers and readers nowadays.

In his study about the rediscovery of Venice after its political extinction, John Pemble states: "Venice was put on the itinerary of the sentimental journey

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, *Italian Hours* (1909), Heinemann, London, in Biblioteca Virtual Universal, 2008. Viewed 6 June 2014. <<http://www.biblioteca.org.ar/libros/167488.pdf>>

<sup>2</sup> Tony Tanner, *Venice Desired*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992, 17.

by novelists, historians, and apostles of culture", adding moreover that "to the novelist it was a quarry of plot and character". In fact, thanks to the development of the technology of transport in the early nineteenth century, the city on water became more accessible to a great number of people. Few years after the death of the Republic, Venice experimented indeed a new life, becoming an icon, almost a relic of old history and culture, and never ceasing to fascinate, even to obsess, foreign "apostles of culture".<sup>3</sup>

Considering this widespread vision of the city as a literary and cultural symbol, it is not so difficult to understand why Venice can still be recognized as a powerful inspirational location for contemporary novelists. Starting from those premises, this thesis aims to underline how the classical Venetian tropes can be imaginatively revised and actively improved by modern writers in English, in order to create their personal representations of the city. The study will focus on the reasons why those writers choose to employ Venice as one of the settings of their books, analysing how they describe the city, in order to understand what Venice means to them. The various chapters of the thesis will provide a thematic analysis of some of the classical tropes about Venice, such as the theme of love and death, or the idea of Venice as an enchanted land, comparing the literary and cultural tradition of the city with the original reinterpretation of the three authors.

The three contemporary novels, chosen for the analysis and featuring Venice as a background, are *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), written by the Indian author Anita Desai, *The Passion* (1987) by the British novelist Jeanette Winterson

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<sup>3</sup> John Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, 10-11.

and *The Nature of Blood* (1997) by the Kittitian-British writer Caryl Phillips. The diversity in culture and experiences of the three authors could possibly help to enrich the study by showing their different viewpoints about the city of Venice.

Before focusing in detail on their works, it could be interesting to examine the writers' opinions on travelling, in Italy and especially in Venice. For instance, Jeanette Winterson openly admits in an interview that she "loathe[s] travel", preferring to "do travel in [her] head"<sup>4</sup>. However, while visiting Venice as a guest during "Incroci di Civiltà" in 2010, she also gladly shares her excitement for having had the chance to experiment the powerful feeling of walking in Venice:

When I'm in this city, I feel like I'm in a city which is changing around me. It's a living city, and that is what makes it so exciting for a writer, because you feel that you are in history and that you are in fantasy, that you are in invention and that you are in the most exciting moment, but it's now, all that, together.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Caryl Phillips seems to enjoy travelling more than his fellow writer Winterson. In fact, when drafting the Othello's section of *The Nature of Blood*, he suddenly felt an immediate need to visit Venice, even only to take a break from writing, as he stated in an interview:

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<sup>4</sup> Bilger Audrey, Interview by, "Jeanette Winterson, The Art of Fiction No. 150", *The Paris Review* (No. 145, Winter 1997). Viewed 31 May 2014. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1188/the-art-of-fiction-no-150-jeanette-winterson>>

<sup>5</sup> Marialaura Bidorini, Interview with Jeanette Winterson at "Incroci di Civiltà", Venice, 2010. Viewed 28 July 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAIFoDV4d4g>>

What happened was that as soon as I started to write about Venice, I thought to myself well I have to go to Venice. Then I thought you don't need to go to Venice, you just want a holiday.<sup>6</sup>

To conclude, Anita Desai seems to have a special relationship with Italy as well, since she personally reports, in her acknowledgements section of *Journey to Ithaca*, that she started working on the book at the Rockefeller Foundation Center in Bellagio on Como's Lake. In addition, she also mentions, during an interview, that she considers the city of Venice as one of her "favourite places in the world"<sup>7</sup>.

Having just briefly introduced the relationships between Venice and the three authors, the thesis will now proceed with an in-depth analysis of the three novels, starting precisely from Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*, moving secondly to *The Passion* and concluding with *The Nature of Blood*. The study will then end with a closing section, in which the different "visions" of the city, discovered by separately analysing the three novels, will be finally compared. By presenting the most recurring themes in the novels, the thesis will provide some final conclusions about the Venetian tropes which are more likely to be researched and employed by modern writers in English.

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<sup>6</sup> Schatteman Renée T., edited by, *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, University Press of Mississippi, 2009, 58.

<sup>7</sup> "Anita Desai – Q&A", *Penguin Group*, 2014. Viewed 30 June 2014. <<http://www.penguin.com/author/anita-desai/1000009147>>

## 1. Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995)

*Journey to Ithaca* tells the story of two wandering souls in search of their self or, more precisely, "a spiritual Odyssey"<sup>8</sup> of the two main characters, Laila and Matteo. In her essay about the fascination of India and its culture in the Western mind, Rama Kundu describes Desai's novel as "a story of multiple journeys undertaken by various people at many different planes of existence". She depicts the characters of the book as "pilgrims, - one lighting his/her torch from another's light and giving the same to some other sojourner in his/her turn".<sup>9</sup> In effect, this statement could be easily identified as perfectly fitting Laila and Matteo's conditions, with the second character following the light of the first, who had previously pursued, and reached, the bright steps of her master, the famous Indian sage Aurobindo.<sup>10</sup>

Born in Egypt in the 1920s in a bookish family, Laila was then a restless young girl who lived her adventures in search of freedom, becoming first an Indian dancer and later the head of an ashram in India. Matteo, on the other hand, is an Italian good-for-nothing boy raised in the 1970s. Burdened by his rich and strict parents, he decides to get hastily married and to leave for India, driven by the reading of Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* and *The Journey to the East*. In order to discover the Eternal Truth of Life, Matteo dreams to reach the

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<sup>8</sup> B.L. Tripathi, 'Journey to Ithaca: A Spiritual Quest', *The Fiction of Anita Desai Volume II* (ed. Suman Bala), Khosla Publishing House, New Delhi, 2002, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Rama Kundu, 'The Lure of the 'Other': Frustration and/or Fulfillment', *Critical Essays on Anita Desai's Fiction* (ed. J. Dodiya), IVY Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, 163.

<sup>10</sup> Magda Costa, "Interview with Anita Desai", *SAWNET - South Asian Women's NETWORK* (30 January 2011). Viewed 24 April 2014. <[http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/desai\\_interview.html](http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/desai_interview.html)>. This interview was originally published in Spanish in the magazine *Lateral* in March 2001.

India described in the books, an imaginative and soothing land, his "Ithaca" in which he could be definitely happy only by following the steps of Indian gurus and yogis, sages and saints.

The third noteworthy character in Desai's novel is Sophie, a German pragmatic girl deeply in love with Matteo. Despite her strong will and realistic attitude towards society, she is nevertheless dragged into a life full of struggles and peregrinations in India, which are the result of the path her beloved husband has chosen. Her figure deserves to be mentioned since she undertakes the same journey of Laila, in search of the Mother's roots, even though her quest is driven by curiosity, and not by divine love as Laila's pure research of freedom.

The novel is set primarily in India, with the city of Venice playing only a secondary role in the plot. Despite this, the city on water can be still acknowledged as a significant location for both Laila and Sophie's quests. Venice is actually the first city visited by Laila in her pursuit of spirituality, which will ultimately lead her to find, or better found, the "temple of the Mother Goddess of the World"<sup>11</sup>. After the performance in Paris, the Indian dance troupe led by the charismatic figure of Krishna moves to Italy, in order to practice for the incoming American tour. Although with some doubts and lots of curiosity, the dancers offers Laila the opportunity of joining them in order to learn Indian dancing. Deeply fascinated by their culture and religion, the Egyptian girl immediately accepts to take dance lessons, in order to "develop the spiritual side of dancing" (JI, 210). In the old Venetian palazzo of Signora

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<sup>11</sup> Anita Desai, *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), Vintage, London, 2001, 177. Henceforth, page references will be given in parentheses in text, as JI.

Durante, Laila learns “how to dance with sincerity and devotion”<sup>12</sup> under the guidance of Krishna, who professes himself not only as a dance teacher, but as a guru, a “spiritual teacher” indeed (JI, 211).

The city on water is also visited by Sophie, while in her quest to find the true roots and discover the whole story of the Mother. She follows step by step the journey of Laila, from Egypt to Paris, then Venice and America, finally reaching Bombay where she finds Krishna who hands her a precious item: Laila's diary of her physical and spiritual travel from America to the Indian Ashram. Reading her passionate words, Sophie ends her search by fully realizing the reason of Laila's transformation into the Mother and her “greatness as a saint”<sup>13</sup> as well.

This chapter aims to analyse some passages of the novel set in Venice or dealing with it, and therefore identify and illustrate the canonical tropes of the Venetian literature and how Desai's writing is able to revise and improve them. Firstly, the episode of the hagdah's prophecy would introduce the concept of Venice as a holy city of gods. Secondly, some literary quotations about the topic of gods and goddesses in a divine Venice will be examined, in order to associate the novel to the classical tradition. The study will focus thereafter on Laila's arrival and experience in the city of water, discussing the themes of love, refuge, dreams and happiness but also fear and death in Venice. Furthermore, the topic of death will be extended with the analysis of the literary trope about the resemblance between a gondola and a coffin, then including the episode

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<sup>12</sup> Solanki Mrinalini, 'Journey to Ithaca: A Voyage of Spiritual Awakening and Recovery of Faith', *The Fiction of Anita Desai Volume II* (ed. Suman Bala), Khosla Publishing House, New Delhi, 2002, 57.

<sup>13</sup> O.P. Budhola, *Anita Desai: Vision and Technique in Her Novels*, B.R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2001, 186.

of Krishna's gondola trip with Signora Durante. Another significant subject worth analysing will be the idea of Venice as the city of art and enchantment, even after the devastation of First World War, in contrast with America as the emblem of emptiness and disillusion. To conclude, a brief account of the Venetian tropes located in the pages of Sophie's quest will be provided, ending the chapter with some considerations about the overall function of the city in the novel, detecting Venice's role compared and opposed to Ithaca.

### **1.1. "There god and goddess meet": Venice as the Holy city**

One of the passages worth analysing includes hagdah's prophecy, in which Venice was mentioned not with its name, but indeed as a divine landscape, a City of Gods. The episode occurs during Laila's education in Cairo, which she has undertaken only in order to escape the narrow existence of her birthplace. She is promised further studies in Paris if her results at the American College for Girls of Cairo will be positive. However, despite her outstanding intelligence, she is not able to concentrate on books at that time, only pretending to study with diligence, and preferring indeed to get lost in the maze of lanes of the city. Life passes her by without purpose, until she discovers, through the words of a friend, the Café Fishway. While waiting to be served, Laila notices an odd presence sitting immobile on a bench. The figure reveals herself to be an old woman, claimed to have the power of prophecy. The curious and passionate Laila, always "seeking something beyond ordinary

comprehension"<sup>14</sup>, cannot resist the temptation of asking the hagdah to read her future in the drained coffee cup. The relevance of the excerpt concerning the prophecy about Laila in Venice deserves a quotation at length:

So the hagdah seized the cup between her hands and, without looking and it –perhaps she had already had a glance - parted her narrow, pale lips to say, 'In the north, a city stands in water. There god and goddess meet.'

(JI, 176)

At first, Laila is not completely convinced about the accuracy of the foretelling, since her satisfying results at College compel her parents to keep their promise, allowing her a ticket to Paris, including an accommodation in her aunt's house and a letter of acceptance at the Sorbonne. Nevertheless Laila is unsatisfied with the choice of her parents, blaming Paris for not being a city on water, nor "the abode of gods and goddesses" (JI, 177).

However, she still leaves for France and keep on with a life that seems meaningless, since "her entire body and soul" have yearned "since childhood for some vision of supreme joy and beauty"<sup>15</sup> that cannot be found in a city like Paris. While often struggling about the prophecy and trying to figure out a possible city of gods standing on water, she finally notices by chance a poster pinned to the door of Madame Lacan Oriental shop. Fascinated by the image depicting an Indian dance troupe performing in Paris, Laila manages to buy a ticket with her few coins in order to see the Krishna Lila spectacle. During the dance, the Egyptian girl is deeply touched by the intense spirituality of the artists, so much that she is filled with ecstatic joy and persuaded to "run and

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Kundu, 'The Lure of the 'Other': Frustration and/or Fulfillment', 167.

catch them" (JI, 202). As a consequence, while describing to her cousins and aunt the performance of Indian dancers, the first glimpse of the fulfilment of the prophecy can be grasped in Laila's own words: "It was a dance of gods" (JI, 206). Soon after that, another episode could be mentioned to confirm the accuracy of the hagdah's prophecy, when Krishna informs the new joined dancer that their next destination will be Venice, a city that is actually built upon water.

The hagdah prophecy is therefore able to include in few words one of more vast and powerful tropes about Venice: the idea of the city on water as a meeting place of gods, or the birthplace of some of them, or even more a godly city itself, raising from water in all its impressive divine power. The subject of Venice as a "deified"<sup>16</sup> living city is extensively treated by Tanner, who demonstrates the wide extent of this belief by referring to some example from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos*.

At the beginning of Canto IV, Byron depicts the city of Venice as the avatar of the ancient mother goddess:

She looks a Sea Cybele, fresh from ocean  
Rising with her tiara of proud towers  
At airy distance, with majestic motion,  
A ruler of the waters and their powers

(Canto IV, 2)<sup>17</sup>

Tanner observes how the description that emerges from these verses shares nothing with the Venice of reality, since it represents the city as an imaginary

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<sup>16</sup> Term borrowed by Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Jerome J. McGann (edited by), *Byron*, Oxford University Press, 1986, 149.

living being, "regalized and mythologized"<sup>18</sup> to embody the form of the "Great Mother of the Gods". In fact, the goddess Cybele was an ancient Oriental and Greco-Roman deity, also called Cybebe, Agdistis or Mater Deum Magna Idaea by the Romans. Her essential quality was universal motherhood, for she was the giver of life to gods, human beings and beasts<sup>19</sup>. By depicting Venice as the Mother of both gods and humans, Byron represents thus the city as the holiest place in the world, a manifestation of the divine on earth, able to give life to all humanity while rising "triumphantly from his dreaming imagination"<sup>20</sup>.

Moreover, it can be also intriguing to notice how one particular aspect of Cybele could be associated more easily with the character of Laila than with the city of Venice. The ancient goddess was indeed also called "the Mountain Mother"<sup>21</sup>, a term that deeply reflects the experience of Laila, since the young girl, at the end of her journey, would eventually become the Mother in the Himalayan mountains. Another typical image associated with Cybele was the invincible courage of the lion. In fact, the goddess was often represented with a lion at her side as, in Doody's opinion, they "together compose an image of strength, control over physical nature, and harmony with Nature herself"<sup>22</sup>. As a consequence, it can be interesting to mention how the Venetian winged lion was not only Saint Mark's evangelic symbol, but that its origins date back to ancient mythology. The association of the city with gods and goddesses seems in this way even more effective.

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<sup>18</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> "Great Mother of the Gods", *Encyclopaedia Britannica online*. Viewed 25 April 2014. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/243491/Great-Mother-of-the-Gods>>

<sup>20</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> "Great Mother of the Gods", *Britannica*.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2007, 245.

One century after Byron's eulogy, Ezra Pound evokes once more the visionary image of "gods floating in the azure air"<sup>23</sup> associated with Venice. By employing his powerful imagination and reverie, Pound is thus able to build a city that is at the same time visionary and eternal. Tanner defines this Venice as "rising into the realm of myth to become an image of an earthly paradise, the City Beautiful. *There* indeed it may float – godlike"<sup>24</sup>. In Pound's visionary Venice, images of gods and goddesses are deeply linked with images of the city, which he considers the only blessed land where the divine can still be perceptibly present.

Pound's belief is, furthermore, confirmed by Venetians themselves. They indeed regarded (and still regard nowadays) their city as a holy land, and for this reason they were, historically speaking, always in contrast with Rome. For instance, Venice insisted on having their own Inquisition court, which never burned a single individual for heresy. In addition Venetian's clergymen elected their bishops by themselves, and the Venetian Church was more tolerant than other Catholic countries towards Jews, Muslims and Greek Orthodox Christians. Rome judged Venice's conduct with disdain, imposing an Interdict on the Serene Republic in 1606. Venice simply responded by invalidating the papal edict and encouraging the citizens to take the sacraments and going to Mass as usual.

By examining the behaviour of Venetian clergy and people when dealing with this troublesome situation, it is not difficult to observe that Middle Ages Venice was the only nation able to stand against the power of the Vatican.

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<sup>23</sup> Ezra Pound (Cantos III, 11), in Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 303.

<sup>24</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 323.

Doody affirms that this disobedience was only possible “because it [Venice] reckoned it had truth – divine Truth – on its own side”<sup>25</sup>. The fact that the Basilica of Saint Mark houses the corpse of one of the four evangelists puts Venice on the same spiritual level of the Rome of Saint Peter. Venetians have even invented a legend in order to justify the superiority of the city on water, blessed by God through Saint Mark’s intercession. While anchored in the lagoon (around the *rivoaltus*, according to the legend), the Saint would have received from an angel this particular message: “*Pax tibi Marce, evangelista meo. Hic requiescet corpus tuum*”<sup>26</sup>. This saying would have been a prophecy of the safe return in Italy, specifically in Venice, of Mark’s corpse, now buried in the Basilica after the recover from the infidel Alexandria.

To conclude, it is impossible to deny the abundance of the literary tradition about Venice as a holy land, home of pagan gods and goddesses as well as of Catholic saints. Doody briefly summarizes this odd feeling of standing in a city at the same time proudly material and almost godlike: “I see in Venice a highly spiritual city – of its own kind”<sup>27</sup>, hence contradictory more than ever.

## **1.2. “In the old, dark house”: Laila in Venice**

The hagdah’s prophecy not only informed Laila that she would stay in Venice, but also that there a god and a goddess would meet. The meaning of these words, at first unclear, suddenly unveils when Laila inevitably falls in love

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<sup>25</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 163.

