

Letter From Turkey

by Jeffrey Meyers

Turkish Tally



A few years ago, my wife and I set off to spend a sabbatical year in Spain, but thought we would go via Turkey. The idea started with a new Swiss “motoring” map that laid out the highways in firm red lines. We also wanted to go to the Aegean islands of Greece. We’d been to Greece many times before; and while we loved the islands in the Cyclades and the Sporades, we couldn’t stand the tedious boat trips from Athens. The map, once more, encouraged us: Rhodes, Kos, and Lesbos were all very close to the Turkish coast. Surely there would be boats that would get us there in an hour.

We relished the thought of going off without reservations or a fixed itinerary. We had enough money for modest hotels, and we owned a trusty Volkswagen beetle. We would make our way from Northern Europe through Yugoslavia and Bulgaria to Istanbul, then drive across the wilds of Anatolia to Ankara, Erzurum, and the border with Iran. On the way back, we would turn south, through Kayseri in the middle of the country, and head for the Mediterranean and Aegean coasts. We could cross back and forth by boat to Rhodes and Lesbos—then drive back up to Istanbul, leave the car in the airport, and fly to Israel for ten days. Simple. But we forgot a few important things. We had a lot of luggage. The Turks and the Greeks hated each other. And I didn’t read the small print on the map: “numbered main highways, without regard to their conditions.”

Influenced by my visits to Greece, I thought of Turks with some apprehension. Their ferocious image was reinforced when I read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. In Deraa, once part of the Ottoman Empire, T.E. Lawrence had been captured and raped by the brutal Turkish bey. I had taught in Korea in the 60’s, and heard a story about the Turkish NATO troops. Everybody was preyed on by Korean thieves, whose brazen thefts

included underground cable and telephone poles. American military bases, awash in television sets and electronic equipment, were easy targets. But the Turks had a way with thieves. They caught one, shoved a ramrod through one ear and out the other, and hung him between the gateposts. Then I saw *Midnight Express*, a movie about a naive young American doing drugs in Turkey, who was cast into a sadistic jail. Not exactly a promotional video.

In Istanbul, the West becomes East. After the grim totalitarian towns and villages of Bulgaria and the rolling farms of northern Greece, we plunged into the chaotic, squalid, crowded, noisy, dusty Asiatic city. Beggars sat, hawkers screamed, and porters toiled across the Galata bridge under incredible loads. Many people lived and slept in the streets. Turkey seemed a country under arms. Police were everywhere, holding the masses in check. To control political unrest, armed soldiers stood at every major intersection, yet they seemed more reassuring than threatening.

There’s no pleasant street to walk on, even in the new part of the city. The old part has all the tourist sights: St. Sophia, the Blue Mosque, Topkapi, the New Palace, the museums, the covered bazaar, and the spice bazaar. For all the dust and noise outside, the mosques were cool and silent inside, resplendent with jeweled colors, the black and white calligraphy glowing on the walls. The best way to see Istanbul is from the water, and on a boat ride up the Bosphorus, we admired the old houses crowding its banks. From close up, the domes, minarets, and hills were seedy and depressing; from a shimmering distance, they appeared exotically beautiful and recalled the splendor of old Byzantium.

We were also dazzled by the food in Istanbul. Despite all the Greek propaganda we’d been fed, along with the lukewarm stuffed tomatoes and shish kebab with chips, we were immediately won over to Turkish cooking. Not, perhaps, the land of *A Thousand and One Nights*, but hundreds of little dishes, like Islamic dim sum, that make a whole meal. And they definitely have a thousand and one ways with an eggplant. One restaurant menu offered *Imam Bayeldi*, “The son of the priest of the mosque fainted”—because the dish was so good. We ate “split

tummy egg plant” but turned down “brain fried in lamb’s grease.” In humbler establishments, it was soothing to be called *Effendi* (master) as I paid the bill.

Back on the road, from Istanbul to Ankara, I was reminded of Turkey’s military readiness and strategic situation. Huge army camps, their white pointed tents stretching across the dun landscape, looked like desert battle scenes in World War I. Three hundred miles to the east, Ankara, the capital, was paradoxically more European than Istanbul. The new part of the city—founded by Kemal Atatürk in the 1920’s and laid out along wide, straight boulevards—had neo-fascist public architecture. Easily seen in a day, the city had little color or interest, apart from tasteful and sophisticated Hittite archeology and national art museums.

