



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

Deakin University

Paul Venzo

Poetic foundations for watery terrain – three poems below Venice

Abstract:

The Venetian lagoon is a geographical extremity imperilled by extreme weather events. Increasingly regular flooding endangers the lives and livelihoods of Venetians, not to mention the built and natural environments around them. In response to the documentary film *Saving Venice* (Bulling, 2022), I have produced a short series of poems that address the existential threat that climate change poses to Venice. The first poem refers to the MOSE sea-gates project, a feat of engineering designed to prevent catastrophic flooding of the lagoon. The second takes up the motif of the foundations of Venice, specifically the use of wooden pylons that excise oxygen and moisture and prevent the city from sinking. The third poem deals with the effects of erosion caused by shipping. This poetic work builds upon my previous creative and critical output focussed on Venice as a liminal and literary space, notable for the in-between-ness that comes from being a city built on water (Venzo, 2015; Venzo 2019; Venzo 2022). Extending this scholarship on Venice as a city both real and imagined through writing, these poems represent this watery terrain as simultaneously poetic and ecological (Bryson, 2002). Using the technique of concrete poetry (Draper, 1971; Bray, 2012), each poem syncretises these hidden elements that speak to the effects of extremity, to address the “slipperiness” of this physical environment and construct new foundations in word and image.

Biographical note:

Paul Venzo (PhD) is a poet and academic living in southwest Victoria. He is a Senior Lecturer in writing and literature at Deakin University. His research includes publications on sexuality and writing for young people, poetic geographies and self-translation, and creative and critical writing on Venice and the Veneto. Paul is also the co-author of the children’s picture book *The Great Southern Reef* (2022) with CSIRO publishing: part of a project to promote ocean literary.

Keywords:

Geographical extremity, extreme weather events, climate change, ecopoetry, Venice

Mose

Lido, Malamocco, Chioggia:
tre sorelle holding hands across a
peninsula of hope, a silt-silk waistband

tightening breathlessly when the
Triestine sirocco blows. Rain comes,
feet wet, we plank our way home. Less

outstretched arms than brute objection:
a heaving, leaden counterweight, a slab of
engineered fuck-you. Venice is, finally, *cancellato*.

Wake

The
Very least
Of these boats
Flat-bottomed, curved,
Keeled, sets out its bridal train
Of water in its wake: an endless, slick
Procession of rivulets, swell, flow and ebb,
That runnels against exposed foundations, splices
Canals, arrowing aside moonlight, endlessly undermining
The thought of remaining upright, intact, solid. Shunted traffic, those
Maladetti grandi navi, cruisers hauling the freight of necessary evil, their cargo
Leaning over railings to wave at us on San Giorgio. Out further, towards Malamocco,
The banks yawn ever wider, their clay bellies hollowed, striplings choking on salt, and the water
Inhospitable to even the hardiest mollusc. Around the haunches of Sacca Fisola, towards the maw of
Marghera, a servant's entrance that does not distract from the elegant porches, the finest drawing room of Europe,
Seen from the east. Oars that tilled the lagoon in the time of Dandolo and Faliero (you may take your pick
Of the generations they beget) hardly scratched the surface, made little or no pockmark on the face of
This old dame. Yet there is no going back: the only reverse gear is that of the tronchetti, the buses
That churn and grind against the imbarcaderi of San Zaccharia, Redentore, Salute, the
Scafi that blitz out from the Fondamente Nova towards the airport, some
Blithe bugger, sucking on a vape, checking Snap, eyes from birth
Trained for sizing depth, weather, other craft, but rarely
Buildings, that have simply always been. He doesn't
Know people are trying to shore it up with
Papier mâché, and lung-like pumps
To swell the under-marsh.
Ever killed some-
Thing with
Love for
It?

Rami

Gliding
out
from
the
bacino
I
keep
a
close
watch
on
the
depth
below
the
keel
-
half
a
metre,
halved
again.

I
catch
my
breath
as
the
wind
sucks
at
the
sails.
I
steer
into
a
deeper
groove
that
splices
the
grey,
un-
seen
sand.

My
house
is
stumped
with
stubby
concrete
pylons,
chubby
baby
legs
for
a
brown
brick
body.

The
grander
buildings
of
this
lagoon,
however,
are
wicketed,
their
bulk
suspended
on
tightly
packed
stripling
families,
mummified
by
un-
breathing
mud.

Jewel-
boxes
that
sit
atop
a
mirrored
table
give
away
nothing
but
their
pretty
faces,
and
their
music,
to
the
saline
air.

References

- Bray, J. (2012). Concrete poetry and prose. In *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (pp. 314–325), Routledge.
- Bryson, J. S. (2002). *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*. University of Utah Press.
- Bulling, D. (2022). *Saving Venice*. WGBH, first aired on PBS, United States, September 28, 2022.
- Draper, R. P. (1971). Concrete Poetry. *New Literary History*, 2(2), 329–40.
- Venzo, P. (2016). Self-translation and the poetry of the in-between. *Cordite Poetry Review*, 50(3), 1–6.
- Venzo, P. (2015, March). Imagined Terrain: Literary Nomadism in Venice and the Veneto. *Axon: Creative Explorations*, 5(1).
- Venzo, P. (2022). Postcards from Venice: Poetry and Peregrination in La Serenissima. *Axon: Creative Explorations*, 12(1), 1–11.