<sup>26</sup> See *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

with Krishna while dancing in the ancient Palazzo of Signora Durante. Fascinated by Indian culture, the Signora fondly offers her house in Venice as a practicing stage for the dancers, which need a safe and calm place in order to “choreograph a new ballet for [the] American tour” (JI, 210). The description of Laila's sojourn in Venice highlights some of the most famous Venetian tropes, above all the theme of love and death in Venice as well as the idea of the city as a place of first refuge for the wandering souls.

In order to understand to what extent Venice can be perceived as a shelter against life's dangers, it is necessary to outline at first the origins of the city. Venice was indeed first built around A.D. 400, as a temporary natural stronghold against the Visigoths and the Huns by refugees from the mainland, especially from the Roman settlement of Aquileia. These early Venetians were patiently waiting for the Italian conditions to recover, in order to return to their houses in the mainland. However the situation only worsened, leading as a result to the dissolution of the Roman Empire. As a consequence Venice became then a permanent settlement, the only peaceful shelter against the disorder of the Italian peninsula, tormented by the continuous invasions of barbarians hordes. The city grew wealthy with fishing and salt trade, becoming in few centuries the powerful maritime Republic whose greatness still echoes nowadays<sup>28</sup>.

For the restless Laila, who had never find a place in which she wants to stay neither in childhood nor in youth, Venice becomes thus a city of refuge, as it was for the early inhabitants of the lagoon. Here she experiments the joy of

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<sup>28</sup> See John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice* (1982), Penguin, London, 2003, 5-6.; Doody, *Tropic of Venice.*, 129-31.

love, dancing alone in solitary rooms and leaping in the air in the shadowy hallway of the Venetian Palazzo. Laila is aware of Krishna's caring looks, of his delicate touch, of the affection he feels towards her. As a consequence, she transforms the ancient mansion and the city itself in a manifestation of her love, as it can be easily recognized in the following quotation from the novel:

Dance and love, they came to be one in this old dark house in Venice. [...] They were twined together and shimmered the way the light shimmered upon the Candelezzo, on the swooping gulls, the gliding boats.

(JI, 227)

Venetian history and literary fiction are full of examples similar to Laila's experience. In his cultural guide to the city, the native writer Tiziano Scarpa even drafts a list of authoritative testimonies about the issue of falling in love in Venice, in order to understand the true nature of positive feelings perceived in the city, and trying to answer the still unresolved question: "Does one fall in love more easily in Venice? Does the heart beats faster?"<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, falling in love can always seem dangerous, but in Venice the natural overflowing of feelings experimented by a man or a woman in love could become even more critical, for the city was traditionally the home of passionate (but also treacherous) lovers, with Casanova being just the more outstanding name among them. In fact, loving in the city of water, especially in literary fiction, could often prove fatal. "Eros in Venice so often turns into Thanatos"<sup>30</sup>, more in literature than in real life. Some narrative examples of this concept can be found in Mann's novel *Death in Venice*, in Du Maurier's short

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<sup>29</sup> Tiziano Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish: A Cultural Guide*, Serpent's Tail, London, 2009, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 128.

story *Don't Look Now* as well as in the more famous Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello, The Moor of Venice* (which would receive further analyses in the chapter dedicated to Caryl Phillips).

Some days before leaving for America, even Laila experiments the shocking feeling of losing someone in Venice, although only in a nightmare. She dreams indeed of Krishna floating dead below the surface of a canal, until a gondola slides quickly over his body, and when the boat disappears there is no sign of the corpse anymore, replaced by a "great trail of bright red blood" (JI, 242). It seems like the gondola has erased Krishna's body, or better buried him inside its wooden hull. In fact, the great resemblance of black gondolas to coffins is a widely known trope of Venetian literature. For instance, in his *Beppo*, Byron accurately describes the shape and the motion of a gondola, which "glides along the water looking blackly, just like a coffin"<sup>31</sup>, by dedicating a whole stanza to the subject. The same image is also present in Goethe's Venetian epigrams, Mme de Stael's *Corinne ou l'Italie* and again in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*<sup>32</sup>.

### **1.3. "Home of music and dance": Venice as the city of Art**

All the authors mentioned above described the gondola almost as a death bearer's ship, and definitely not as the traditional boat that has transported for centuries both natives and tourists. Krishna and Signora Durante also experiments a gondola trip together, in a passage that deserves to be

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<sup>31</sup> Byron, *Beppo* (Stanza 19), from Jerome J. McGann (edited by), *Byron.*, 321.

<sup>32</sup> See Tanner, *Venice Desired.*, 48.; Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 40.

mentioned here, for it represents both the not mutual affection of the Signora for Krishna, and at the same time her hope toward an improvement of the Italian and Venetian situation after the World War I, that would eventually push Krishna to stay by her side.

Signora Durante is visibly in love with Krishna too, with some noticeable proofs scattered all along the dancers' visit to Venice. Her first description is given by Krishna himself, while explaining to Laila their next destination: he labels the Signora as "my friend there" (JI, 210), giving no further explanation about their relationship. He also explains that the Signora is a passionate supporter of Indian culture and of Krishna's dance group, so much that she would offer her own house in Venice to the troupe in order to practise. However, the devotion of Gabriella Durante towards Krishna has yet to unfold, and Laila will discover it slowly, during her stay in Venice. For example, during their arrival by gondola to the old Palazzo, the Signora fails both to embrace than to worship Krishna by falling at his feet, receiving as answer only a blessing on the shoulder. Moreover, she often turns her eyes away in embarrassment from the Indian troupe and it even happens that she sighs and cries in desperation, since she is not able to bear the sight of Krishna deeply in love with another woman. In addition, she is at the same time jealous and friendly with Laila, seen both as a love rival and a lucky girl, since she at least could enjoy the wonderful feeling of being near the heart of the Indian teacher. The Signora even entrusts to the Egyptian girl a family ring that has sentimental value for her, with the promise of giving it to Krishna once departed. The Indian dancer rejects the gift with disdain, leaving the ring in Laila's hand with no further reply.

Despite Krishna's arrogant superiority when dealing with her, Signora Durante is still able to fulfil one of her more intense dreams: to have a gondola trip with him before his departure for America. The Indian dancer is pleased to glide softly upon the water of the Grand Canal, so much that he seems to even forget the presence of Gabriella at his side. He greets with delight the passengers of other gondolas, as if he were blessing them like a god, and they answer back with smiles of gratitude, recognising the figure of Krishna as the famous Indian dancer who used to perform in Venice often in the past. For this reason, before the end of the trip, Gabriella hopes to persuade Krishna not to leave, by showing how much the Venetian citizens are fond of his charming spectacles. "You are so well known here in Venice!" (JI, 232): she exclaims like she was imploring him to stay. However, her attempt to help the troupe to live and perform in Venice is destined to failure, since Krishna simply replies, even lacking in persuasion because of Venetian exquisite distractions, that Indian dance differs from Western ballet for the first is worship, hence not allowing him to take part in "drinking and parties and all that" (JI, 232).

At the end of the gondola trip, Krishna is still convinced about performing in America. He even corroborates his thesis by mentioning the better conditions of the States in comparison with Italy, since there "they had no war [...] at all" (JI, 233). As a matter of fact, it was also true that "Italy after the War was hardly a dance stage" (JI, 218). However, Signora Durante refuses to give up, anticipating with strong belief that Venice would recover fast from the war's injuries and become again the supreme city of Art, "the home of music and dance" (JI, 233) indeed. Gabriella Durante's words sounds like a prophecy. In

fact, Krishna's American adventure fails miserably while in those years Venice experiments a re-flourishing of culture and art.

During the First World War, the environment of Venice had been "exceptionally vulnerable"<sup>33</sup>, since the city was subjected to aerial bombing, with more than a thousand bombs dropped in the lagoon. The damage inflicted to the ancient architectures was serious, due to the difficulty of aiming at strategic targets like the railway station, the cotton mill and the arsenal. In 1916, an incendiary bomb was even dropped, although by mistake, near the main portal of the Basilica, failing to destroy, but only by chance, nine centuries of history and art, of fragile mosaics and priceless marbles<sup>34</sup>. Nevertheless Venice survived the War and started to repair and restore the damage both to the buildings and to the cultural image of the city. In the 20s tourists came again, in greater numbers than ever, to bath on the Lido, to play at the casino, to enjoy the architectural marvels of the city on water, making Venice once again "the scene of social encounters, the stage of Europe's carnival"<sup>35</sup>.

On the other hand, America proves to be a country of disappointment for the Indian troupe, starting from their arrival. In fact, when they enter their guest mansion, there is not an American version of Signora Durante who hurries down the stairs to greet the dancers, but only an annoyed secretary who wants to chase Krishna away. In New York there is no sign of the kindness showed by Venetian people, and it seems that even "sights and scenes and textures and colours" (JI, 248) would have been erased from the landscape. Furthermore, the tour promised to Krishna has to be ambiguously delayed because of

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<sup>33</sup> Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered*, 180.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, 182.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

Prohibition, leaving the Indian group without a stage in which to perform but also without the money they need to live.

Krishna is thus forced to “reconcile with the situation in order to survive”<sup>36</sup>. He eventually manages to find an engagement but some cuts and changes to the spectacle have to be made in order to please the ignorant and childish mentality of American people. He is forced to mix the Radha-Krishna dance with exotic and profane elements which have nothing to share with Indian spirituality and to shorten their performance into “five- and ten-minute sketches” (JI, 254), that must fit the vast scheduled programme in which various artists from different oriental countries are obliged to perform together. This is the reason why Laila starts to feel betrayed “for she want[s] to dance not for displaying her physical charm and emotion”<sup>37</sup> but for showing to others her devotion to spiritual Joy and Love. Laila’s complaint underlines the “pathetic condition” in which Indian artists have to perform in order to “sell[...] Indian spirituality abroad”<sup>38</sup>: in America they do not dance anymore for the sake of devotion, they do not dedicate anymore their souls to discipline, respect, exhaustion and bliss. Even the attitude of Krishna towards his art changes, since he starts to consider dance as a job, and thus worrying about gaining money and fame and improving his career. The American business mentality has succeeded in affecting in the end even a spiritual man as Krishna professed to be.

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<sup>36</sup> Tripathi, ‘*Journey to Ithaca: A Spiritual Quest*’, 44.

<sup>37</sup> Mrinalini, ‘*Journey to Ithaca: A Voyage of Spiritual Awakening and Recovery of Faith*’, 57.

<sup>38</sup> M. Dasan, ‘Anita Desai’s *Journey to Ithaca: A Critique of Indian Spirituality*’, *Critical Essays on Anita Desai’s Fiction* (ed. J. Dodiya), IVY Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, 184.

To sum up, America as depicted in Desai's novel represents a country in clear contrast with Venice. If in the city on water Laila discovers love and joy, in the States she experiences only physical pain and spiritual sickness. If in Venice the Indian troupe is praised by the most influential citizens of the city, in New York they are neglected even by their guest Mrs Du Best. Venice proves thus to represent the city of genuine art and pleasure, as predicted by Signora Durante, while America turns out to be only a country ruled by money and valuing physical performance. For this reason, in the overall structure of the novel Venice is selected to symbolise the blessed city of Laila's first enchantment, before the final bliss she experiences in India, while on the other hand America is chosen to portray the country where dreams shatter, a wasteland of disillusion.

#### **1.4. "Are you not interested?": Sophie's quest in Venice**

If Laila has experienced the old Venice of the Post-War, Sophie embarks upon her quest, on the other hand, in the modern Venice of the 70s. The German girl starts then her research with the critical eye of a strong-headed, down-to-earth former journalist. Her physical appearance reflects her nature as well: she is indeed a tall strong woman, square-shouldered, with short hair and grey eyes. In the novel she is always described as "self-reliant [...], frank and believ[ing] in logical explanation of things"<sup>39</sup>. Her husband Matteo, on the other

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<sup>39</sup> Supriya Bhandari, "Journey to Ithaca: A Reconnaissance of Indian Myths and Mysticism" *Boloji.com* (28 February 2010). Viewed 28 April 2014. <<http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=2371>>

hand, is an ascetic, a mystic in search of the Eternal Truth. It seems even that in their couple the gender roles are reversed, with Sophie resembling the rational man and Matteo the emotional woman. Moreover, she has never shared Matteo spiritual dreams. For her India is only an adventurous land, where she can enjoy "exotic beauties and delights"<sup>40</sup>. Sophie represents here the concept of the one-dream young wife, who desires to "fulfil her self"<sup>41</sup> with a work, a family, a house.

However, Matteo does not agree with her earthly aspirations, preferring the holy and soothing figure of the Mother (Laila in her old age) to his wife. As a consequence, Sophie starts to perceive the Mother as an enemy, describing her as "a monster spider who had spun this web to catch these silly flies" (JI, 127). This is the reason why she decides to inquire the past of the Mother, in order to dethrone her "form the high pedestal the devotee had put her on"<sup>42</sup>. Moreover, Sophie analyses an unusual fact concerning the biographies about the Indian saint, which all rushes about her past, describing only her life after the initiation, and she immediately expresses her doubts to Matteo:

Look. It says here that she studied in Paris. Very elite. But where, in the Sorbonne? And what? Not a word. Another uninteresting detail, I suppose. Then that she "studied dance in Venice". Now, that is not what you would expect to find in the biography of a sage! Are you not interested?

(JI, 132)

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<sup>40</sup> Kundu, 'The Lure of the 'Other': Frustration and/or Fulfillment', 165.

<sup>41</sup> Budhola, *Anita Desai: Vision and Technique in Her Novels*, 184.

<sup>42</sup> Kundu, 'The Lure of the 'Other': Frustration and/or Fulfillment', 166.

Yet her husband seems not to listen, forcing Sophie to leave him in India and to start her personal and rational research about the Mother's past. After her visit to Egypt and Paris, the German journalist eventually reaches Venice.

Her brief sojourn in the city of water is narrated in detail, with some vivid descriptions of the city in every particular of its ordinary life. Furthermore, those gracious and singular scenes are filled by Desai with some classical Venetian tropes, revisited to fit the modern and touristic image of the city. For instance, Sophie is described with pigeons surrounding her, while crossing a square with a fountain, bathed in a strong sun which reflects its light on "stones and walls and water" (JI, 215). She is depicted as the standard tourist: she reads a guidebook and drinks cappuccino sitting at a café, while wearing sunglasses to shade her fragile grey eyes from the shining sun.

In addition to Sophie's portrait, it could be also interesting to highlight Desai's smart and amusing description of people sunbathing on the ground of the city "as though they were on a beach" (ibid.), which seems to openly mock the common image of standard tourists in Venice. Desai describes their "pale blond hair" and "tender pink flesh" (ibid.), focusing on how their bodies are "all stretched out and exposed as in some pagan salutation to the sun" (ibid.). In order to fully comprehend the clever irony employed by the Indian author, it would be necessary to understand at first what is the real and serious meaning of "salutation to the sun" in the traditional culture of yoga. It can be therefore helpful to read a small extract selected from a medical study carried out by the director of the Yoga Research Foundation, which provides a simple but clear definition of the concept:

As a spiritual practice *surya namaskara* or 'salutations to the sun' dates back to the ancient vedic period when the sun was worshipped as a powerful symbol of spiritual consciousness. The practice has ever since been utilised to awaken the solar aspects of an individual's nature and release the vital energy for the development of higher awareness.<sup>43</sup>

As it could be observed by reading the quotation above, the practice of *surya namaskara*, namely "sun salutation", is widely regarded by yogis as a powerful and holy sequence of positions, whose purpose is to awaken the human affinity with the solar aspect of the divine. When representing the act of sunbathing in Venice as a "pagan" sun salutation, Desai seems to willingly highlight, on the one hand, the sanctity of the blessed city, which could even deserve the holy practice of *surya namaskara*, by underlining at the same time how the "pagan" tourists spoil the beauty of the city with their "unholy" sun salutation. It could be also interesting to notice how in this passage of the novel the word "pagan" is not positively referred to ancient gods or goddesses, as in hagdah's prophecy. In fact, the term is here disparagingly employed in clear contrast with the indefinite sense of holiness which seems to spread from Venice in Desai's novel, considered as a blessed experience which cannot be related with ease to a particular religion or philosophy. The reference to the "pagan salutation to the sun" is not the only passage of the novel which criticizes the uncaring behaviour of some tourists while visiting Venice. Desai reports indeed a scene witnessed by Sophie while passing near the Gesuati. The church is shut, and she sees some tourists "sitting in contended indolence on its steps" (JI, 216),

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<sup>43</sup> Dr Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati, "Surya Namaskara – An Energising Practice", *Yoga Magazine* (May 2006). Viewed 17 August 2014. <<http://www.yogamag.net/archives/2006/emay06/sn.shtml>>

sunbathing like their fellow travellers on the Venetian ground. The usage of the term “indolence” seems to confirm how Desai wants to convey a strongly negative impression of the tourists' behaviour.

In addition to these ironic descriptions of tourists, which could be sadly recognised as a common scene in the modern Venice, Desai also proves to be aware of the locations she is mentioning. In fact, some Venetian sites are named by the author, then located as if in map and related the ones with the others. The “length of the Zattere” (JI, 215) is described as standing front of “the marvellously geometric mass of San Giorgio” (JI, 216). Later in the same passage, the Giudecca's island and San Gesuati are mentioned as well, even though the exact name of the church where bored tourists sit would have been *I Gesuati*, or Saint Mary of the Rosary. The site of Campo San Barnaba is given even a greater consideration than the previous locations, since Desai portrays there a lovely scene of some kids and a priest playing football at sunset, with the last light of the sun shining on the superb façade of San Barnabas church.