In Turkey, you can always see the layers of the past in the present. In the Citadel, the core of the oldest part of Ankara, the people live as they did a century ago. A small boy picked us up and led us through the dingy warrens (for once, we really needed a guide) to the high ramparts and a view of the drab town. When I offered him a tip, he went into the routine so familiar to us from northern India and Morocco. He disdainfully refused it and demanded more, stomping off in a dramatic display of wounded dignity. When we walked away, he chased after us and took it eagerly. Upstairs, in the ladies’ section of the ancient Ashlahane mosque, the guide showed me the staircase to the minaret. Though it was narrow, dark, and rough to my shoeless feet, I was tempted to use my heathen voice to call the faithful to prayer at the wrong time. As I painfully climbed and climbed, a bird suddenly flew out of the dark recesses and gave me a real fright, and I retreated downstairs.

We arranged to meet Mehmet, a Princeton-educated physicist at the Middle Eastern Technical University and a friend of a friend. He couldn’t find our hotel and arrived an hour late. He told me about the recent shootout at the university, really an abortive *coup d’état*. Three hundred students and a few faculty were sent to jail (which we’d seen from the Citadel), some of them charged with treason, a capital crime. Between the army and the fundamentalists, Turkish

professors and intellectuals have to tread carefully. In a smart restaurant—with a French-speaking maître d', tuxedoed waiters, and flowers on the table—we had a five-course lunch for a few dollars. Once more the food and the service calmed our worries.

Several people had told us that the main west-east road through Turkey was well-paved, and much better than the northern road along the Black Sea. We left at dawn, partly to steal a march on the heat. We also wanted to avoid a persistent beggar who'd been following us around for days and wiping the car windows with a smeary rag. The street was blessedly empty, the air still cold. I started the car, and Abdul, as if wired to the ignition, let out a muffled scream and emerged from underneath to demand a final tip.

We made excellent time until Sivas, the next big town after Ankara. Private cars had now virtually disappeared, and the road was eerily empty, except for the occasional truck or bus belching diesel fumes into the desert air. There seemed to be enough gas stations, but there was bad news as soon as I got low and had to stop. *Yok*, they said at the first one, and *yok* was repeated in the next three—Turkish by the direct method. Finally, I could go no farther. At 9:15 in the morning, the gas delivery truck was expected at 10:00, at 10:30 it was due at 12:30, and I pictured us stranded overnight in the wilderness. A passing Turk returning from work in Germany, in a Mercedes adorned with dangling knickknacks, urged me in German to be patient. Finally, at 11:30, the local police took an interest and offered to sell me some of their own supply, and we set off eastward again. At the next service station, I figured out there was a delivery drivers' strike and that gas would be hard to find.

After Sivas, the paved surface ended, and the road got very bad: first rough, then potholes and dirt, and finally a washboard with deep ruts. Sometimes I had to drive through a foot of water. This continued for 500 miles, almost to the Iranian border. So much for "motoring." When this "good" road was abruptly barricaded, we were forced to detour, could rarely go faster than 30 miles an hour, and were blinded by dust. All this jolting did not agree with the electrical system, and the car stopped dead just outside a town with the romantic-sounding name of Zara. We sat in stunned silence as the village idiot came over to stare at us—no

doubt the most interesting thing that had happened to him for a long time.

A truck stopped almost immediately. The driver tried and failed to fix our car, then drove us into town to find a mechanic. We took cups of thick, sweet Turkish coffee in the café opposite the workshop, as the old men clacked their beads and dogs and chickens scavenged around our feet. The usual returned *Gästarbeiter* chatted sympathetically with us as he sat at the next table, happy to be back in this dusty middle-of-nowhere hometown. Though he made the repair, the mechanic swiped my screwdriver, as I discovered when the door handle fell off. The next day, about 250 miles later, the car once more came to an abrupt halt. This time, an American oil man from Kuwait, driving a van in the opposite direction, stopped to help. One by one, his nine kids climbed out and stood around us in a circle. Immensely organized and resourceful, he had exact information about the roads, three tool kits, cold milk, and Chiclets. One of his teenagers fixed the car with aplomb. The art of traveling, it seemed, was gracefully getting out of difficult situations.

The scenery in eastern Turkey was quite spectacular. High, rust-colored, Arizona-like mountains in a semi-desert alternated with carefully nurtured wheat fields. Clusters of smooth, square mud houses sat behind curvy mud walls (as in the Sahara), an occasional camel strolled by, and great herds of Angora sheep massed together to resemble one woolly mammoth. On the roadside, we passed a traffic fatality—a long dead cow with bony skull and bloated body, about to burst. The country women wore *yashmaks* and bright colors. Shepherds begged for cigarettes with an appealing pantomime and, disappointed and with nothing better to do, hurled stones at us.

