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Venice and the theatre of memory.



The Art of Gigi Bon.

By HOYT ROGERS.

VENICE, WITH ALL her layers of history still apparent and intact, is the most complete theatre of memory on earth. But only a lengthy sojourn will reveal that the Serenissima is not just a stageset, a shallow backdrop for fictive characters. Instead she is a persona herself, a muse who by a teasing game of hints, evasions, and promises leads us to revisit our lives and to transform them.



In *The Aspern Papers*, Henry James compares the city to an enormous house, because the absence of cars (or carriages, when he was writing) makes all the spaces seem interior—the narrow lanes are corridors, the squares are rooms of varying sizes, with Piazza San Marco the great hall at their center. The more we thread through those complex enclosures the more they strike inward, the more they embody the compartments of our mind. Step by step, they trace a vast mnemonic palace, an architectural model of the lessons we have learned, the ever-repeated lessons of the heart. The labyrinthine passages connect us to earlier years, and the half-sunny, half-somber courtyards subtly concretize the chapters of our narrative. But where the city opens out on the sea, a dramatic change occurs. An unfamiliar light floods our old scenarios, and the walls of our confinement are shattered by the infinite. The fish-shaped island drifts through the lagoon and heads for the ocean, sailing us back to our childhood desires—to fulfill them, to deny them, and above all, to voyage beyond them. Then, just as suddenly, everything falls still again. The waves that lap against the hull of stone glimmer with a remote, consoling awareness: a peace from before we were born, and that will last beyond our exit from the stage.



Tintoretto's paintings abound with figures in receding planes, oscillating between the foreground and the background. Images of temporality, as in "The Dream of St. Mark," they flow unimpeded between the past and what is passing, between the present and what will come. Pursuing that tradition with humor and grace, the art of Gigi Bon collapses our different epochs into a seamless continuum.



Like her, Venice teaches us that history is never dead: the humblest portico affords us a proscenium composed of centuries—but not as an album of faded recollections, settled and done. The theatre of memory unveils its meaning only when we behold it as a vital, breathing gospel of the present. The flagship of the Serenissima grants us a signal privilege—to inhabit, here and now, a visible accretion of time—on the sole condition that we give our own time back to her. We are Venetians when we accept the paradox of our eternal transience, and say the lines we have come here to say, moment by moment, scene by scene. We must linger on the city's glistening quays, in her churches and hidden gardens, till we recognize with calm detachment and even deeper joy that the actors in the spectacle are

now ourselves. In Venice, the curtain is always rising: strangers no longer, we begin our conversation; the stageset ripples with life, and the play becomes the real.



Hoyt Rogers, a contributing editor of *The Fortnightly Review*, is the author of a collection of poetry, *Witnesses*, and a volume of criticism, *The Poetics of Inconstancy*. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in many periodicals. He translates from the French, German, Italian, and Spanish. His translations include the *Selected Poems of Borges* and three books by Yves Bonnefoy, *The Curved Planks*, *Second Simplicity*, and *The Digamma*. *Openwork*, an André du Bouchet reader, will be published by Yale in 2014. He lives in the Dominican Republic and Italy.

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