Furthermore, other two daily details noticed by Sophie in her Venetian sojourn are worth further analyses. The first trope depicted is the presence of an intense water traffic, with “the traghetto, the vaporetti, the gondola, the cargo boats” (JI, 216), sailing likely across the Giudecca canal or some minor canals in Dorsoduro. The second scene is, on the other hand, a gracious description of the daily toilette of a cat that stands “in the bow of a gently rocking gondola” (JI, 247). This lively and at the same time delicate image can be regarded without doubts as genuinely Venetian, since the extensive presence of cats was one of the main features of the city in the past, and a sincere love for felines still retains some importance in the life of Venice. In her anecdotal history book

Doody states that “there seemed to be thousands” and adds some information about elderly Venetian ladies feeding “rough kitties [...] in their campi”.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, the native Tiziano Scarpa personally recalls the history of “the all-time world champion of the down-jump, the mythical Heideggerian cat of the Giudecca”<sup>45</sup>, who used to sleep on a balcony outside closed shutters, and was timely thrown in the void by the opening of the windows.

In conclusion, all these small details added to Sophie's trip, and regarding the usual routine of tourists in Venice, as the cappuccino at the café, or the young people sunbathing on the ground, manage to enrich the novel with authenticity, rendering the fictional settings more accurate and palpable, as if the reader were carried into the Venice of the book by living the same vivid situations of the characters.

### **1.5. “Do not hurry the voyage at all”: Ithaca and Venice**

It has been demonstrated in this chapter how Venice can be considered a significant location in Laila's journey to Ithaca (and in Sophie's as well). Starting from the hagdah's prophecy about a city on water and home of gods, this study has analysed the importance of Venice in Desai's novel, as a blessed city of love that can sometimes turn to death, as well as a city of art and enchantment in contrast with America's dullness.

However, the relationship between Venice and Ithaca has yet to be examined. In order to understand the connection between the two concepts,

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<sup>44</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish*, 86.

it would be necessary to analyse the idea of Ithaca first. In her essay, Kundu defines Ithaca as “a long-lost-home [...], as well as the joy of home-coming at last”<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, later in her analysis, she explains what the idea of a journey to Ithaca means to her, describing it as an “endless voyage of a searching soul, not necessarily including the idea of reaching the port”<sup>47</sup>. On the other hand, in her review Bhandari dedicates to the concept an entire paragraph, with a detailed explanation of both the idea of Ithaca and the voyage that has to be undertaken to reach it:

Ithaca is the city where all the journeys end, it is the ultimate goal. To reach there, one has to cover a long path, full of joys and sorrows; providing invaluable gems of knowledge. What Ithaca itself promises? Nothing like riches, but it has already given one a beautiful journey. On reaching Ithaca, one can understand and value the precious possession of knowledge and experiences.<sup>48</sup>

Ithaca and the research for a home proves to be an important issue in Desai's personal experience as well. In fact, in a public conversation with her daughter, the Indian author declares that she has experienced “23 changes of address”<sup>49</sup> during her life. Moreover, in another interview, she also defines home as a “backpack filled with relationships and memories that [she carries] around on [her] back wherever [she goes]” also confessing that she considers Venice as a “city [she] would have liked to make [her] home”<sup>50</sup>. It can be interesting to

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<sup>46</sup> Kundu, 'The Lure of the 'Other': Frustration and/or Fulfillment', 167.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>48</sup> Bhandari, “Journey to Ithaca: A Reconnaissance of Indian Myths and Mysticism”

<sup>49</sup> “In conversation: Kiran Desai meets Anita Desai”, *The Guardian* (11 November 2011). Viewed 19 August 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/11/kiran-desai-anita-desai-in-conversation>>

<sup>50</sup> Prasad Ramamurthy, “In conversation with Anita Desai”, *Condé Nast Traveller*, (1 November 2012). Viewed 19 August 2014. <<http://www.cntraveller.in/story/conversation-anita-desai>>

highlight how Desai's own definition of home shows some similarities with Bhandari's description of Ithaca, both valuing knowledge and memories. Moreover, it is also intriguing to notice that the Indian writers mentions the city of Venice as one of her possible "homes".

Having just examined the concept of Ithaca, this last section will now proceed with an analysis of the overall function of Venice in Desai's novel, based on the author's personal vision of the city, both in comparison and contrast with Ithaca. While recalling her memories in her diary, Laila also writes about her sojourn in Venice, describing it as a city "where beauty dwelt and flowered" (JI, 286). She remembers how she was in love in the old dark house, with a man that has however betrayed her later, showing her only "devotion to worldly success, to financial gain, to fame" (JI, 286). Her vision of Venice is thus positive, in contrast both with her American memories and her present in India while waiting for death inside the building which lodges *Krishna School of Dance*. At the end of the novel, Laila eventually manages to reach her Ithaca on the Himalayan mountains and to build there the "temple of the Mother Goddess of the World" (JI, 177): she has reached her goal at last and she can now experiment the joy and the bliss of an home.

Like Ithaca, Venice is a place of bliss. Tanner exhorts to think "not only of death in Venice but transfiguration and salvation in Venice as well", even describing the location as "a city in a state of perpetual self-transcendence".<sup>51</sup> Venice is similar to Ithaca since the visitor shares the same sense of divine joy in both locations, even thinking about them as ideas. However, the source of that

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<sup>51</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 209.

feeling differs, since in Ithaca it comes from the solidity of a home at last, while happiness in Venice is more connected to the sentiment of love, which requires passion and movement. Confirming this belief, Doody affirms that “Venice’s sense of holy is a sense of the moving and flowing”<sup>52</sup>. Laila can love and dance in Venice, while in India she is free to stay and meditate.

Nevertheless, because of Venice’s continuous movement of its waters and feelings, the city proves to be not solid enough to provide a stable ground to lay the foundations for a home. In *Journey to Ithaca*, Venice can indeed be chosen only as a temporary shelter, like it was for the first citizens that decided to stay and build a permanent settlement only after some decades, and only because they were forced by the barbaric invasions. To conclude, the nature of the city, as depicted by Desai in her novel, provides a shifting ground suitable for dreams, love, happiness and imagination. Venice is thus a vision, “the one permanent miracle”<sup>53</sup>, as Stokes, that belongs more to heaven than to this world. Unfortunately, it is exactly this blessed sensation of “divine and paradisaal landscape”<sup>54</sup> experimented in Venice that, as a consequence, makes the place too visionary to be called home, and to found a temple there.

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<sup>52</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 302.

<sup>53</sup> Stokes in Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 318.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

## 2. Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987)

The city of Venice can be easily identified as the main setting of *The Passion*, since it is featured in three of the four sections in which the novel is divided. The first part of the book, called *The Emperor*, tells the adventures of the male protagonist Henri, who initially works as the private chicken cook of Napoleon. The second section, on the other hand, starts with the description of a city "surrounded by water with watery alleys that do for streets"<sup>55</sup>. It can be easily perceived that the writer is referring to Venice, just by reading these very first lines which are quoted above; however the name of the city is mentioned only several pages later (P, 56), preceded by other clues such as the brief mention of the island of San Servolo (P, 50), or the allusion to 1797, year of Bonaparte's occupation of Venice, or even the reference to the well-known Basilica of Saint Mark (P, 52). This chapter, namely *The Queen of Spades*, introduces as well the character of Villanelle, a young Venetian girl blessed with the gift of webbed feet, which were, according to legends, the peculiar trait of all male boatmen born in Venice.

Afterwards, the stories of Henri and Villanelle are destined to meet in Russia in the third section, called *The Zero Winter*. During the infamous Russian Campaign of Napoleon, Henri decides to desert with his loyal Irish friend Patrick and a mysterious woman who follows the army as a *vivandière*, attending until that moment to the needs and pleasures of the officers. When sufficiently far from the French army, hence almost safe, the girl decides to tell a tale while

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<sup>55</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (1987), Vintage, London, 2001, 49. Henceforth, page references will be given in parentheses in text, as P.

resting by the fire; however she shows no sign of taking off her boots despite the cold weather and the extreme tiredness of the escape. She explains her decision with these singular words: "My father was a boatman. Boatmen do not take off their boots" (P, 89). The reader is therefore able to identify in this mysterious character the already known figure of Villanelle, due to the details of her father's profession and her webbed feet as well, that must not be exhibited to strangers. The three fellow travellers resolve to journey south, in order to reach this strange and magical city which is home to Villanelle. Unfortunately, Patrick dies in the way, while Henri and Villanelle manage to eventually arrive in Venice and live other various adventures there. The last section of the book is called *The Rock*, a title taken from the hard and rocky ground of San Servolo, where Henri is seized due to a murder. The island was historically a mental asylum, and the French soldier is found guilty of assassination but sentenced as mentally ill. He ends his days planting roses on his own garden in San Servolo, while Villanelle and their new-born daughter glide on the lagoon on a boat to wave to his window.

Having introduced the sections of Winterson's novel which are set in Venice, this chapter will now focus on exploring the Venetian tropes that can be detected in them. Firstly, the description of Venice that opens *The Queen of Spades* would be analysed, with special attention to the themes of maze and confusion, discovering thus a city impossible to map and always changing, shifting, dissolving. The ambiguous feeling of getting lost in a living city would be examined as well, introducing the idea of a double labyrinth within Venice. It is possible, indeed, to discover a maze not only in the city, with its narrow streets and flowing canals, but in the enveloping waters of the lagoon as well, whose

shallow channels have provided, in addition, even a bulwark against invading enemies in the glorious years of the Republic.

The analysis will move then to the concepts of faith, magic and believing. There are several living legends in the book, such as the miraculous eye of Patrick, or the webbed feet of Villanelle. The character of the old woman who is able to foretell can be considered legendary as well. Even though these specific myths cannot be proved as existing in the Venetian folklore, yet it can be observed without difficulty that legends of ghosts, witches, and more generally of strange happenings were often (and are still nowadays) narrated by Venetian people with fondness and a hint of fear.

The character of Napoleon and his tormented relationship with Venice in history will be analysed as well. Even though it was Napoleon who led to the fall of the Serene Republic, his efforts in order to subject the city to French rational and democratic rules would eventually prove unsuccessful. The city of Venice, often represented in literature as a living feminine entity, would be therefore examined in this study, by opposing its powerful and charming passion to the masculine and logical force of war, represented by Napoleon. In addition, Venetian people in *The Passion* seem to reflect the city's inner soul in their attitude: they are indeed too shifting and passionate to be rationalised. One example of this free and proud behaviour can be found in the character of Villanelle, which will be examined in detail in this chapter as the icon of the Venetian citizen. The character of Henri will receive further analysis as well, since it can be recognized as the model of the tourist lost in Venice, the foreigner not able to bear the intense passion that emanates from this "city of madmen" (P, 112). To conclude, this section will end with another concise

mention to the theme of gods in Venice. Moreover, some brief references to the influence of water on the city and to the dull and foggy weather in the fall season will close the chapter with a final conclusion.

## **2.1. “The short cuts are where the cats go”: The maze of Venice**

The very first description of Venice in the novel depicts the place as “the city of mazes”. There are indeed several details in these sentences which confirm the difficulty to find one's way in the city, such as the ineffectiveness of a compass or of a “bloodhound nose”. The writer narrates that in Venice it is not possible to depart every day from one fixed place in order to reach another settled destination, while taking the same route, unless by mistake. Moreover, it is impossible for natives to trust their “confident instructions to passers-by” as well, since the poor helped tourists would be likely reach “squares they have never heard of, over canals not listed in the notes” (P, 49). It can be curious to notice that Winterson is not the only author to write on the issue. In fact, also the Russian writer Joseph Brodsky, in his confessional memoir *Watermark*, invents a funny metaphor about the uselessness of stopping a Venetian to ask for directions. He narrates indeed that “in the fluently flapping hand of the native [...], the eye, oblivious to his sputtering *A destra, a sinistra, dritto, dritto*, readily discerns a fish”<sup>56</sup>.

In Venice there are no short cuts, except for cats and rats. For Winterson, Venice represents the place where nothing is permanent and well-defined: to

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<sup>56</sup> Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1992, 46.

miss the way there is an easy task such as to find it. Everything in Venice seems to be ruled not by rational choices, but only by some sort of fate, or maybe faith. The same idea of an irrational and liminal Venice can be identified also in Villanelle's description of the city to Henri and Patrick, while fleeing from the French army in Russia. She describes the city as "changeable", since in her opinion Venice is able to change its size, shrinking and expanding at will. She believes furthermore that in her city streets can "appear and disappear overnight" (P, 97), hence the difficulty to orientate the day after.

The concept of the absurd labyrinth of Venice is evoked again some pages later, during the arrival of Henri in the watery city. After landing in Saint Mark's square, Villanelle leads the French soldier "through an impossible maze", as Henri calls the city, while noticing places with odd names such as the "Bridge of Fists" and the "Canal of the Toilet" (p, 110). Moreover, when reaching Villanelle's house, the Frenchman is astonished in seeing how they are entering the backdoor of the building, while the main entrance opens into the canal. However, his adventures in Venice are yet to begin. On the third day of his visit he gets lost, since he is expecting to find clear street signs to mark his way in a city that has being described to him as always changeable from the first. He experiments thus the labyrinthine spirit of the city, recalling in his own words Villanelle's first description of Venice. Like the streets mentioned by the Venetian girl, Henri is persuaded that in Venice the churches appear and disappear as well. He assumes that they "spring up overnight like mushrooms", while dissolving early "with the dawn" (P, 112), all in order to mislead the unfortunate traveller. While analysing Henri's wandering, the theme of the "tracker dog" is recalled as well, although it is still impossible to "catch a clue

on the air" (P, 113) in order to find the way home. The only information the Frenchman is able to detect by sniffing the city in search of bread's scent are churches and squares which look always the same.

After five days of searching, Henri finally succeeds in finding Villanelle on a boat, although only by chance. Their meeting underlines the theme of the difficulty to map a living city that is endlessly able to transform. Villanelle affirms that a map "won't help", since in Venice "things change" (P, 113). The same concept has been identified also by Manfred Pfister, who highlights the difficulty to deal with "the fixitive art"<sup>57</sup> of mapping in a fluid and shifting city as Venice. Peter Ackroyd also writes on the subject, observing that Venice "must be one of the most mapped cities in the world"<sup>58</sup>. However, none of these maps seems to be completely accurate for the standard tourist, since the narrow *calli* proves to be too labyrinthine and the city on water can therefore be perceived as "unmappable", especially for non-natives. In fact, it is not so unusual to run into groups of tourists with a map, yet unable to find the place where they are standing, since some streets seems to be too small to be drawn or, if they are actually drawn on the map they are carrying, the names may not correspond directly or may have been translated incorrectly.

In order to aid Henri in his learning of the Venetian streets, Villanelle offers to take the Frenchman on a boat tour. However, Henri is not capable of remembering any of the canals and tunnels Villanelle is crossing, since the boatman's daughter is following secrets routes that only boatmen know. "The

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<sup>57</sup> Manfred Pfister, 'The Passion from Winterson to Coryate', quoted in Merja Makinen, Nicolas Tredell, *The novels of Jeanette Winterson*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, Vintage, London, 2010, 423.

cities of the interior do not lie on any map" (P, 114): she vaguely explains to a disoriented Henri. Ackroyd accurately recalls the same statement in his book about the watery city, yet employing the term "cities of the mind"<sup>59</sup> instead of cities of the interior. While showing Henri the way, Villanelle even explains why her hometown seems to be so shifting and alive, and teaches him how to behave while facing the streets and the canals of Venice, in a passage which deserves a quotation at length:

This city enfolds upon itself. Canals hide other canals, alleyways cross and criss-cross so that you will not know which is which until you have lived here all your life. Even when you have mastered the squares and you can pass from the Rialto to the Ghetto and out to the lagoon with confidence, there will still be places you can never find and if you do find them you may never see St Mark's again. Leave plenty of time in your doings and be prepared to go another way, to do something not planned if that is where the streets lead you.

(P, 113)

From Villanelle's speech, it can be possible to deduce how complex and powerful the city of Venice can be when dealing with its labyrinth. The Venetian girl considers the city as a living being, which is able to shift and change, to adapt but also to deceive. While asked about cities as *characters* in her books, Winterson replied that "cities are living things", with their "own energy [...] which last across time"<sup>60</sup>. It seems thus like the writer's message is

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Margaret Reynolds, Jonathan Noakes, *Jeanette Winterson : the essential guide to contemporary literature : Oranges are not the only fruit, The passion, Sexing the cherry, The powerbook*, Vintage, London, 2003, 19.

echoing through her character's words. Wandering in Venice also takes some time. Villanelle suggests not to hurry, since nothing in there can be planned in advance, and getting lost is often better than rushing to the destination. The native Scarpa proposes to visitors in Venice only one itinerary as well. He calls it "at random" with a subtitle: "aimlessly"<sup>61</sup>.

Having just analysed Venice as a living and labyrinthine city, it can be significant to focus now on the concept of bridge and what it means to find a bridge in the maze of Venice. Villanelle gives a short but powerful description, calling the bridge "a meeting place". Other significant denominations employed by the boatman's daughter are "neutral place" and "casual place" (P, 57). In addition, bridges were often the location chosen to end a quarrel between individuals, as Villanelle mentions. In the past, *Castellani* and *Nicolotti* (rival gangs of Venetian citizens, divided by *sestrieri*) used to have "ritualized fights on unrailed bridges"<sup>62</sup>, in order to settle disputes by pushing the other gang members in the canal. The Bridge of Fists (*Ponte dei Pugni*), noticed also by Henri in his first walk in Venice, is still nowadays recognised as one of the most prominent of these ancient battlefields, easily identified by the marble footprints on every side of the bridge, which used to mark the start point for the fights<sup>63</sup>.

The idea of the bridge as a neutral place that divides and connects "rival territories" is also pointed out in Jago Morrison's discussion on *The Passion*,

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<sup>61</sup> Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 134.