Erzincan, about 475 miles east of Ankara, had a good hotel in a fine mountain setting. We chatted with a few well-off Iranians, who openly scorned the Turks. Peasants or no, these eastern Turks served us another masterly meal. We had an amazingly speedy waiter who yelled out the orders to the kitchen, literally ran with the food, joked with the customers, and seized the plates from the table as soon as you took the last spoonful. I had to grip my plate with one hand while I ate the last of the sauce. Suddenly all the electric lights went out, replaced in a minute by a single oil lamp. In a

town where there wasn't much to do and people went to sleep with the chickens, a large crowd gathered outside, pressing their faces against the glass, to stare at the foreigners groping for their food.

T.E. Lawrence helped the Russians take Erzurum, the last major city on the road to Iran. The city fell in 1915 and looked as if no one had picked it up since then. We visited the crumbling ruins of a 13th-century university and saw a few ancient mosques. Once a great city, like Trebizond on the north coast, Erzurum was now a dusty dump. The next day, the last leg of our trip to the border, we found no restaurants at all, so for lunch we bought a delicious, hot crusty loaf—the only food we could find—and devoured it like Siberian prisoners.

After Erzurum, the road got worse than ever. Straggling bands of road workers picked at the surface. We crawled along and saw an arrogant Iranian meet his doom. He drove at high speed through a group of Turkish workers, forcing them to leap off the road, but plowed into a huge, invisible hole. As oil poured from underneath his car, the workers—angry and armed with picks—advanced menacingly. Near the border—in Kurdish territory north of Lake Van—Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq come together within about 30 miles. Noah's Mount Ararat appeared, snowcapped and clouded over, and, quite appropriately, it began to rain.

We were tempted to take a more scenic route back to Sivas, either along the Black Sea or even around Lake Van, but the roads, so promising on the map, would surely be even worse than the one we were on. In a town near the border, we stayed in a pleasant hotel, run by a man who had worked in England. His pretty young English wife, homesick and depressed, buttons missing on her soiled dress, sat with us in the patio. She flushed angrily as her husband chattered enthusiastically about one tourist sight we had apparently missed—a public hanging that had taken place in the main square that morning. The dead man, a drug smuggler, had killed a border guard. He'd been brought back and executed where the victim's relatives could see that justice had been done. Later, the innkeeper appealed to my wife: Could she possibly talk to his wife about having a baby? His family wanted to know why she wasn't pregnant. She told us that children would merely increase her Islamic bondage.

On the return trip, we arrived in Erzurum totally exhausted and fell asleep before dinner, too tired to eat in the restaurant with the speedy waiter. After lunch in a dubious place the next day, I was stricken with nausea and diarrhea. We finally reached Göreme, southeast of Ankara, in the afternoon. Half dead, I went to sleep for the rest of the day. When I miraculously recovered, we explored the volcanic landscape of ancient Cappadocia, where the early Christians hid in underground caves. The most extensive settlement, set in a harsh and freakish landscape, Göreme had many chapels with early Byzantine frescoes. Most of them had been defaced by Muslim fanatics who scored out the faces and bodies of the Christian saints. We stayed in the central Anatolian town of Urgup, the first attractive place we'd seen, where people lived inside the demented rock and cave formations. At Anamur, on the Mediterranean coast, we came across a huge and well-preserved third-century Phoenecian castle, rebuilt nine times through the centuries, most recently by the Ottomans. Turkey was incredibly rich in unexpected ruins.

There was a good road from Urgup to the coast, which began at St. Paul's Tarsus, and from there to Alanya the drive was vertiginous. But it was a thrill, after so many dusty miles, to see the Mediterranean at last. We saw scores of miles of deserted beach and magnificently colored water (cobalt shading into sapphire) as we wound through the sweet-smelling pine forests and curvy mountain passes high above the sea, like the California coast near Big Sur.

Our next hotel, two miles from Alanya, had a superb setting: high mountains behind, long empty beach below, and a river that flowed down from the hills. The ruins of a once-great fortress surrounded the town and offered a fine view. The harbor had a Greek atmosphere, with some good restaurants at the water's edge. But the heat, even in the shade, was intense. I nearly got sunstroke playing tennis with an elderly—though able—Turk, and my racquet slipped from my sopping hand and split on the ground. I threw it in the trash can, and a little boy immediately retrieved it.

