

Fruttero & Lucentini

NO FIXED ABODE

Translation by Gregory Dowling

1.

When Mr. Silvera at last decides (“look, look, Mr. Silvera!”) to loosen his seta-belt and lean over his neighbours to get a view out of the window, Venice has already disappeared; all he sees is a distant fragment of aluminium-coloured sea and an immediate trapezoid of solid aluminium, the wing,

“The lagoon!” repeat the tourists in his and the other two parties that fill flight Z 114, “La lagune! A Laguna!”

As ever, they find it indispensable to name, rather than to see, the cities and temples and statues and frescoes and water-falls and islands and all the lands and waters they are paying to visit. Look, look, the Coliseum, the Sistine Chapel, the Casbah, les Pyramides, la Tour de Pise, the lagoon.... They sound like invocations intended to arouse imaginary things, to make them exist for a few seconds before they slip out of the magic circle. Five or six of them naturally try to retain the lagoon for ever, with their cine-cameras and instamatics.

Indifferent to these illusions, Mr. Silvera settles back in his seat, his long legs stretched out obliquely in the aisle and a benevolently automatic smile ready to spring to his lips. When seen in profile, he is a man of about forty, tall and thin, with the sharp-cut features of a head on a medallion, the slightly rounded shoulders of a sportsman – a keen tennis-player, for example – who at some stage, for some reason, gave up the game completely; or perhaps those of a chess-player, curved by long meditation over the bishop. His thin, delicate, nervous hands suggest poker or roulette, but also skilled contact with porcelain, parchments, musical instruments; and with female stockings, with silk and lace and tricky necklace-clasps.

An unusual man, who is blandly (stoically?) doing a job that seems a little incongruous for him, somewhat petty. A group-leader. A tourist guide and escort. They usually choose younger people; the other two parties on flight Z 114 are led by a girl who never stops laughing and a stocky bumkin-type with a blond wisp of hair over his eyes.

Silvera took charge of his party this morning at 6.15, outside the headquarter of the Imperial Grand Tours, the London travel-agency for which he has been working for some time now. The coach-trip to Heathrow Airport was sufficient for him to become acquainted with these 28 people, or rather, to slot them into his memory, which is prodigious and accustomed to making instantaneous classifications. The usual types, the usual clientele of the Imperial, old-age pensioners, small-time shopkeepers, small-time office-clerks and artisans, all of recurring nationalities: mostly English and French, but also South-American and Canadian, a few Scandinavians, two Jamaicans, two Indians, one Portuguese with an adolescent daughter whose large nocturnal eyes never leave Mr. Silvera. Even the names are the same, Johnson, Torres, Pereira, Petersen, Singh, Durand...

Flight Z 114 has stopped off twice, at Brussels and Geneva, and picked-up the other parties: at Geneva it also took on three passengers on stand-by, whose flight to Venice and Athens have been cancelled. Two Greek business-men and an Italian woman, who is now sitting just across the central aisle from Mr. Silvera.

A wide-hipped hostess bustles her way down this corridor, looking for any last paper-cups to collect, and Mr. Silvera instantly pulls in his long legs and smiles at her. But she remains peevishly sulky, absorbed in amorous conjectures or, more likely, in trade-union squabbles.

Silvera makes the tiniest motion of a shrug, adjust his smile by a thread, and the Italian woman, on the other side of the aisle, returns it. No longer – their mischievous, resigned eyes say to each other – do passengers get treated with grand-hotel-style respect, with nursery-school solicitude; but then what can one expect, with tourist-loads of this sort? They should be thankful to be taken as far as Venice, considering the fares they have paid.

The machine touches down, brakes with a great angry blast, and rolls to a halt along the edge of the lagoon.

“Well” murmurs Mr. Silvera getting to his feet, “well...”

His height appears to give him a vague superiority, which is belied by his threadbare tweed jacket, by the little holes singed into the front of the raincoat he now puts on. The girls who keeps laughing is already at work with her party; the blond bumkin is instructing his horde, the most numerous, to remain calm and disciplined.