<sup>63</sup> For further information about the historical rivalry between *Castellani* and *Nicolotti*, see Alberto Toso Fei, *Veneziaenigma*, Elzeviro, Treviso, 2004, 165.

where the author recognises the “liminal relation between land and sea”<sup>64</sup> as one of the most significant features of the environment of Venice. Furthermore, Tanner as well observes the “uncertainties and doubts about boundaries”<sup>65</sup> experienced in Venice, since it is difficult to realize where the water ends and the land begins. Later in his book, Tanner deeply underlines this ambiguity by even quoting a significant extract from George Simmel’s essay called *Venedig* (Venice):

Ambiguous [...] is the double-life of the city, at once a maze of alleyways and a maze of canals, so that the city belongs to neither land nor water.<sup>66</sup>

This ambiguous maze is, therefore, intersected by bridges. Doody claims that “wandering about Venice really means crossing salt water”. The living soul of the city is, furthermore, described by the Canadian author by using Sansovino’s simile “lo corpo humano”<sup>67</sup>. By comparing Venetian canals and bridges to veins, the once *Proto* (major architect) of the Serene Republic highlights the shifting power of the city as a living being. The concept is recalled by Scarpa too, who suggests in his guide to imagine a walk in Venice from the viewpoint of a “red blood cell running along some veins”<sup>68</sup>. Even Sir Henry Wotton, the English ambassador to Venice in the early seventeen century,

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<sup>64</sup> Jago Morrison in Makinen, Tredell, *The novels of Jeanette Winterson*, 78.

<sup>65</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 246.

<sup>66</sup> Simmel quoted in Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 367. Translated by Jayne Barret.

<sup>67</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 133.

<sup>68</sup> Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish*, 6.

claims in his reports that the Venetian society and politics “fluctuated, like the element of which the city was built”<sup>69</sup>.

To conclude, Venice is thus a city which always have to be experienced not as an inanimate object, but as a living creature instead. The last example of the vigorous power of Venice's soul, where buildings could even appear from scratch, can be discovered by analysing the intriguing legend about the *Ponte de le Maravegie* (Bridge of Wonders). It is narrated that the construction of the bridge miraculously took place in a single night, just after the laying of the building materials to start the work. The identity of the builder still remains unknown, although the Venetian folk usually like to refer to the bridge as the Devil's work<sup>70</sup>.

If Venice is a living (and maybe even shifting) maze, hence comes the difficulty for foreigners not only in walking through the city, but also when planning a military invasion. In 1517, the Turkish ambassador Alì Bey Dragoman climbed up to the top of Saint Mark's Campanile in order to examine the lagoon with a bird's-eye view and possibly find the easier way to invade the city in case of war. Noticing the intents of the ambassador, the Venetian diplomats simply replied “*Sta terra è piena di zente come l'ovo, né si pol prendere*”<sup>71</sup>. It seems to be therefore impossible to fight and win against the maze of Venice and its lagoon. The Turkish diplomat could not find any other way to solve the issue, except asking the natives how to defeat the shallow canals and reach the Doge's Palace.

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<sup>69</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> See Toso Fei, *Veneziaenigma*, 138.

<sup>71</sup> “This land is like an egg: so full of people that it is impossible to take it”. From Toso Fei, *Veneziaenigma*, 259.

Regarding the issue of defence against invasions, Doody describes the labyrinthine quality of the Venetian lagoon as a successful attempt to “foil enemy action”<sup>72</sup>, identifying then two labyrinths, “one within another”<sup>73</sup>, firstly in the city itself and secondly in the network of islands of the lagoon. In fact, the typical features of the maze can be recognised not only in the central Venice, with its bridges and narrow alleys and flowing canals, but in the shallow bottom of the lagoon as well, which has even acted as a powerful shield against enemy nations. Venetians people strongly believed in the defence system of their labyrinthine lagoon. This is the main reason why the Doge's Palace is not fortified, nor build as the traditional medieval castle of the mainland. Moreover, it lies not in the middle of the city, like a citadel, but near the water, acting as a splendid main gate for the Republic, able to be seen first by foreigners when reaching Venice from the lagoon.

If the Turkish ambassador Alî Bey eventually desisted from trying to defeat the Serene Republic, many other nations attempted to invade, even managing to conquer some of the Venetian territories such as Chioggia or Pellestrina, but never succeeding in reaching the heart of the Republic. The most prominent Venetian enemy during the centuries was the fellow maritime Republic of Genoa. However, it is the invasion by Pepin, son of Charlemagne and King of Franks, which can be possibly mentioned as the most vigorous victory of the Venetian maze against foreign armies. Pepin tried to invade in 810, reaching the island of Malamocco (now better known as the Lido) but he was unable to proceed further. The Frank King encountered the furious and heroic resistance

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<sup>72</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 160.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

of the Malamoccans, who “showed no sign of weakening”<sup>74</sup> and, although being under siege, even bombarded the enemies with bread when threatened with starving.

There is another peculiar legend regarding the advance of Pepin toward the heart of Venice, which clearly shows the ever cunning attitude of Venetian people, even if old and weak. It is narrated that the king of Franks once asked an old woman of Malamocco for directions in order to reach the Ducal Seat of Rialto. She simply answered with “the old Venetian instruction, *sempre dritto*”<sup>75</sup> (straight ahead) pointing treacherously toward Saint Mark’s basin. The Frankish fleet got therefore stuck in the muddy sandbanks of the shallow lagoon and was easily destroyed by Venetian sailors. Defeated, Pepin was forced to leave and never engaged Venice again. Thenceforth, the marshy waters of the lagoon constantly kept on acting as a “strong barrier against any invader”<sup>76</sup>, until Napoleon’s arrival.

Unlike his predecessor Pepin, the French Emperor did not have to fight the maze in 1797. Doody states that even at that time the shallow lagoon would have protected Venice “for two or three months”<sup>77</sup> against Napoleon’s army, although even fighting against France would not have changed the ultimate fate of the Republic. Instead of embarking in a hopeless bloodshed, the last Doge Ludovico Manin unwillingly chose to preserve the buildings of Venice and the lives of its citizens over the glory and pride of the Serene Republic. In the end, no foreign force was ever able to defeat the powerful maze of Venice. In

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<sup>74</sup> Norwich, *A History of Venice*, 22.

<sup>75</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 13. See also Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 278.

<sup>76</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 137.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

fact, despite his initial success in conquering the city, even the character of Napoleon depicted in *The Passion*, would have trouble dealing with Venice's irrational labyrinth of streets, as it will be explained in detail in the section dedicated to the French emperor.

## **2.2. “With faith, all things are possible”: Magic and Myths, Ghosts and Legends in Venice**

If the city of Venice can appear as a treacherous maze in which one can get lost easily, as a consequence, when approaching the lagoon, it is required to rely on stability in order to survive the labyrinth. Hence comes the need to believe in ancient traditions, in miracles and magic, as well as the effort to create myths and legends in order to build a solid base where it would be easier to live without being carried away by the shifting power of the city. After her description of the maze, even Villanelle states that “in this mercurial city, it is required you do awake your faith” (P, 49). Faith and believing are therefore the keys to survive the maze without fighting it, to understand the almost magical influence of the shifting city.

In the literary tradition, Venice has been often represented in magical terms, as in Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, where the city is described while rising “as from the stroke of the enchanter's wand”<sup>78</sup>. Tanner recollects in his book some quotations concerning Venice as an enchanted location. For

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<sup>78</sup> 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', Canto IV, Stanza I, in Jerome J. McGann (edited by), *Byron*, Oxford University Press, 1986, 148.

instance, he reports Mrs Radcliffe's belief of Venice as a "fairy city"<sup>79</sup>, as well as Mrs Piozzi's assumption about the enchanting effect produced by Venetian architecture when "illuminated [...] by the moon at full, rising out of sea"<sup>80</sup>. Furthermore, he also quotes Milton Wilson, who asserts that

certainly Venice became more magical as she became less real;  
and, when the republic died, the ghost of a city became more  
enchanted than ever.<sup>81</sup>

The collapse of the Republic has been described in magical terms by Ruskin as well, who depicts the fall of Venice as an "enchanter's spell" which has been "broken in the weakness of the moment"<sup>82</sup>. Venice proves therefore to be enchanted even after his decline as a nation, although inhabited only by the ghosts of its glorious past.

As examined before, magic and legends are always been part of the traditional Venice, at least in literary works. In *The Passion*, the concept of magic plays a significant role in the characterisation of Winterson's own vision of Venice. In fact, several legends are narrated in the novel and the characters always moves in a world full of supernatural circumstances. The first legend concerning this fictional Venice is recounted by the words of Villanelle herself, who mentions rumours whispering that in Venice boatmen's sons are always born with webbed feet and able to walk on water, if the pregnant mother carefully follows a particular and slightly frightening ritual. She describes then

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<sup>79</sup> Mrs Radcliffe in Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 19.

<sup>80</sup> Mrs Piozzi in Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Wilson in Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 19.

<sup>82</sup> Ruskin in Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 131.

the ritual, which includes a boat trip to the island-cemetery at night and a prayer at the tomb of the most recently dead in the family.

Villanelle knows these boatmen-only secrets, since her father was one. During her adventure, she continuously reminds the reader and her fellow characters that boatmen cannot take off their boots. However, her father did not respect the strictly tradition: he revealed his secret to a tourist and suddenly disappeared without traces. Legends are not to be taken lightly in *The Passion*. However, even after her husband's death, Villanelle's mother decides to "go ahead with the gloomy ritual" (P, 51), since the baby she is expecting can be still considered son or daughter of a boatmen. Some months later, several omens begins to appear just before Villanelle's birth. In fact, she was born not only under the bad sign of an eclipse of sun, but also with the peculiar webbed feet of boatmen, which were usually inherited by males only. This odd mistake could have been caused maybe because of her mother's loss of rosemary in the water during the ritual, or to the absence of a real grave for her father to place the offers. It could have been also due to the foolish behaviour of the boatman who broke traditions, or to her mother's new marriage to a baker.

Nevertheless, it was impossible for the midwife to cut through the flesh, as the webbed feet were a divine gift. The gift proves, furthermore, to be truly useful, since it enables Villanelle to walk on water, just as the legend tells. Although she is blessed with this extraordinary power, she employs her talent only twice, the first time after falling in love to the Queen of Spades and the second one in order to save Henri after the fat cook's murder.

The legend of boatmen's webbed feet is not the only supernatural fact which can happen in Venice. The place itself vibrates with magic, symbolized

by the “city within the city that is the knowledge for a few” and, as a consequence, by the old fortune teller who represents the icon of this inner city. Villanelle introduces her as a former rich woman, who used to keep “a fleet of boats and a string of cats” (P, 53). She lost everything after Napoleon’s invasion and then became the wretched woman who now lives “in the silent city” (P, 54) and who “will tell your fortune, depending on your face” (P, 49). The fortune teller’s poor existence lies among mud and slime, yet she is able to use magic. She foretells indeed Villanelle’s and Henri’s fate, predicting with precision both the love affair with the Queen of Spades and the murder of the fat cook. The city of Venice experiments thus the same contradiction of the old woman: it may seem powerful and enchanted, but “it cannot be an escape from or a transcendence of the natural”<sup>83</sup>. Despite being created by the power of the enchanter’s wand, as Byron writes, it is true as well that the beauty of Venice arises from “mud and sea-weed”<sup>84</sup>.

The last significant happening occurred in Venice and concerning a legendary and almost frightening background, regards the loss and recovery of Villanelle’s heart. Henri is not able to believe the Venetian girl at first, although she patiently explains that Venice “is an unusual city” and that people there “do things differently”. When the Frenchman discovers that Villanelle really lacks her heart, he simply replies that “it was fantastic” (P, 116). Being the city too much incredible (even insane) for his narrow mind, Henri is not able to distinguish Venetian reality from dreams of his imagination. In fact, both during and after the recovery, the Frenchman cannot yet fully believe these mysteries

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<sup>83</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 126.

<sup>84</sup> Pope in *Ibid.*

which enfolds the city of Venice. The day after the event, he describes indeed the whole experience as “fantasy” and “nightmares” (P, 121).

The whole collection of magical myths included in *The Passion*, like the webbed feet that unable boatmen to walk on water or the physical loss of a heart during a gamble, could be completely regarded as literary inventions of the author, devised in order to enrich the narration with captivating elements. Winterson is literally inventing her own vision of Venice, since she personally states that she had not visited the city before writing the book, adding to be really fond of this peculiar choice, and considering it “perfect because Venice doesn't really exist.”<sup>85</sup> Winterson is thus free to create her own literary city, by “just imagin[ing] it.”<sup>86</sup> However, she did not write completely from scratch, but provided indeed support to the geographical and historical sceneries of her book by reading Jan Morris's popular guide to Venice. There she discovered, among some other materials, also the history of the island of San Servolo, which retains a significant degree of importance in the development of the novel, as the eventual prison of the mad Henri. Pfister sustains this thesis by stating that “all her information on Venice can be found in this [Morris's] travel guide”<sup>87</sup>, and adding that Winterson did not need to discover anything new about the city when starting to write her book, since “everything in Venice is a palimpsest – down to its cats and down to the minor island in the lagoon”<sup>88</sup>, just like San Servolo and San Michele's cemetery.

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<sup>85</sup> Jeanette Winterson, “The Passion”, *Jeanette Winterson's Website* (2013). Viewed 31 May 2014. <<http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/book/the-passion/>>

<sup>86</sup> Interview by Audrey Bilger, “Jeanette Winterson, The Art of Fiction No. 150”

<sup>87</sup> Pfister in Makinen, Tredell, *The novels of Jeanette Winterson*, 66.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Even if capable of creating a powerful and almost Venetian atmosphere in the novel, none of Winterson's invented legends could be thus considered as part of the real Venetian folklore, at least according to the personal opinion of Alberto Toso Fei, an expert researcher in local history and myths. Yet, it is also a fact that Venice is deeply endowed with its own stories and legends of magical happenings, which Toso Fei accurately explores in his studies. The first tale collected by the Venetian historian which is worth to be narrated here, regards both love sickness and the career of boatman. The story is set near the already mentioned *Ponte de le Maravegie*, and features an athletic young man, skilled in the art of Venetian rowing and winner of several boat races, and a not-so-good-looking young woman, who falls deeply in love with him. After some misunderstandings between the two youngsters, like the mistaking of the lady for a wicked witch, love is able to blossom and the two lovers eventually marry, but not before the glorious victory of the boatman in the most prominent *Regata* of the year<sup>89</sup>.

Another significant legend regarding boats and witches (real ones this time) takes place in *Cannaregio*, near *Fondamente Nove*'s docks. It tells the story of an angry boatman, who finds his boat docked in the wrong place, and thus sleeps below the deck in order to find the truth under this change of position. Astonished, he discovers that the usurpers of his boat are seven witches, and he assists as well to their sabbath, after a flying trip to Egypt. The day after, back to Venice, he refers this weird adventure to his friends, who refuse to believe to his story at first, suddenly changing their idea when seeing

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<sup>89</sup> For further readings about the legend of "The seven sisters of The Bridge of Wonders", see Toso Fei, *Veneziaenigma*, 138-141.

the fresh date palm's branch which the boatman had brought back from the desert<sup>90</sup>.

Other superstitions and traditional beliefs about the sea and its perils could be observed as well in Ackroyd's study. The English writes states, for instance, that the iron prows of the gondolas are perhaps forged to imitate the "shining blade of [...] Saint Theodore", who was the first patron saint of Venice before the recovery of Saint Mark's corpse from Alexandria. Moreover, the recommended behaviour for sailors when facing a storm is mentioned as well. It was habit for boatmen to cross two swords to be protected against the rough weather, and to imitate a fight with the tempestuous sea by cutting the air "in the face of the coming storm".<sup>91</sup>

In addition to the legends about the sea, another important element of the Venetian folklore could be identified in the presence of several ghosts' stories scattered all over the *sestieri* of the city. Even in the book, Villanelle refers to the city as "littered with ghosts" (P, 61), since she experiments the intangible presence of several generations of rowers around her boat, while gliding softly through the lagoon. The Venetian writer Tiziano Scarpa shares the same idea of Villanelle, stating that Venice is not only "crammed full of ghosts", but even "encrusted with imagination" and sinking under "an impressive pile of apparitions"<sup>92</sup>. In order to prove the importance of ghosts in Venice folklore, Toso Fei carefully gathers some of these phantoms' stories in his study, dividing them in *sestieri*.

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<sup>90</sup> See *Ibid.*, 53-55.

<sup>91</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 25.

<sup>92</sup> Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish*, 70-71.

For instance, in *Cannaregio*'s area, there are lots of whispers about some children's ghosts in the old house of Tintoretto, as well as rumours about the several and heterogeneous presences in the *Casino de li Spirti* (Spectres' House), as well as in the haunted building of *Calle Larga dei Proverbi*. On the other hand, in the *sestriere* of *Dorsoduro*, an ancient legend is narrated, which tells about a love oath between a young girl and her beloved who, after his death, continued to haunt the poor woman, until the local priest performed an exorcism against the ghost. Moreover, in *San Marco*'s district, the location of *Campo Manin* is well known for the story of great-grandmother's Adriana, who peacefully haunts her former house sitting in her sofa. The "polite ghost of Rialto" is indeed the legend associated with *San Polo*, which recounts the story of a mirror where an eighteen-century phantom used to bow down in sign of courtesy. Finally, in *Santa Croce*'s residential district, tales are narrated about several oppressive apparitions in *Ca' Corner de la Regina*, as well as about a peculiar ghost of a Japanese samurai, haunting the Oriental Art Museum in *Ca' Pesaro*<sup>93</sup>.

To conclude, it is then proved that, when moving in this fictional Venice imagined by Winterson, the shifting powers of her representation of a living city cannot be fully and safely experienced unless by believing in faith and by respecting magical traditions. The foolish behaviour of Villanelle's father represents, for instance, an act of defiance against the traditional secret of boatmen, which he carelessly sells for money to a tourist. In order to avoid this tragic fate, *The Passion* explains to its readers that in Winterson's own Venice

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<sup>93</sup> For further readings about Venice ghosts' apparitions, see Toso Fei, *Veneziaenigma*, 22, 51, 58-59 for *Cannaregio*, 144-47 for *Dorsoduro*, 209-11 for *San Marco*, 297 for *San Polo* and 335, 336 for *Santa Croce*.

magic should never be underestimated, since the power of traditions is always able to affect the characters' lives.

### **2.3. “Why did we want a public garden?”: Napoleon and Venice**

The tormented relationship between Napoleon and the city of Venice is first mentioned in the novel by the character of Villanelle, who denigrates the French Emperor as the man who “demolished our churches on a whim and looted our treasures”. She refers as well to Josephine, Napoleon's wife, stating that she “has jewels in her crown that come out of St Mark's” (P, 52). Villanelle is not particularly angry towards French people living in Venice by the time, stating that she “ignore[s] them” (P, 53). However she feels deeply sorry when thinking about Saint Mark's horses, stolen from the Basilica and “thrown [...] up in some readymade square in that tart of town, Paris” (P, 52), or about the public garden built under Napoleon's request by demolishing four churches in the zone near the *Arsenale* and there planting “regimental pines” (P,112), a type of trees not so suitable to the Venetian landscape. Although these political and physical changes to the city are affecting her daily life, Villanelle easily manages to survive, helped by her Venetian cunning way of thinking, by taking advantage of French people playing at the Casino and during the celebration of Bonaparte's birthday as well. Even though she declares that “what we Venetians had to celebrate was not clear” (P, 54), she is able indeed to earn quite some money in that single night, both by working at the Casino's table and by stealing wallets during the firework's spectacle.

Villanelle's thoughts and actions seem to perfectly embody the common response of real Venetian citizens at that time. When Napoleon declared “*Io sarò un Attila per lo Stato Veneto*”<sup>94</sup> in his “heavily accented Corsican Italian”<sup>95</sup>, he was expecting to battle against an evil nation, with tortures and dubious justice, full of secret plots and horrible prisons. However, when actually opening the *piombi* and *pozzi* after his settlement in Venice, he discovered that, apart from three political prisoners legitimately imprisoned after a fair trial, the place was almost empty. Furthermore, Bonaparte was imagining the Venetian citizens as oppressed people struggling for their freedom, and tried thus to convince them by “announcing the creation of a democracy, inviting the populace to choose its representatives”<sup>96</sup>. Nevertheless his assumptions were actually wrong, since the working population, unlike the intimidated nobles, was strongly in favour of the Venetian government, and replied to Bonaparte's occupation by “roaming the streets, crying ‘*Viva San Marco!*’”<sup>97</sup>.

In addition to these political revisions, the French Emperor established as well a forced “Festa Nazionale”<sup>98</sup>. A Tree of Liberty was lifted in Saint Mark's square, where the insignia of the previous government (the ducal *cornio*, obligingly provided by Ludovico Manin, and a copy of the Golden Book) were publicly burned. Despite the French celebratory intents, Norwich informs that the Venetian folk were “in no mood for rejoicing”, as Villanelle also confirms through her words. Moreover, they also were quite “shocked and stunned to find their city occupied by foreign troops for the first time in its thousand years of

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<sup>94</sup> “I shall be an Attila to the State of Venice.” From Norwich, *A History of Venice*, 625.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 629.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 630.

<sup>98</sup> “National Celebration”, *Ibid.*, p. 632.

history"<sup>99</sup>. Yet they are not to blame, since their "matchless square that Bonaparte had contemptuously called the finest drawing-room in Europe" (P, 55) was now staging a totally demoralizing celebration, featuring the representatives of the former Venetian government obliged to "stand by and applaud while all their proud past was symbolically consigned to the flames"<sup>100</sup>.

After his betrayal against the Emperor and his arrival in Venice, Henri experiments the shame of being a Frenchman in a conquered city. When he gets lost for five days, he suddenly realizes that he is unable to ask for directions, because he feels too "embarrassed to speak French to these people". Moreover, he immediately notices the lacks of street signs, which prove to be only a messy combination of the same few names repeated two or more time in different places, if not completely missing. He inevitably ends up stating that "not even Bonaparte could rationalise Venice" (P, 112).

The same idea is recalled and extended in Cath Stowers's writings as well. In fact, she explores the topic of the complex relationship between Bonaparte and Venice as a gender issue, by stating that

Napoleon personifies the masculine linear force of history-making, rationality and war, where the feminine, woman's history, becomes charted out of sight. [...] Set against the uniformity of Napoleon's military whereby 'straight roads follow, buildings are rationalised, street signs are always clearly marked' is the alternative non-uniform, multi-form model of Venice, which 'not even Bonaparte can rationalise'.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 633.

<sup>101</sup> Stowers in Makinen, Tredell, *The novels of Jeanette Winterson*, 60.

By employing Henri's own words when describing Venice, Stowers identifies indeed the city as a "place of difference, of femininity"<sup>102</sup>, and for this reason clearly opposing Napoleon's masculine brute force with its shifting and subtle power. Despite having completely rejected Bonaparte's love for rationality and war, Henri still remains male and a soldier as well, feeling therefore unable to reconcile with the intense feminine nature of the city, but being at the same time deeply attracted by it.

The association between the city on water and the female gender can be regarded as one of the most classical tropes of the literature about Venice. For instance, Tanner associates with ease the city of Venice to "the feminine, sexuality"<sup>103</sup>, while Ackroyd states that "Venice has been called a feminine city", adding moreover that "the presence of water is also believed to encourage sensuality"<sup>104</sup>. Water is indeed one of the major symbols of femininity, while fire, which is also the emblem of war, can be more easily related to men. Standing out among the many literary references about the female Venice, Cradford describes the city as "the living body of a human being", recalling thus the idea of Venice as a living and shifting being, as fully explored in the maze's section. Furthermore, he lately compares this living city to "a woman of divine beauty, yet almost tragically jealous of her own freedom"<sup>105</sup>. The living Venice is indeed female, it represents a real woman with feelings, ambitions and experiences to share.

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 181.

<sup>104</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 328.

<sup>105</sup> Crawford in Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered*, 103.

If Venice embodies sensuality and passion, then the perfect avatar for the city could be easily found by looking at ancient mythology, which provides the most sensual and powerful woman of all times: Aphrodite, also called Venus. The ancient goddess of love is indeed often represented as the icon of the city of Venice, as it can be noticed by reading the following epigram:

Aut Venus à Venetis sibi fecit amabile nomen,  
Aut Veneti Veneris nomen, et omen habent.<sup>106</sup>

Concerning the issue of Venice as the avatar of the love goddess, Pfister is able to observe that many literary texts, like the epigram above, “punned upon the phonetic closeness”<sup>107</sup> of Venice and Venus. In fact, it can be easily perceived how the two names seem etymologically related, although there are no linguistic proofs about Venice’s derivation from Venus. Another affinity shared by Venice and Venus could be their similar births: both of them arose from sea waves, thanks to divine will. Furthermore, according to legends, the estimated birth date of the Republic of Venice was “25<sup>th</sup> March 421, when Venus was in the ascendant”<sup>108</sup>. These close resemblances between the living city and the female goddess also succeed in confirming the relevance of Venice as a city of gods, as explored in the section dedicated to *Journey to Ithaca*.

Venus is not the only woman chosen as an symbol of the city on water. In fact, Venice can be represented as well as a “personification of Justitia, the

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<sup>106</sup> “Either Venus from the Venetians made herself a lovable name / or the Venetians have their name and significance from Venus”. Translation from Doody, *cit.*, p. 238. The excerpt is taken from an anonymous poet quoted in Giovanni Nicolò Doglione’s *Venezia trionfante et sempre libera*, 1613, as recorded in Shaul Bassi, Alberto Toso Fei, *Shakespeare in Venice: Exploring the city with Skylock and Othello*, Elzeviro, Treviso, 2007, 50.

<sup>107</sup> Pfister in Makinen, Tredell, *The novels of Jeanette Winterson*, 67.

<sup>108</sup> Bassi, Toso Fei, *Shakespeare in Venice*, 51.

feminine figure of Justice"<sup>109</sup>, usually depicted with her sword at hand and surrounded by lions. These two peculiar details actively contribute to strengthen the affinity between the female image of Justice and the city of Saint Mark, whose lion sometimes also carries a sword, when portrayed on the Venetian war flags. Another famous representation of the female city could be easily recognized in the Christian figure of the Virgin Mary. She is indeed "the most popular feminine image in Venetian art"<sup>110</sup>, with several churches dedicated to her, or even built after an apparition or a miracle. For example, the *Madonna dell'Orto*'s name originates from the legend about a statue of the Mother and Child which presumably "fell from the heavens"<sup>111</sup> into an orchard there. In addition, the church of *Santa Maria Formosa* obtains its denomination from its founder's dream, in which the Virgin Mary presented herself to him as a woman *formosa*, which can mean at the same time elegant and beautiful, but also "buxom", "well-endowed"<sup>112</sup>. The "formosa" characteristic can be seen as not only Mary's trait, but it also recalls one of the main attributes of Venus as well, hence linking the image of the Christian Mother with the pagan goddess, both powerful women, fitting to represent Venice and its power.

Whether symbolized by Venus, Justitia or Mary, the female representation of the city of Venice always embodies the values of "potency, the power of the state, the power of the future"<sup>113</sup>. Venice is thus seen as the "lady of desire, the queen who controls wealth, and takes rather than gives"<sup>114</sup>, showing with her

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<sup>109</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 238.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

power the absolute superiority of the Venetian State over both its enemies and allies. As the only nation blessed by the heavens, Venice is thus worthy to be called "mayden citie", as Coryat states in his *Crudities*, since "it was never conquered".<sup>115</sup> Some centuries after Coryat's eulogy, and even after the fall of the Republic as well, Wordsworth recalls the same image in his sonnet "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic". The Romantic poet describes the already defeated Venice of the past as she was a young woman looking for a mate, stating that:

She was a maiden city, bright and free;  
No guilt seduced, no force could violate;  
And, when she took herself a Mate,  
She must espouse the everlasting Sea.<sup>116</sup>

The last verse refers to the famous ceremony of the wedding with the Adriatic, in which the Doge threw his ducal ring into the sea as a symbol of everlasting dominion over the waters.

In conclusion, it can be easy to notice how Venice regarded herself as an "unconquered and unconquerable"<sup>117</sup> city. For this reason, even after the fall by the hand of Napoleon, who finally managed to win against the maiden city, Venice was still able to maintain its peculiar habits and strong distinctive traits. Although having conquered it with the masculine force of war, the Emperor did

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<sup>115</sup> Coryat in William Edward Mead, "Wordsworth's 'Maiden City'", *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 25, No. 6 (June 1910), p. 174-176. Published by The John Hopkins University Press. Viewed 12 May 2014. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2916918>>

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 137.

never succeed in totally dominating the female and irrational city of water, and eventually gave up even rationalising it.

#### **2.4. “And our own souls? They are Siamese”: Villanelle as the icon of Venetian citizens**

Shortly after having narrated the legend of boatmen's webbed feet and the story of her birth, Villanelle proceeds then to describe the common attitude of Venetian people towards their fate and when approaching foreigners. She defines Venice as “an enchanted island for the mad, the rich, the bored, the perverted” (P, 52), closely recalling in this way Henry James's well-known definition of Venice as an appealing location for foreigners. In his *Italian Hours*, the American-born British writer describes the city as a place of refuge for “the deposed, the defeated, the disenchanting, the wounded, or even only the bored”. Moreover, he also adds that “such people came for themselves”, carrying to Venice nothing more than “the egotism of their grievance and the vanity of their hopes”.<sup>118</sup> The close resemblance between the two descriptions can be perceived without difficulty, strengthened as well by Villanelle's other references to “French and Austrians pleasure-seekers” in addition to the “stream of English and [...] Russians intent on finding satisfaction” (P, 55).

Deprived of their proud and free Republic and surrounded by all these guests searching only for pleasure, Villanelle and the Venetian citizens are still able to survive, by abandoning themselves “to pleasure” as well (P, 52). In order

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<sup>118</sup> James, *Italian Hours*, 50.

to demonstrate the healthy effect of Venetian passion on its people, Judith Seaboyer exposes a peculiar thesis about the contrast between Venetian emotions and French nationalism once again. She explains French struggle for patriotism as a reaction to passions repressed and channelled into war. On the other hand the Venetian citizens, while acknowledging pleasure as vital, "seem not to be susceptible to ideas of nationalism". She asserts moreover that passion is also one of the possible explanations to the peaceful attitude of Venetians folk towards the invaders. In fact, in the book French people are "ignored rather than hated".<sup>119</sup> Guided by pleasure and passion, the Venetians are thus able to realize that hating is pointless, preventing their destruction by simply enjoying healthy pleasures. Henry James seems to agree also with those reflections about Venetian citizens, stating indeed that "the best way to enjoy Venice is to follow the example of these people and make the most of simple pleasures"<sup>120</sup>.

James is not the only writer who associates Venice with pleasure. In fact, the city on water has often been linked to the concepts of luxury and passion, both before and after the fall of its Republic. For instance, Tanner identifies in Sir Roger Ascham, an English scholar born in the sixteen century, one of the first contributors to the current conception of Venice as "a place, *the* place, of love, lechery, sensuality, prostitution, *as well as* a place of wise rulers and just laws". He describes as well its citizens as "notably free and, perhaps hence, notably licentious", an idea which is also confirmed by the existence in the

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<sup>119</sup> Seaboyer, in Makinen, Tredell, *The novels of Jeanette Winterson*, 64.

<sup>120</sup> James, *Italian Hours*, 5.

Elizabethan London of a brothel simply called 'Venice'.<sup>121</sup> Pemble confirms this belief as well, by stating the lack of "morality and conformity" in Venice, while underlining at the same time the positive experience originated from living in the city, which inspires "vivid and [...] intense" feelings of pleasure.<sup>122</sup>

Moving the analysis from real history to literary fiction, the charismatic character of Villanelle can be easily identified as avatar of the typical Venetian citizen, starting from the very meaning of her name. Despite sounding French, the term "villanelle" originally refers to an old style of rustic song, derived from the Italian's word *villano* (peasant)<sup>123</sup>. Named from an ancient form of poetry, Villanelle seems to be destined to enjoy pleasure from birth. Her name is indeed able to clearly reflect both her passionate life and the peculiar ability to survive by disguising herself.

The first reference to concealment in the book can be recognized in the prophecy of the fortune teller of the inner city, where the old woman refers to Villanelle's name as a disguise, advising in addition the young girl to be careful with "dice and games of chance" (P, 54). This prediction really seems to fully fit Villanelle's life, since the Venetian woman cross-dresses daily to work at the Casino, spreading cards while disguised as a boy. It can be interesting to notice how Villanelle informs the readers that she would have preferred a boatman's career, if only that work would not have been forbidden "on account of [her] sex" (P, 53). However, in this case, the real Venice demonstrates to be less discriminatory towards women than the literary city depicted in *The Passion*. In

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<sup>121</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 5.

<sup>122</sup> Pemble, *Venice Rediscovered*, 109.

<sup>123</sup> "Villanelle", *Encyclopaedia Britannica online*. Viewed 7 June 2014. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/629119/villanelle>>

fact, a drawing taken from the book *Habiti d'Huomeni et Donne Venetiane*, and related by Doody as well, depicts a female boat's race in the seventeenth century, clearly showing women's experience with boats and confirming as well the fluidity of Venetians with gender roles <sup>124</sup>.

Despite aspiring a boatman's career, Villanelle proves to be happy enough with her employment at the Casino as well. Doody provides a brief description of the term "casino" (meaning "little house"), defining the word as a "privately owned place of public resort", in which "coffee and other refreshments, as well as gambling opportunities, could be provided" <sup>125</sup>. Villanelle is indeed accustomed with bets and games of chance, being a gambler, and even a cheater herself. While basking in a church during Christmas time, the young girl stops to reflect about going to confession, declaring that she steals and cross-dresses to survive. Furthermore, she also explains her deep love for the night, since disguise is easier in darkness, adding as well that the obscurity of the dark hours also helps while conducting Venetian "trades, secrets and diplomacy" (P, 56).

Other references to secrecy and disguise in Villanelle's experience can be discovered in her use of the verb "conceal" (P, 59) when referring both to the bottle of the "best champagne" and to her secret love with the Queen of Spades, reflecting in this way her wearing of a double mask, physical and emotional. Moreover, by naming Venice as the "city of disguise, wit and wealth" (P, 150), Villanelle also contributes to strengthen the idea of Venetians as rich, passionate and mysterious people. In conclusion, the Venetian trope of

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<sup>124</sup> Drawing printed in Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 113.

<sup>125</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 67.

disguising by wearing a mask (both physical, as the cross-dressing, or emotional, as the poker face) can be easily summarized with Tanner's brilliant analysis of carnival and masquerade. The British author affirms indeed that masking and disguise

involve intimations of the inversion or collapse of hierarchy; the destabilization of genre and perhaps gender; a promiscuous mingling of both classes and sexes; a suspension or failure of habitual taxonomies; [...] possibilities of metamorphosis; a liberation from conventions.<sup>126</sup>

Most of the characteristics listed above can be easily traced in Villanelle's behaviour, such as the fluidity in genders, the metamorphosis and the collapse of conventional thought, confirming in this way the iconic role of Winterson's character as an avatar of the typical Venetian citizen.

In addition to their passion for pleasures and their ability in disguising, the Venetians (and Villanelle as a consequence) are usually notorious also for their clever pragmatism and cunning attitude towards life. For example, Villanelle shows her astute but also treacherous behaviour by stealing vulnerable pockets during the fireworks at Bonaparte's celebration. Moreover, she narrates as well that French soldiers are used to light up the streets at night, in order to glimpse at potential shadows in the darkness, to protect themselves from Venetian "soft feet and thin knives" (P, 57). In addition, Villanelle also refers to her "Venetian pragmatism", when deciding not to stab the fat cook in the Casino and choosing to play "a little game" instead (P, 63).