“Well” sighs Mr. Silvera, pulling down his bag.

He notices that his Italian neighbour is trying to reach her small case, pulls it down and hands it to her chivalrously.

“Thank you” says the woman.

”Ah” says Mr. Silvera, his eyes far away.

Then he is swallowed up by his group, please, please, Mr. Silvera, there are overcoats and scarves to be collected, bags to be extracted from the overhead-lockers, packages to be retrieved from under the seats, impatient passengers to be restrained, slow ones to be incited. The Portuguese girl follows him with her head bowed, her eyes gazing up at him from beneath beautiful black lashes, and she too is “counted” at the foot of the staircase, where Mr. Silvera and the two other group-leaders stand in the wind, dividing up their peoples.

But it is not she who is offered Mr. Silvera’s hand when descending the final step. This act of homage (performed with melancholy detachment and an indefinable air of complicity) is for the Italian lady.

“Thank you,” she repeats, gravely.

“Ah”, murmurs Mr. Silvera without looking at her.

He moves off towards the airport building at the head of his flock, who all walk with their heads turned towards the aluminium expanse of the lagoon since not a single cent of their cheap package-fare is to be wasted. The French girls’s party has beaten them to the passport check-out and the customs, but from there everything proceeds smoothly, since nobody checks anything in fact, and soon Mr. Silvera is already beyond the barriers, coagulating his 28, preventing them from dissolving amidst the toilets and the bars.

“No, no,” he says indulgently “no cappuccino, please, no vino.”

They go out into the wind again, and a few coaches are there waiting at the entrance. But they disband towards the lagoon, which begins a few-yards to the left and fades into a fuzzy horizon. Five or six slim motorboats with little flags fluttering at the stern are bobbing up and down by a jetty among the seagulls.

“Taxi?” asks one of the sailors. “Venedig? Taxi? Taxi Venice? He repeats indicating a distant point, over the waters.

A few yards further on, the blond bumpkin’s party are dropping into a plump cabined boat, amidst laughter and screaming.

A protest ripples through the massed eye of the 28. And what about us?

“No boat,” says Mr. Silvera firmly, “no boat, no barco, sorry.”

The prices charged by the Imperial, he explains, do not permit the water-approach to Venice, across the grey lagoon. For the Imperial there is instead a fine Italian coach, all in red, which will cross the famous bridge.

”A famous bridge?” the 28 console themselves.

Yes, the longest in Europe, lies Mr. Silvera, driving them back to terra firma. He will stay here for another moment or two to check that their luggage has been correctly stowed onto the porters’ boat, and correctly despatched to his destination.

Now he is left alone on the jetty and he gazes at the lagoon like a prince, a *condottiero* who is finally taking possession of it; or perhaps like one who is bidding farewell to it, who has lost it for ever? One of the motorboats pushes away from the bank, traces an elegant parabola in the water and heads swiftly towards Venice amidst the shrieking seagulls. Next to the flag at the stern, for the last time, the Italian woman from flight Z 114 is standing: I am standing.

“Ah” murmurs Mr. Silvera. And he does not respond to my wave, he does not raise his hand, while his raincoat flaps like a frayed grey banner in the November wind. This did I meet him, thus did I see him for the first and (I thought) for the last time.

2.

I had attached no importance to the fact that Mr. Silvera was a group-leader, a tourist-guide, escort or whatever you call it. Amidst that air-borne rabble, he had naturally struck me at first glance and I had recorded him and his ancient-medal-type profile with an almost professional interest; but without puzzling my head over him any further, without stopping to wonder just how he had ended up among those clods, who never once stopped calling out to him: Mr. Silvera, Mr. Silvera! I had filed him away in an imaginary and personal auction-catalogue, under the heading “Traveller: unusual, even a little mysterious”, and had then gone straight back to my own business.