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<sup>126</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 41

This choice to play with the cook in order to know the origin of his funds deeply reflects Doody's belief that Venetian people "love conscious tricks"<sup>127</sup>. In addition, the Canadian writer also analyses the values of "wit, audacity, and efficiency"<sup>128</sup> as some of the most admired qualities in Venetian society. She observes as well the correlation of these typical Venetian traits with the art of Mercury, confirming again the link between the holy city and the ancient gods. Mercury is indeed the deity associated both with trade and theft (or better with dishonest trades), who employs cunning tricks and audacious manners in order to acquire profits and advantages. His smart personality can be seen as fully fitting both Villanelle's behaviour and the collective Venetian attitude when dealing with trades and business. Another mythological character possibly associated with the city of Venice could be identified in the figure of Odysseus, since both the Greek warrior and the Venetian citizens display fertile talent with "wiles and devices"<sup>129</sup>. The treacherous attack upon the Byzantine Empire during the Fourth Crusade could indeed be associated without difficulty to Ulysses's expedient of Trojan wooden horse, confirming again the link between Venice and audacious tricks.

In conclusion, this section has attempted an analysis of the fictional character of Villanelle, comparing the similarities between the boatman's daughter and some historical and literary representations of other Venetian citizens. It has been demonstrated, therefore, how they both share the same typical features, namely their carefree attitude, cunning wits, and their ability in disguising as well, even without wearing a real mask. Considering these three

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<sup>127</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 285.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

features of Villanelle as characteristic of the Venetian folk as well, the young Venetian girl can thus be recognized, at least in *The Passion*, as an icon of the whole spirit of the city and its inhabitants. In fact, her strangeness, displayed by her habits of cross-dressing and stealing, as well as by her feet, webbed from birth, proves not to be judged as abnormal by her fellow Venetians, since those features seem to represent the soul of the city itself. This careless and neutral behaviour towards life and its oddity, typical of Venetian people, could be eventually summarized by quoting the baker's simply belief when facing her stepdaughter's webbed feet: he does not care so much about her diversity, since, in this world, "there are stranger things" (P, 61).

## **2.5. "This is a city of madmen": Henri, the foreigner in Venice**

The first encounter between the character of Henri and the city of Venice in *The Passion*, derives from Villanelle's description of the city while fleeing from the French army in Russia. In that occasion, the Venetian girl labels her native city as "changeable" (P, 97), employing also the terms "city of destiny" and "shrinking city" (P, 98) to describe it. The French soldier feels interested, from the very beginning, in this "watery city that is never the same" (P, 99), falling in love as well with the icon of Venice, represented by the character of Villanelle.

However, despite his decision to reach the "city of disguises" (P, 100), Henri is not completely convinced about this choice, since he feels already in disguise in the soldier clothes he is wearing. His most sincere desire lies indeed in coming back to his house and fields in France, more than in visiting a new mysterious city, even if lured by Villanelle's passionate emotions.

Nevertheless, for Henri there is no other choice than fleeing to Venice, since he is a deserter and, for this reason, cannot go back to France anyway. His arrival by sea explores the already mentioned tropes of Venice as a magical and “invented city ris[ing] up and quiver[ing] in the air” (P, 109). Henri is moved especially by the reflection of the buildings in the water, and the shimmering light which enfolds the enchanted Venice. Moreover, it can be also interesting to notice his reaction to Villanelle's face and emotions when landing in Saint Mark's square. Seeing the joy of homecoming in her eyes, the Frenchman is not able to resist to this look, feeling a spontaneous envy towards the Venetian girl who, unlike him, can be finally back home. Winterson's *The Passion* is thus able to demonstrate that even Venice can become an image of Ithaca, although only for natives, since all the foreigners seeking for a home there cannot bear its shifting and irrational nature.

Henri is indeed the perfect representation of this type of outsider, stunned by the numerous beauties and oddities of the city and unable to find a way home, both physically, when lost for five days, and emotionally, since the city finally drives him insane and contributes to the loss of his self. The character of Henri clearly resembles other literary figures selected from different novels, written at the beginning of the twentieth century. Andreas, for example, who acts as the main character in the unfinished novel by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, experiments the same feeling of loss as Henri. While wandering in search of a precise house, Andreas misrecognises squares and churches, getting lost so much that he finally “understands nothing and rejects any explanation”, truly

losing "all sense of direction"<sup>130</sup>. Another character sharing the same experience of both Henri and Andreas can be identified by reading Thomas Mann's well-known novel *Death in Venice*. His protagonist Aschenbach explores indeed the city by pursuing his young lover, but eventually gets lost in the "labyrinthine little streets, squares, canals and bridges" and finds himself "cheated at the end" by the irrational maze of Venice<sup>131</sup>.

In addition to his inability to find a way home when lost in Venice, one of the other experiences which contributes in alienating Henri from the city can be observed during his attempt to learn Venetian rowing. He proves to be not accustomed to boats from the very beginning, since he fails in recognising the particular shape of gondolas, showing moreover his surprise in finding out that they are rowed by "standing up" (P, 112). It is thus easy to deduce that Henri's experience on boats can end only in failure, since he is able just to cause the boat to overturn. He is forced then to bear the shame of saving Villanelle from the waters, for she is not able to swim, living "on" water, "not in it" (P, 124).

Unable to fully comprehend their peculiar behaviour, Henri labels the Venetians as madmen from the first moment. However, he finally proves to be the only real madman, since he is not able to live in harmony with the spirit of the city and is thus slowly driven to madness and then seized into San Servolo's mental asylum. The importance of the island of San Servolo for Winterson's story has already been analysed in the section dedicated to legends. However, it can be significant to recall another important event witnessed by Henri while

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<sup>130</sup> Tanner, *Venice Desired*, 226.

<sup>131</sup> Mann in *Ibid.*, p. 359.

locked up in the asylum. During the preparations for New Year's celebration, the French man reflects about the habits of that mad city, observing that

At midnight the bells ring out from every one of their churches and they have a hundred and seven at least. I have tried to count, but it is a living city and no one really knows what buildings are there from one day to the next.

You don't believe me?

Go and see for yourself.

(P, 158-9)

By recalling Villanelle's narration and his own experience while lost for five days, Henri invites the reader to believe in the powerful and magical soul of the city, avoiding in that way to make the same mistake and be swallowed by madness and despair as he did. To conclude, Venice can be easily portrayed as a city built for the main purpose of "disorienting and dismaying the foreigner and the tourist"<sup>132</sup>, and Henri's story seems only to confirm this theory.

## **2.6. "I'm telling you stories. Trust me.": Other tropes and Conclusion**

In addition to the previous references to Venus and Mercury, the trope of Venice as the city of gods deserves to be mentioned once again, since in the *Queen of Spades* there is a remarkable observation about the role of God and the Devil for the city of Venice. Villanelle informs the reader that Venetians are "philosophical people, [...] holding hands with both the Devil and God" (P, 57),

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<sup>132</sup> Reynolds, Noakes, *Jeanette Winterson: The essential guide*, 84.

thus revealing once more the shifting, irrational and contradictory attitude of the Venetian folk towards life, religion and common sense.

Another trope which would require further analysis, can be discovered by examining an event happened during Villanelle's love story with the Queen of Spades. Walking back home from her lover's house, the Venetian girl depicts a charming scene, featuring a mist-shrouded Rialto, with boats "covered and empty, apart from the cats that make their homes under the seat boards". It could be interesting to notice how both Winterson and Desai include, in their representations of Venice, a brief mention to cats in a boat. In addition to this detail, Winterson's description of the fall season deserves consideration as well, since the mist is portrayed "brooding above the water", as if it were a living being, matching in this way the description of the city as a whole (P, 68).

By examining the analysis above, it can be easily understood how fog plays an important role in *The Passion*, since it is used to describe November in Venice, characterised also by catarrh, Venetian "hateful congestion" (P, 65). The theme of fog during the fall season can be thus recognised as a traditional trope of Venice, which has been discussed by some other writers as well. For example, in his *Watermark*, Brodsky writes about "the local fog, the famous *nebbia*"<sup>133</sup>, even calling it "King Fog"<sup>134</sup>. He reports his personal experience in the city as well, describing the Venetian fog as "thick, blinding, and immobile" and capable of "obliterating [...] everything that has a shape"<sup>135</sup>. In addition to Brodsky's depiction, Ackroyd also affirms that in Venice "the fog sometimes shrouds the city so that the only sounds are those of bells and muffled

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<sup>133</sup> Brodsky, *Watermark*, 58.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

footsteps"<sup>136</sup>, confirming in this way the powerful influence, both in literature and in real life, of the foggy Venetian weather.

The concept of moving and living on water can be considered the last Venetian theme which still deserves a brief remark in this final section. The presence of water can be easily represented as a fundamental element for Venice's survival, being essential in order to preserve the wealth and security of the city. This belief can be easily traced in Winterson's novel as well, by reading the first definition of Venice in *The Queen of Spades*, which starts by describing the city as "surrounded by water" (P, 49). Moreover, it can be also fascinating to discover the author's own opinion about water in her novels, since she states that "there's always water in [her] work" and that she was using it "literally and metaphorically as a place where time could flow"<sup>137</sup>. The connection between water and time represents a fascinating theme which has been treated by Brodsky as well. In his memoir again, he states indeed that "water equals time"<sup>138</sup>, describing as well the reason why he firstly "set [his] eyes" on Venice as the perfect city to enjoy in winter:

I simply think that water is the image of time, and every New Year's Eve, in somewhat pagan fashion, I try to find myself near water, preferably near a sea or an ocean [...]. I am looking for a either a cloud or the crest of a wave hitting the shore at midnight. That, to me, is time coming out of water.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 30.

<sup>137</sup> Reynolds, Noakes, *Jeanette Winterson: The essential guide*, 23.

<sup>138</sup> Brodsky, *Watermark*, 134.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

As it could be understood by analysing the passage above, the Russian author seems to share both Desai's vision of Venice as a blessed and soothing city, in which it is possible to find refuge and bliss, and Winterson's idea of the city as a place, surrounded by water, where time is able to flow, recreating history from an invented point of view.

To conclude, it could be interesting to end the study about *The Passion* with a significant quotation from the novel, which would possibly manage to summarize many of the themes analysed in this section.

In this enchanted city all things seem possible. Time stops. Hearts beat. The laws of the real world are suspended. God sits in the rafters and makes fun of the Devil and the Devil pokes Our Lord with his tail. It has always been so. They say the boatmen have webbed feet and a beggar says he saw a young man walk on water.

(P, 76)

Reading the excerpt above, it can be easy to point out several of the Venetian tropes explored in this study, such as the idea of Venice as an enchanted city out of reality, where all can be possible, or the inversion of genders and laws like during the Carnival. In addition to those tropes, also the theme of God and gods, as well as the presence of magical elements like the webbed feet, are able to succeed in creating a living city, forever changing, so much that even the masculine Napoleon eventually gave up rationalising it.

### 3. Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997)

*The Nature of Blood* could be easily identified as a novel based on the everlasting themes of discrimination, alienation and loss of the self. Phillips's book features different stories, which continuously intersect succeeding in creating a fixed pattern of intolerance and prejudice, that easily links together historical happenings of different ages. Concerning the influence of Venice in the novel, it can be perceived without difficulty that the city is able to retain some degree of importance in the book, since Venice has been chosen as the background of two of these interlaced stories. In fact, Ledent points out that *The Nature of Blood* could convey the impression of being a response to both *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, namely the two Shakespearean plays set in the city on water.<sup>140</sup>

The noticeable connection between Phillips's novel and Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello* can be easily pointed out by analysing the Venetian adventures, as depicted in the book, of a black general who has been chosen to lead the Republic's army against the Turks. Although this character is never called by the name of Othello, the details of his story perfectly match with the background of Shakespeare's play. In his study about the re-writing of canonical literature from a postcolonial viewpoint, John Thieme analyses *The Nature of Blood* almost as a "prequel" to Shakespeare's *Othello*, stating that Phillips's adaptation "stops well short of the play's tragedy" indeed, purely

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<sup>140</sup> Bénédicte Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2002, 151.

ending with Othello's arrival in Cyprus<sup>141</sup>. Moreover, Phillips himself considers the Othello's section of his novel "like a movie prequel", adding that the story reports "what happened before the play" <sup>142</sup>. Differently from Shakespeare's tragedy, which is set mostly in Cyprus, Phillips's original rewriting seems to focus especially on Othello's first months in Venice, describing the psychological experiences of the black general in a foreign city, driven both by curiosity and desire of acceptance.

In addition to these visible references to *Othello*, it could be possible as well to recognize some similarities between Shylock's trial in *The Merchant of Venice* and the incident regarding Portobuffole's Jews in the novel. Charged, almost without evidence, of having murdered a Christian beggar to drink his blood, the community of Jews was forced to endure various accusations and persecutions from the populace, before being moved from their hometown of Portobuffole to Venice in order to be judged by the Grand Council of the Most Serene Republic for their crimes. Three of them were sentenced to death, while others sent to prison and then exiled. Albeit less evident than the references on *Othello*, some resemblances between the story of *The Merchant of Venice* and Phillips's novel could be grasped in both the presence of a group of Jews in Venice and in the act of judging them.

The significant influence of Venice in the book could be, furthermore, strengthened by reading one of the four short definitions scattered throughout the final part of the novel. Employing only few explanatory sentences, Phillips briefly explores the concepts of Venice, Othello, Ghetto and suicide. In this

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<sup>141</sup> John Thieme, *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing back to the Canon*, Continuum, London, New York, 2001, 161.

<sup>142</sup> Schatteman, *Conversations with Caryl Phillips*, 58.

definition, he describes the early Venice as an “independent city-state”<sup>143</sup>, wealthy and beautiful, as well as powerful in both economics and politics. Yet he proceeds then by illustrating the city's further decline, even claiming the risks of “polluted air, contaminated water and [...] serious flooding” (NB, 161) for the modern-day Venice. Phillips's overall depiction of the city seems to be, therefore, slightly negative, possibly in order to highlight his idea of an alienating and deceptive city for the character of Othello.

Having briefly underlined the powerful influence of Venice in the novel, this chapter will now proceed by examining some of the Venetian tropes which can be detected by reading both the Othello's and the Portobuffole's stories. Firstly, Othello's arrival in “fair” (NB, 108) Venice would be analysed in detail, focusing especially on the importance of gondolas in the Venetian society, as well as on the usual habits of gondoliers when eating, working and dressing. Another significant trope worth discussing would be the idea of love in Venice, which will be analysed by exploring the various stages of traditional courtship and marriage, as well as by examining the prominent role of courtesans in the Venetian society.

The analysis would proceed, furthermore, by focusing on the character of Othello, considered first as a powerful general of the Most Serene Republic, then as a foreigner in a deceptive and unfamiliar city. Othello's personality can be easily examined by comparing him with the character of Henri, the “other” foreigner, focusing on the differences in their attitude towards the labyrinth, as well as on their difficulties in familiarizing with Venetian customs. Moreover,

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<sup>143</sup> Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (1997), Vintage, London, 2008, 160. Henceforth, page references will be given in parentheses in text, as NB.

Othello's journey into the lagoon and his visit to the Ghetto would be mentioned as two examples of the uncertain and solitary position of the Moor in Venice, similar to the life experienced by Venetian Jews, since they both reside in the city as strangers. In addition, further information about Othello's marriage, considered as the symbol of his hope for assimilation, will be provided, even though his optimistic expectations would be eventually destined to fail in Shakespeare's tragedy. In conclusion, this chapter will end with some investigation on the Portobuffole's incident, displaying furthermore the standard procedure of the Venetian politicians when dealing with legal cases.

### **3.1. "I approached by water": Othello's arrival in Venice**

When arriving in Venice by sea for the first time, the Moorish commander seems greatly impressed by the atmosphere of magnificence which surrounds the whole city, describing his feeling as "ingenuity", since he was not prepared to withstand the compelling emotions of being at the "centre" of the world. Moreover, Othello proves as well to be particularly receptive to several details of Venetian everyday life, such as "the sails and flags" snapping in the wind, or the vigorous sound of bells chiming and the resonant voices of gondoliers. He seems to be especially moved by the magnificent "genius" of the buildings on the Grand Canal, whose great façades are decorated with "proud images" of Saint Mark's lion. In addition to his receptiveness to Venice's wonders, it can be possible to observe as well how Othello's own thoughts during the arrival closely recall the trope of Venice as an "enchanted" city, since the character openly

employs words such as "fabled" and "fair" when referring to the city-state (NB, 107-8).

When analysing Othello's landing in Venice, it could be interesting to notice how the chime of bells and gondoliers' rising voices represent the first sounds perceived with intense feelings by the commander. The sound of bells is recalled later in the book, firstly during the journey into the lagoon, in which the bells are described as "alarmed, angry and [...] arrogant" (NB, 118), in order to reflect Othello's disruptive feelings towards the city, then in the morning of the Doge's war meeting, where the same sound is now perceived as "familiar" (NB, 136), since the General's heart is already soothed by Desdemona's presence. Furthermore, the image of gondolas and gondoliers as well could be regarded as a significant aspect of Othello's sojourn in Venice. The figure of the gondolier proves to have been deeply analysed by Phillips when writing his novel. In fact, the author reports some interesting details about gondoliers' voices, as well as their habits in eating and dressing and their manual skills, adding a mention about their discretion as well.

Firstly, Phillips describes the gondolier's cry as "a half-salute, half-warning" (NB, 109) that resound within the labyrinth of Venice, always answered by another invisible boatman. In addition, he also mentions the gondoliers' practice of singing if required, such as during the episode of the balcony. As long as their songs and signals are concerned, Ackroyd interestingly suggests that gondoliers "seem to enjoy the sound of their own voices"<sup>144</sup>, while Doody reports that the Venetian boatmen of the past enjoyed singing "passages of

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<sup>144</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 229.

Torquato Tasso and other poets"<sup>145</sup>. On the other hand, even the native Scarpa represents the gondoliers when "chattering among them as they row, greeting one another, calling out to each other"<sup>146</sup>.

The second aspect of the "gondolier class" mentioned by Phillips is their frugality in food, and love for "exterior show" in exchange (NB, 110-11). The term "frugal" can be also found in Doody's description of the Republic's "*mediocritas*" when dealing with food, in which she also claims that "hunger is a Venetian experience". However, she also reports that Venetian dining rooms were "larger and glossier" than any other in Europe, adding as well that, for the Venetian noble, "hospitality [...] meant display".<sup>147</sup> Consequently, it can be possible to assume that the habit of being stingy with food, while exceeding in vanity, represents not only a gondoliers' weakness, but can be also considered as an ordinary custom of part of the Venetian society in the past.

Another significant feature regarding gondoliers can be observed by analysing their excellent skills in the art of rowing. Othello's attendant refers that "it requires only a delicate turn of the wrist for these artists [...] to guide their boats" (NB, 111). The same concept is echoed by Scarpa as well, who states that "with the flick of a wrist" they are able not only to "disengag[e] the twelve-metre black wooden beast from an impossible jam", but also to succeed in the movement "almost without looking"<sup>148</sup>. Furthermore, even Doody describes the

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<sup>145</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 71.

<sup>146</sup> Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish*, 37.

<sup>147</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 99-103.

<sup>148</sup> Scarpa, *Venice is a Fish*, 36-37.

gondolier as an “amazingly dexterous waterman”, adding other praising epithets such as “wonder-worker, secret-bearer, quasi divine know-it-all”<sup>149</sup>.

The last gondoliers' aspect worth analysing is represented by their silent discretion when dealing with the personal business of their customers. Othello's gondolier stays silent until he reaches Desdemona's balcony, then sings “in a pleasing tune” (NB, 139), reluctantly accepting even Othello's unreasonable decision to break Venetian traditions, by entering the lady's house without official permission. Later in the book, another gondolier (or maybe the same one) accepts without questioning to “silently” (NB, 146) carry Othello to his wedding at the monastery. As it could be noticed, during the Republic years, gondoliers were “praised for their discretion”<sup>150</sup>, as Ackroyd states. Doody adds, furthermore, that gondoliers “rapidly learned everything about their employer's doing and tastes”, including their secret business and the hideaways of their mistresses<sup>151</sup>.

To conclude, Phillips focuses his attention on one last element concerning the gondola's shape and colour. Othello's attendant, who comes from a family of gondoliers, passionately explains the main features of the gondola, focusing first on its “impressive length” (NB, 111) and then on the decree which forces all the noble families to paint their boats on black only, to avoid meaningless displays of luxury. Both details prove to be historically correct, for the gondola is about “11 metres long”<sup>152</sup>, which can be considered a notable length, since the boat is controlled by a single rower. Moreover, the Ducal order about the

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<sup>149</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 264.

<sup>150</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 229.

<sup>151</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 115.

<sup>152</sup> Bassi, Toso Fei, *Shakespeare in Venice*, 142.

black colour was established “on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1562”<sup>153</sup>, hence some years before the Venetian war in Cyprus. Finally, it can be also interesting to notice that Othello's attendant employs the term “recently” (NB, 111) when referring to the decree, thus proving once again the accuracy of Phillips's references on the subject of gondolas and gondoliers.

### **3.2. “The most beautiful treasure”: Love and Marriage in Venice**

The first mention to love and marriage in Othello's story vividly contrasts from the beginning Desdemona's “chastity, loyalty and honour” with the well-known treacherous “deceit” of Venetian courtesans, depicting, in this way, Othello's wife as “the most un-Venetian of women” (NB, 106). In fact, during the Renaissance, Venice was actually considered the “pleasure capital of Europe”, and its courtesans were widely celebrated even by famous authors, like Rousseau, for their “graceful manners” and charming beauty. In addition, it was really difficult to distinguish them among the ordinary Venetian ladies, since both were “expensively dressed” with gold, gems and pearls, as it could be observed in Cesare Vecellio's *De Gli Habiti Antichi et Moderni* (1509), where the ‘Cortigiana’ and the ‘Donna Venetiana’ are depicted with similar dresses and rich jewels. Moreover, even Sir Henry Wotton affirms that Venetian wives and courtesans shared the same behaviour, being “indistinguishable in clothes and manners”.<sup>154</sup> Desdemona's chastity and loyalty to her husband represents,

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Rousseau, Sir Wotton and Vecellio in E. A. J. Honigmann, edited by, *Othello*, Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, London, 1997, 9-10.

therefore, a rare and pleasant exception to this rule. However, considering the common treacherous attitude of Venetian women, Othello is never fully able to trust his devoted wife, and this doubt would eventually lead their love story into tragedy.

During his first days in Venice, and long before becoming interested in Desdemona, even Othello, recommended by his merchant friend, experiences the "sensuality" of a courtesan. He describes her as "a Venetian woman of middle years and frantic passion", adding that some "conversation" may be normally included in her pleasant business (NB, 112). In fact, the Venetian courtesans were generally renowned for their natural disposition to "intellectual conversation, repartee and poetry". Furthermore, these especially Venetian "genteel" courtesans were also depicted, unlike the common prostitutes, as "cultivated and refined" women.<sup>155</sup> The behaviour of Othello's "pleasant" companion seems to confirm this widespread belief, since she gladly explains in detail, when asked, how to court a woman according to traditions. She reveals that the established Venetian courtship for all classes usually includes several long steps, with various exchanges of traditional gifts between "would-be bride and bridegroom", and, most importantly, both families' consent in two conventional suppers. She eventually concludes her speech by affirming that, after all the passages of this sophisticated courtship, "there is only the marriage" (NB, 114).

Several months after this conversation, Othello spontaneously recalls the theme of Venetian marriage to his memory, during the meal at the senator's

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<sup>155</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 339-40.

house, by stating that Desdemona "must live a lonely life", since she is certainly "being groomed for a marriage that would be beneficial to both families" (NB, 128). When firstly speaking to Desdemona, Othello easily perceives, in her silent and composed behaviour, the strictness of her life expectations. Othello's suspicion that noble daughters, except for some occasional "visits to church", were essentially secluded at home, is confirmed by Ackroyd's studies, in which he reveals that patrician women often "stayed out of sight" and, when outside, they were usually accompanied by attendants and "wore veils". Moreover, as traditional marriage was concerned, the Venetian wife did not legitimately become part of her new husband's family, but she kept on living as a member of her father's family instead. This legal practice can be easily recognized as the main reason why, in Venice, traditional marriages between patricians were often arranged "between families rather than between individuals", confirming in this way Othello's thoughts about the future benefits of Desdemona's arranged wedding.<sup>156</sup>

In order to escape from this unwanted fate, the senator's daughter immediately accepts Othello's short and unusual courtship, persuaded as well by his good qualities in speaking. Bound by the lack of time and by the difficulty to be accepted as a couple, the two lovers choose thus not to follow the slow and impracticable habit of traditional courtship, opting for a fast and secret wedding instead. By becoming one and consuming their union in secret, they completely reject both the disadvantages and the benefits of an appropriate Venetian marriage. Despite having chosen a secret ceremony instead of a

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<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

traditional wedding, Othello remains therefore aware that marriage, which he calls "the most powerful of traditions", could be considered the only way for a Venetian woman to attain a "secure station in life" (NB, 106).

By defying traditions, Desdemona becomes thus unable to live as an average Venetian wife, while Othello, on the other hand, is slowly consumed by upsetting thoughts about his new "object of beauty and danger". He expects other men to look at him with "a combination of respect and scorn", while depicting at the same time his marriage as the "first taste of bitterness" in Desdemona's life, since she would now discover "many new and difficult truths" (NB, 148-49). Despite their current happiness, Othello eventually proves to be unable to totally free himself from the dangerous doubts originated by his secret marriage. This attitude succeeds in confirming that sexual love, in Venice, is often depicted as "tormented, secret, or [...] endangered and endangering"<sup>157</sup>, as Doody affirms in her studies.

Even though Othello and Desdemona's behaviour could be possibly perceived as unusual in their years, it is also true that the idea of secret marriage was not so unfamiliar in the Most Serene Republic. In fact, to conclude the section about marriage, it could be interesting to analyse another story concerning a secret wedding in Venice. It features two young lovers "of noble birth", namely "Elena Candiano and Gerardo Guoro", who married secretly to prevent their families from "forbid[ding] their union" and from arranging traditional marriages with different patricians. Their arrangement closely recalls Othello and Desdemona's secret marriage, but part of their story

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<sup>157</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 48.

seems to have inspired also Romeo and Juliet's legend. When obliged to accept another proposal, Elena fainted and was believed to be dead. She was buried in the Church of San Pietro di Castello, where Gerardo eventually succeeded in reviving his bride with "tears and kisses". Unlike Romeo and Juliet, or even unlike Othello and Desdemona, the young Venetian couple experienced, in the end, the "forgiveness and blessing of their parents", being therefore able to live happily ever after.<sup>158</sup>

### **3.3. "Summoned to serve this state": Othello as General**

During his first journey on the Grand Canal, Othello immediately explains the military reason why he has been summoned by the Venetian government from "the dark margins" to "the very centre of the empire". From the beginning of his story, he seems to be proud of this opportunity "to lead the Venetian army" which has been offered to him (NB, 107-8). Othello reports to the reader that, during his visits to the Doge's Palace, he is always "attended in a manner which seem[s] to reflect [his] status as General" (NB, 137). Moreover, he also reveals that the Venetian senators normally call him "their General" (NB, 146), or "revered leader of military men" (NB, 116).

Before his departure for Cyprus, even the Doge personally addresses the Moor as "his General" (NB, 158), hence recognizing the prestigious status of Othello and reminding as well the weight of his mission against the Turks. As a consequence, it can be easily observed that, in *The Nature of Blood*, the

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<sup>158</sup> Bassi, Toso Fei, *Shakespeare in Venice*, 81-82.

Republic of Venice seems to highly respect Othello's military skills, conferring on him both honour and responsibility, as the Moor commander reminds to himself before departing, by stating that "a great deal of faith ha[s] been placed in [his] abilities" (NB, 146).

When considering Othello's character as a commander of the Most Serene Republic, another significant aspect worth analysing can be found in the common Venetian practice to choose foreign military leaders to guide the Most Serene army in war. In *The Nature of Blood*, Othello himself refers that the Republic was "skilled at protecting herself from problems both within and without", adding that it was not so uncommon for the Doge to rely on foreign commanders like him, in order to "prevent the development of Venetian-born military dictatorships" (NB, 117). Ackroyd confirms Phillips's assertion, by stating that "the danger of a military coup was always present to the administration" of Venice, hence the choice of foreign generals who were normally known as *condottieri*.

These commanders were usually "deemed to be no less wise than courageous, no less virtuous than judicious". The description above seems to perfectly match with Phillips's depiction of the honourable Othello. Moreover, Ackroyd informs his readers that the *condottieri* were granted "ornate houses along the Grand Canal", such as in Othello's case.<sup>159</sup> It will not be difficult, in conclusion, to correlate the traditional figure of the *condottiero* with Othello's character. In fact, even Bartels supports the same belief, declaring that "nine critics out of ten would readily endorse the assumption that the Venetian court

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<sup>159</sup> Ackroyd, *Venice Pure City*, 221-22.

has hired Othello from the outside (most likely, North Africa) to be a mercenary soldier"<sup>160</sup>.

### **3.4. "I am a foreigner. I do not know.": Othello as the outsider**

Having already analysed the figure of Othello from the viewpoint of his military status, it would be significant to examine now the same character not as a powerful commander, but as a foreigner instead, focusing both on his fast achievements and on his difficulties to deal with Venetian customs. Phillips himself considers Othello as the "prototype of the migrant"<sup>161</sup>, as affirmed during his recent conversation in Venice. As long as the theme of the foreigner dealing with Venice is concerned, it can be therefore possible to analyse some of the Venetian experiences of the migrant Othello, in order to compare them with the adventures of the "other" foreigner already examined in this study, namely Henri from *The Passion*.

Like Henri, Othello starts to wander alone in Venice shortly after his arrival, describing his walks as "solitary migrations through the streets and along the canals" (NB, 116). However, unlike the French soldier, the Moor commander proves to be fast in learning how to move in the city, and does not fear to lose his way in order to discover the secrets of Venice. He seems to be more flexible and open-minded than Henri, as it could be clearly seen by focusing on some of the words used by Othello when describing his experiences. He employs

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<sup>160</sup> Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor – From Alcazar to Othello*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008, 168.

<sup>161</sup> Caryl Phillips, Maureen Freely and Annalisa Oboe, Conversation at "Incroci di Civiltà", Venice, 5 April 2014.

indeed the adverb “quickly” once and the verb “learnt” several times, which demonstrates that he is willing to understand Venice, its streets and its customs as quickly as possible. Moreover, Othello admits as well that he is “enjoy[ing]” this time spent in Venice, watching the everyday life of the city (NB, 109). Regarding this feeling of “pleasure” experienced by Othello while wandering in the maze of Venice, it could be interesting to report Attali’s belief about the issue, by quoting an excerpt from his study:

To enjoy being lost, also presumes the special quality of curiosity. It is what enables us to learn from losing our way, to make discoveries in the unknown, to find something through our ignorance. It means being interested in others, being alert for all kinds of differences, and putting oneself in a stranger’s place in order to understand his or her uniqueness.<sup>162</sup>

As it could be easily noticed, Othello is described, in the passage above, as a very perceptive and sensitive man, since he possesses the peculiar trait of good curiosity, which helps in understanding the unknown. This special feature strengthens the distance between Othello and the simple-minded character of Henri even more. However, despite all the “Good qualities” (NB, 167) displayed by the Moor, both Othello and Henri are destined to fail in their relationship with Venice, since they are unable to fully comprehend its “own special code” of habits and traditions. In fact, during his first months in Venice, Othello keeps on wandering the streets, while “observing the customs” of the society in which he

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<sup>162</sup> Jacques Attali, *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society: Pathways to Wisdom*, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, 1999, 79-80.

is living, until the "exploration on water and foot" becomes his "daily routine" (NB, 115-16).

Despite his quick improvements in the use of the Venetian language, Othello's first summer in Venice finally ends and, as the weather becomes colder and sadder, he begins to perceive a "new emotion of loneliness". In order to soothe his heart from the unpleasant feeling originated from this "strangely melancholic autumn", the commander decides to rent a gondola to set out on a "journey into the hearth of the lagoon" (NB, 116-17). Yet the trip turns out to be a failure, since it ends disrupted by a violent storm. During the tempest, the Moor clearly perceives for the first time that he is betraying himself, and that it would be better for him to leave his post in Venice, since he has "made no friends" (NB, 118) among the local people, being in addition not able to distinguish between friends and enemies.

Unable to sleep, Othello begins therefore to wander at nights as well. Concerning his nocturnal walks, it could be interesting to highlight the presence of some traditional tropes in his personal description of Venice at night. Firstly, he portrays the city under the moonlight, with the occasional chiming of bells and the continuous swirling of water. Moreover, he employs as well the two adjectives "blessed" and "enchanted" (NB, 121), which recall the theme of Venice as a magical and holy city. Another event regarding Othello's wanderings, which is worth analysing, would be his encounter with a scared cat running "into a blind alley" (NB, 121). The cat's instinctive reaction to Othello's presence succeeds in finally making him smile and forgetting for a moment his constant anxiety about being accepted into the Venetian society, since the feline's response to his complexion is free from any human prejudices. It would

be interesting as well to notice the presence of a solitary cat, not only in *The Nature of Blood*, but also in the other two novels already analysed. By including a free and careless cat in a peaceful environment of Venice, the authors might possibly have wanted to underline the disruptive feelings of loneliness and struggle of their characters, when dealing with a painful dilemma in their hearts (desire of acceptance for Othello, hopes about reciprocal love for Villanelle and feelings of guilt towards her children for Sophie).

The last significant event which is worth examining would be Othello's accidental visit to the Ghetto during his nightly wanderings. Concerning the issue, it would be intriguing to discover that the employ of ghettos has been firstly introduced in the early sixteenth century by the city of Venice. After having proposed either the island of the Giudecca or Murano as possible sites to house the newcomers Jews, the Grand Council finally decided to confine them next to the "former Public Copper Foundry (*Geto del rame del nostro Comun*)", hence the word Ghetto, succeeding in this way both in "securing their services" and in "keeping them safely at the margins". Directly following the already quoted definition of Venice, Phillips also defines the word Ghetto, in a way that could be possibly considered rather pessimistic, since it emphasizes the worst part of the situation. In fact, if it cannot be denied that the Venetian Ghetto was "subject to serious overpopulation" (NB, 161), it is also true that it represented the only available compromise for that time, since it provided at once "a place of segregation and a safe haven for refugees".<sup>163</sup> Phillips explains as well that the Venetian Jews usually agreed to this arrangement of

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<sup>163</sup> Bassi, Toso Fei, *Shakespeare in Venice*, 151-52.

locking them up at night, for it provided protection, and that they gladly accepted the compromise, since in this way they were able to “commerce at the hearth of the [...] empire” (NB, 130).

While visiting the ghetto, Othello seems astonished to find rich and poor Jews living so close in those tall and claustrophobic houses, just because of their common faith. The Moor commander seems to be unable to “consider the similarities”<sup>164</sup> between the Jews’ conditions and his own life. In fact, he is also glad to “stand at the very centre of the empire”(NB, 108) as the commander of the Venetian army, despite being addressed as an outsider too. However, despite his powerful military status, Othello still realizes that it is not so easy to be accepted as part of a society: for this reason, he always feels “different” from the Venetians, unable “to fit in, to belong” to their world.<sup>165</sup>

Despite having spent many winters in Venice, and having, in addition, finally been buried at San Michele’s cemetery, not even Brodsky has ever fully succeeded in considering himself a Venetian, and the city of Venice as his new home, becoming “transient in either realm”<sup>166</sup> instead. For the same reason, the act of continuously wandering in Venice would not help Othello’s situation, since the vanishing city is only able to originate “feelings about transience”<sup>167</sup>, about uncertainty, as the Russian author confirmed. Furthermore, even Doody associates Venice with “the loss of the self”<sup>168</sup>, and Othello’s position can be easily regarded as perfectly fitting her description. In fact, the same difficulties

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<sup>164</sup> Helen Thomas, *Caryl Phillips*, Northcote House Publishers Ltd, Horndon, Tavistock, Devon, 2006, 57.