Now of course I cannot say what impression he would have made on me if I had considered him in the first place from the point of view of that trade – let’s use this term – of his. Which of course is a perfectly fine one – don’t get me wrong – for penniless students who want to see the world in the summer (Rosy’s son and the daughter of my cousin Macchi have done it for years), but which, in November, when practised by adults with parties of that kind, can only be defined as wretched. Probably signor Silvera would have lost all possible credit in my eyes. I would have written him an offsome commiserative murmur along the lines: “Poor guy, what a thing to have to do at this stage”, or maybe, given his surname, “Just think, a poor Sephardi reduced to that level to make a living”. A failure, a down-and-out, a bum. And no man ever manages to rise above first impressions of that kind. Therefore: afterwards, things would have gone quite differently; in fact quite probably they would never have gone anywhere at all.

But, thanks to my fortuitous and rather sleepy inattention, I found myself reflecting on my own trade – let’s use this term – and finding significant points of similarity with his. And it’s no less a vagabond trade. A trade in which one has to ingratiate oneself with one’s clients in exactly the same way, swallow affronts and humiliations, always be ready with flattery, with placatory remarks, and soothing comments for perfectly horrible people. It is a trade which causes one to live and work alongside beauty, to seek it out, to evaluate it, and to illustrate it, with utter indifference – indeed, without even seeing it any longer. Maybe I exaggerate, but it strikes me now that the only difference between a tourist-escort and myself is this: he gets remunerated with a laughable salary, and an occasional petty tip, while they pay me with crackling cheques drawn on prestigious banks.

Hence our separation: he off with his flock on the vaporetto, I in a motorboat to my hotel on the Grand Canal, and the fiction of an old-world-style welcome: how are you, ready to be a Venetian again, did the journey go well, what weather eh, there’s some post for you, shall I prepare a Manhattan, a pot of Chinese tea? That sort of thing, all trotted out with that air of professional familiarity designed to make me feel “at home” even after an interval of months. And the old valet Tommaso, who handles the lift with the gravity and solemnity of a chamberlain assigned to Louis XVI’s hot-air balloon, declaring as it to himself: “more beautiful than ever.”

He knows his job; he comes out with a phrase like this but lets you know that it’s the grand-hotel translation of the vernacular “Phwaw”, or of some cruder expression that rises from his worn-out loins (but then are they as worn-out as all that?).

I checked with a fleeting glance in the generous, omnipresent gilded mirrors, noting that they knew their job. I saw (and immediately catalogued, without forgetting the “fine frame in contemporary style”) a *Portrait of young woman* attributable to “Tuscan or Umbrian master of the early sixteenth century”, with the influence of Botticelli or Lippi on the one hand, Perugino on the other. Raffaellino del Garbo? Apart from the “ensemble de voyage” of Franco-Japanese school (Issey Miyake), the subject in fact presented definite affinities with various Madonnas by this artist, as it did with the blonde and fascinating *Lady in profile* which Berenson (with the subsequent agreement of my friend Zeri) attributes to him in Baroness Rothschild’s collection in Paris. A portrait which is all the more satisfying for the fact that since Raffaellino or someone on his behalf, courteously

omitted the "AETATIS SUAE XXXIV", the age could quite reasonably be brought down to XXX or even less.

On the thick carpets we crossed paths with a party of Japanese visitors proceeding in silence and in double file, like schoolgirls. All men, and dressed in black.

"At least they don't give any trouble," Tommaso remarked condescendingly.

"Do you get many out of season as well?"

"More and more of them, all year round. I don't know. They say they're tourists, but I reckon they come here to copy Venice. You'll see, one of these days they'll get round to making one of their own, a perfect imitation."

But he at once repented of his joke, which he must in fact have cracked successfully innumerable times. "Venice can't be imitated," he declared with pride.

And yet his is an impression I have sometimes had myself, in this over-scrutinised city: as if all those millions and millions of admiring pupils had the same imperceptible and perpetual power of erosion as the waves, each glance a tiny grain of Venice filched, sucked away...