<sup>165</sup> Phillips, Freely, Oboe, Conversation at “Incroci di Civiltà”

<sup>166</sup> Brodsky, *Watermark*, 122.

<sup>167</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 50.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

in familiarising with Venice that he experienced after his arrival prove not to be solved after some months spent in the city, since they are recalled during his meetings with Desdemona, whom he asks for help in dealing with Venetian customs.

Othello surely realizes that his deep “desire to be accepted” is “depriving [him] of sleep” (NB, 122). Nevertheless, until the very end of his life, he continues to be unable to find an answer to his first doubt: “has some plot been hatched about me?” (NB, 106). Bartels describes Othello's position in Venice as “precarious” and “uncertain”, defining the Moor as an “outsider” and a “cultural stranger”<sup>169</sup>. On the other hand, Thomas points out that Phillips's story succeeds in underlining the “devastating effect of [...] self-alienation”<sup>170</sup>. When conversing about *The Nature of Blood*, even its author expresses his personal opinion on Othello's behaviour, as it could be observed by reading Phillips's own words:

You should never underestimate what people would do in order to belong to a society, or what they would do when they feel like they don't belong.<sup>171</sup>

As Phillips explains, it is when Othello eventually starts to perceive that he “does not belong” in Venice, that he begins to wonder if a traditional marriage would help him in reaching his goal of “assimilation into the society”<sup>172</sup>. He is not

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<sup>169</sup> Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 153-156.

<sup>170</sup> Thomas, *Caryl Phillips*, 59.

<sup>171</sup> Phillips, Freely, Oboe, Conversation at “Incroci di Civiltà”

<sup>172</sup> Bénédicte Ledent, “A Fictional and Cultural Labyrinth: Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*”, *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* (V.32, n.1, January 2001). Viewed 19 July 2014. <<http://www.ariel.ucalgary.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/view/3499>>

aware that this fallacious hope would only “drive him towards the danger represented by Desdemona”<sup>173</sup> and their marriage. Furthermore, it could be also interesting to notice that, immediately after falling in love with the senator's daughter, the Moor suddenly interrupts his Venetian wanderings, both “actual and metaphorical”.<sup>174</sup> In addition to that, Ledent curiously observes that, after his marriage, Othello also stops taking bridges, which are “evocative of cultural crossing”. When he believes to have finally reached “the heart of society” (NB, 145), the Moor commander becomes completely “oblivious of his own irretrievable marginal status” instead.<sup>175</sup> Othello's story in *The Nature of Blood* ends with his best hopes for a “new life of peace” (NB, 174) with his wife. However, even after his departure for the island of Cyprus, the Moor still fails to understand that his experience in Venice is only confirming the ancient Yoruba saying: “The river that does not know its own source will dry up” (NB, 182).

### **3.5. “Do not condemn anyone without a sincere and just trial”:**

#### **Venetian legal system**

In addition to its strong influence in Othello's story, Venice's government plays a significant role on Portobuffole's incident as well. In narrating this event, Phillips employs an ancient German manuscript as one of his main sources, as recorded by Helen Thomas in her study. This legal document, known as the

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<sup>173</sup> Bruce King, “The Nature of Blood”, *The Caribbean writer* (V.12, 1998). Viewed 21 July 2014. <[http://www.thecaribbeanwriter.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=772&catid=15:volume12&Itemid=2](http://www.thecaribbeanwriter.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=772&catid=15:volume12&Itemid=2)>

<sup>174</sup> Ledent, “A Fictional and Cultural Labyrinth”

<sup>175</sup> Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 141.

"Yeshiva manuscript", relates the story of "nineteen Jewish men and three Jewish women" living in Trent, who were accused and taken to trial in 1475/6 for having allegedly murdered a Christian child during a ritual. Thomas also refers that the accused Jews probably belonged to the community of exiles from Colonia, who were expelled from Germany in 1424 for their "occult beliefs and practices".<sup>176</sup> Phillips mentions Colonia and the migration to the Republic of Venice as well, adding moreover that the Venetian folk accepted the Jews in their territory, but treated them with "all the mistrust that is common among people who do not know one another" (NB, 51). On the other hand, the government of Venice was usually more cautious and tolerant in dealing with the Jewish community, since these people were considered essential to the Republic's economy.

Despite having passed a law which forced them to be distinguished from the Christian citizens by wearing a "yellow stitching on their clothes" (NB, 52), the Grand Council also declared that the Jews were allowed to live in the Most Serene Republic without fear of any harm. The Venetian government was even prepared to "severely punish" (NB, 99) anybody who either caused damage or bothered the Jewish citizens. Ledent openly considers this Venetian behaviour an "edifying example of political double-think", explaining that the existence of Jewish usurers was a vital "need" for the Republic, so essential that the practice of usury was even strictly regulated by the "Contract of Moses" (NB, 54). Furthermore, he also affirms that the Grand Council's decree against anti-Semitism reworked by Phillips in his novel, clearly displays the Venetian habitual

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<sup>176</sup> Thomas, *Caryl Phillips*, 64-66.

employ of "pragmatism", hence the same behaviour showed by Villanelle when dealing with the fat cook's case.<sup>177</sup>

Phillips's express purpose, when reporting Portobuffole's happenings in his novel, could be easily revealed by his efforts to protest against the trial and the sentence he is describing, since they both were "based upon gossip, murmurs and suppositions"<sup>178</sup>. In theory, after their imprisonment, the three accused Jews should have been able to receive judgement in a fair trial, since the Republic usually regarded its justice system as infallible. Phillips explains indeed that in Venetian courthouses the "legality" of a "sincere and just trial" must always be guaranteed, depicting as well the Venetian justice procedure as "severe", but apparently "flawless". However, despite all these positive theoretical premises, an ordinary investigation in Venice commonly included "torture session[s]" with the employment of the "*strappada*" (NB, 96-97). In addition, Portobuffole's courtroom quickly sentenced the three Jews to death without any solid evidence, except for their "many confessions" (NB, 100) obtained under torture. Andrea Dolfin, the sceptical and cautious town's leader, was furthermore appointed to report the case to the Senate for a final approval.

As long as the description of the Grand Council's meeting is concerned, it would be truly interesting to mention once again Phillips's accuracy when describing peculiar details of the ordinary life during the Republic years. In fact, the author portrays a realistic scene in which the last breathless senators, in order to avoid a fine "of ten ducati" (NB, 106) for coming late, hurry to reach

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<sup>177</sup> Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 145.

<sup>178</sup> Thomas, *Caryl Phillips*, 66.

the Doge's Palace just before the last ring of the "Trottiera"<sup>179</sup>, the special bell which called the patricians to the Senate. Apart from those details which enrich the whole novel anyway, Phillips's true aim is to underline the difficulties which the Grand Council experiences in dealing with the Jews' case. Ledent gives a possible explanation to the issue by stating that it could be extremely difficult to "cope with the popular hatred" only by employing logic and rationality, since the "xenophobic behaviour" typical of the populace belongs to the "dark of unreason", being thus impossible to fight with rational principles.<sup>180</sup> In fact, Andrea Dolfin's nervous report to the Council includes some irrational concepts, like the fact that the citizens of Portobuffole "firmly believed" the Jews to be guilty, considering furthermore their accusations to be "certain" (NB, 98-99).

Phillips describes then the "impossible position" of the Council, that had to choose between ruining the "carefully cultivated relations" with the Jews or "deny[ing] the work of the local judges". To make the wrong choice could, furthermore, certainly mine the "judicial reputation" of the Republic (NB, 103). After several days of debate, the Council finally decided that the Portobuffole's Jews should face another trial in Venice. However, Phillips reports how even this second opportunity to find justice is destined to fail, for the senators and the Doge feel too "fatigued" (NB, 151) due to the summer heat, but especially because the trial has already "attracted much public attention" (NB, 99), being thus harder to manage. The death sentence for the three Jews is therefore

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<sup>179</sup> "The Bells - Further information", *Basilica di San Marco*, 2004. Viewed 2 August 2014. <[http://www.basilicasanmarco.it/eng/basilica\\_camp/campane\\_appr.bsm?cat=1&sub\\_cat=6](http://www.basilicasanmarco.it/eng/basilica_camp/campane_appr.bsm?cat=1&sub_cat=6)>

<sup>180</sup> Ledent, *Caryl Phillips*, 144.

confirmed by the senators themselves, who are forced to reach a decision that Shapiro describes as “politically prudent”<sup>181</sup>.

In conclusion, it would be interesting to end this chapter by providing a description of the Jews execution, noticing moreover for the last time Phillips's accuracy in researching and quoting reliable sources about Venetian habits in his writing. In fact, when describing the scene of the execution, Phillips mentions two peculiar details, which demonstrate his knowledge of Venetian historical traditions. Firstly, he explains that, before the execution, the bell tower of Saint Mark “struck mournfully”, specifying that it was the “bell of the Cursed”, which usually “accompanied the walk of the condemned” (NB, 153). Despite some imperfections in the translation of its name, Phillips proves thus to be aware of the existence of the “Renghiera or Maleficio (Evil Deed)”<sup>182</sup>, the still existing, even if recast, bell of Saint Mark's tower, which was truly employed to announce executions during the Republic years. Moreover, the author also refers to the execution scaffold, erected between the two “columns of St Mark and St Todaro” (NB, 154), which Doody reveals to be the “traditionally chosen site for Venice's public execution”<sup>183</sup>, proving once again Phillips's accurate research before writing about the Most Serene Republic years.

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<sup>181</sup> James Shapiro, “Diasporas and Desperations”, *New York Times* (25 May 1997). Viewed 21 July 2014. <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/25/reviews/970525.25shapirt.html>>

<sup>182</sup> “The Bells - Further information”

<sup>183</sup> Doody, *Tropic of Venice*, 138.

## Conclusions

By analysing the three novels, it has been possible to observe that modern authors are still interested in writing about Venice, even though there is nothing new to portray with words when looking at the city. It is certainly true that Venice represents "the already seen, the already read". However, it is also possible to state that the personal "visions" which could be invented by writing about Venice can be innovative and unlimited. Using their powerful imagination, contemporary novelists are effectively able to create their own modern interpretation of the old city, by employing and even reinventing the Venetian tropes which represent their own idea of Venice in the best way. In this closing section, the three representations of the city will be finally compared. Firstly, the study will focus both on the differences and similarities between the three stories, concerning the use of past history and the influence of the city of Venice as a setting of the novels. Secondly, an analysis of the most employed themes would be provided, in order to end the thesis with a final remark about the three visions of Venice which can be perceived while reading the novels.

The first significant aspect which the three modern novels share is the fact that all the stories about Venice are set in the past. However, some differences in the use of Venetian past history could be easily identified by examining the different approaches of the three authors. For instance, Desai portrays a lovely picture of Venice in the 20s, with gondolas gliding on the canals and rich

people trying to enjoy again the pleasures of life after the years of war. On the other hand, the Indian author seems to despise the city of the 70s, describing the disrespectful behaviour of "modern" tourists towards the "sacred" Venice. Differently from Desai, Jeanette Winterson is not interested in displaying the differences between the old and the new Venice. After having read some guides about the city on water, the British author simply imagines Venice as an ideal and enchanted location, blending reality and dreams together. As a consequence, the use of Napoleon's years as a setting of her novel represents only a pretext to invent her own original city. On the other hand, Caryl Phillips employs the most Serene Republic history in order to reveal his personal opinions, reporting Othello's and Portobuffole's stories to highlight the significant issues of discrimination and loss of the self. It is difficult to demonstrate with any certainty why the three authors have chosen to portray Venice expressly in the past. However, it cannot be denied that the powerful and glorious history of the city seems to influence and fascinate writers' imagination more than present-day Venice.

In addition to the shared choice of an historical Venice as the perfect fictional location, it could be interesting to notice as well that the city is not the only setting of the three novels. In fact, Venice and the Republic settlements on the mainland represent the background of only two of the crossed stories in Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*. In addition, the happenings of *Journey to Ithaca* develop in several different countries, following Laila's path to salvation and bliss. Among the various cities visited by the Egyptian girl, Venice represents, nevertheless, one of the most important turning point in the dancer's life, since it is portrayed in the novels as the city "where god and goddess meet". Even

though Venice represents the main location in *The Passion*, Winterson's novel features several scenes in France and Russia as well. Moreover, the city depicted in the novel can be considered as an independent living character which has been partially invented by the British writer, who also included in her story magical events and legendary characters. To conclude, it is possible to observe that the use of other various locations in addition to Venice could provide a wider and more eclectic approach to the themes illustrated in the three novels.

Having just explained the importance of Venice as a setting of the novels, this final section will now examine some of the most recurring Venetian themes which can be found in the three stories and which have been analysed on the previous chapters. For instance, all the three novels feature a description of Venice from the water, as seen by the eyes of the characters when arriving in the city for the first time. In fact, both Othello, Henri and Laila enter Venice by boat, experiencing moreover, during the journey along the canals, an intense feeling of fascination and wonders when seeing the ancient buildings reflected on water.

The second trope which is shared between the three novels can be identified in the powerful idea of love and loss. Laila falls in love with Krishna, but she dreams his death by drowning as well. Othello, on the other hand, loses himself precisely when he decides to marry Desdemona in order to avoid discrimination and to be accepted into the Venetian society. Villanelle loves and purposely loses *The Queen of Spades*, while Henri is driven insane both by the shifting city and by his unrequited love for Villanelle. In addition to the theme of losing a love, it could be interesting to notice that both *The Passion*

and *The Nature of Blood* share the concept of Venice as a powerful maze, where the mad Henri is not able to find a way home. Othello, on the contrary, deals with the labyrinth quite well, being nevertheless unable to find his own home in Venice as well.

In fact, the most significant trope, which is shared by the three novels, is represented by the idea of foreigners living in Venice, and by the efforts made by those people to consider the city on water as a home, and to be accepted as citizens of Venice as well. The theme of searching for a home in Venice is developed in the three novels by using different approaches. For instance, Laila is not interested in finding (or founding) a home, namely her sacred temple, in Venice. For the Egyptian dancer, the city represents indeed her first spiritual refuge, a beautiful and visionary place of bliss and positive emotions in which she can dance, move, love for the first time. Laila closely relates the city of Venice with her love for Krishna, yet this feeling encourages the girl to leave for America in order to fulfil her lover's dream. Venice symbolizes therefore not a solid home, but only a temporary shelter in Laila's journey to "Ithaca". Later in the book, the Mother would remember her visit to the city as an early positive experience, clearly opposing her first transient refuge of joy to the subsequent American failure in love and spirit.

Henri's approach to the city of Venice proves to be, on the other hand, totally disastrous. His character symbolizes the narrow-minded French peasant tricked by the powerful charisma of Napoleon and forced to experiment the atrocities of war. After having realized that he is not meant to be a soldier, his only available option is to desert the army and to unwillingly follow a clever Venetian girl in her journey back to the "city of disguises". He would surely have

preferred to return to his little village in France and to live peacefully in his family's farm by the river. However, his condition of deserter forces him to stay in Venice and to search for a new home in the city on water. This attempt proves to be extremely difficult for the Frenchman, since his status of foreigner continuously unsettles his psyche, especially when, after getting lost in the labyrinthine city, he is forced to ask for directions to the natives. Ashamed of being an enemy of the Venetians, Henri does not even dare to speak French to them and wanders the streets of Venice for five days. Tricked first by Napoleon, the French soldier is now imprisoned in the labyrinth of Venice. The enchanting charm of the living city, symbolized also by his unrequited love for Villanelle, is too powerful for Henri to bear, driving him insane in the end.

Like Henri, Othello starts his journey in Venice as a foreigner too. However, he is deeply respected by the Doge and the Senate thanks to the reputation he earned on the field, even before having the opportunity to demonstrate his military skills in Venice. Moreover, unlike the French soldier, Othello proves able to deal with the labyrinthine city from the beginning, because of his positive curiosity and clever attitude. He is indeed willing to learn and to understand both the city and its customs. However, his status of military commander does not prevent him from being tricked, not by the city of Venice and its labyrinth, which has always helped the general by soothing his anxieties, but by envious and racist people instead. It can be interesting to summarize the analysis by noticing that both *The Passion* and *The Nature of Blood* seem to follow the same scheme: after an arrival on water, which represents the characters' hopes, both Othello and Henri are not able to attain success nor in love neither in the city, failing therefore in finding a home in Venice.

As long as the theme of the foreigner in Venice is concerned, it could be also interesting to mention the presence of some Venetian characters in the three novels, who help or at least interact with the foreigners in the city. For instance, Signora Durante, with her unrequited love for Krishna, represents a significant figure in the development of Laila's awareness, especially since the Venetian lady features as a victim in the episode of the silver ring, which reveals for the first time the rude and heartless behaviour of the revered Krishna. The helping Venetian character in Henri's adventures can be easily identified in the figure of Villanelle. However, the two main characters complement each other, sharing the same degree of importance in the development of the novel. Lastly, Othello interacts with several Venetian figures, starting from his merchant friend who gladly helps the general in his first days in Venice. Other characters who deeply affect Othello's experience can be recognised in the senator and in his daughter, who will later become Othello's wife. Moreover, it is also interesting to mention the constant presence of gondoliers, who silently accompany the general in his journey to love and despair.

To conclude, the three visions of Venice which can be perceived by reading the novels deserve to be summarized in the end. Firstly, Anita Desai portrays a city surrounded by an holy atmosphere, in order to imagine her personal Venice as a blessed refuge, a spiritual temple of bliss. Then, Jeanette Winterson employs the Napoleonic years and the real city of Venice simply as a starting point to invent her own living city, where magic, faith and legends exist and deeply influence people's lives. Lastly, Caryl Phillips provides an original adaptation of Othello's story, by recreating a detailed and historically accurate representation of the city. His vision of Venice can be, moreover, regarded as

challenging and provocative, since the Caribbean writer depicts a realistic interpretation of the old Republic, in order to denounce the still contemporary issues of alienation and discrimination.

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