Pamukkale, in western Anatolia, was the ancient Hierapolis, a Roman thermal spa and pleasure dome. We approached it by driving up a steep mountain that overlooked a vast plateau. The hotels, equipped with huge hot-spring swim-

ming pools, were perched on the crest of a mountain, with an impressive view of the weird rock formations and pools caused by underground springs. We even had our own miniature pool outside our room. At dinner, I spoke Spanish to an Argentine diplomat stationed, unenthusiastically, in Ankara.

The whole place was pleasant, quiet, relatively empty, and seemed restful. At dusk on the second afternoon, we were walking along a dirt road and looking at the ruins. A car came up fast behind us, blasting his horn to force us and a few other stragglers off the road. I was furious, and as the car passed I pounded the top with my fist, New York-style. The car stopped and the driver, a middle-aged Turk with his womenfolk, screamed at me. I yelled back, and he drove off. I took my wife's elbow and steered her back toward the town, but the driver stopped again, noticed the dent I'd made, quickly backed up, and leapt out in a fury. Casually examining the damage, I leaned inside, tried to push out the dent, and managed to tear the upholstery in the process. By now apoplectic, the Turk summoned up his English and threatened: "I take you to justice!" My wife muttered that I didn't know my own strength. We went back to the hotel, where a policeman came to summon me to the barracks. Here it comes, we said, the interview with the Turkish *bey*. *Midnight Express* at the very least.

But the corporal in charge was a mild type, and the only punishment was watching the policemen struggle through an hour of painstaking, semiliterate writing (one got tired and had to be relieved) to take the Turk's deposition. Asked to surrender my passport, I got it from my hotel and came back to give my version of the story. In combat boots and helmet (dented, like the car), the policeman, appropriately named Attila, licked his pencil and stuck out his tongue with the effort of writing. I apologized to the Turk, gave Attila my gray cardboard international driver's license instead of my passport, and he solemnly accepted it. We solved the problem by leaving town before dawn the next morning.

It was now time to put the Greek island plan into action. We drove through the mountains to Marmaris, on the Aegean coast, where, we'd been told, the boat to Rhodes left in the evening, cost ten dollars, and took no cars. In fact, it left in the afternoon, cost five dollars, and carried cars. We had to buy the boat tick-

ets, get a customs guarantee from a travel agency for leaving the car behind (a racket cooked up by the customs agents, who split the fees), go to the customs office and to the police, and then check our luggage at a hotel. The Turks, lethargic and inefficient, watched bemusedly as I raced about frantically.

After a few days on Rhodes, we sailed on to Kos for a week, and (though we'd been told there was no boat from there to Turkey) took a short boat ride to Bodrum, on the southwest coast. The bus connections back to the car were poor, so we hitchhiked. After 15 minutes, the first car on the road, driven by a Belgian traveling alone to Marmaris, stopped to pick us up. A Flemish nationalist, he refused to speak French, so we chatted amiably in English and rambled along the steep mountain roads.

The next morning we saw Ephesus, the most extensive Greek ruin in the Aegean, an entire town with two long marble streets and impressive remains of temples, libraries, houses, tombs, a theater—even a brothel. The museum had a famous bronze, the Boy on a Dolphin, and a male terra-cotta figure with an enormous member (a great favorite on the postcard rack).

Izmir (Smyrna), an attractive port, looks like Genoa or Haifa. We walked through the squalid back streets to the Agora (Greek marketplace), saw the modern Efes hotel with its bar below the transparent swimming pool (liquid watching liquid), and strolled along the seafront on the famous quay that Hemingway described during the Greco-Turkish war of 1921. When the Greeks left Smyrna, he said, "they had all their baggage animals they couldn't take off with them so they just broke their forelegs and dumped them into the shallow water."

We were told in Izmir that a Turkish boat sailed daily at 2:00 P.M. from Ayvalik to the Greek island of Lesbos. In Ayvalik, the tourist office confirmed this and directed us to the shipping agent, who told us that the boat, in fact, left at 3:30. (It was then four o'clock, and we could have made it had we known.) Because of a recent bank robbery and murder, he explained through his harelip, we had to notify the police nine hours before our departure, which meant by five that evening since he did not open until eight the next day. The fare was high, he said, because the ship was new and went very fast. He claimed that there were no bus-

es in Lesbos and urged us to take our car to get across the island. All this seemed wildly improbable.

We rushed off, once again, to find a hotel to keep the luggage and get advice about taking the car. I asked for a room at a family-style pension inhabited solely by middle-class Turks. They said they were absolutely full, then kept us from leaving, rushed downstairs, and returned with a key. We took the dingy room, laboriously explained about the luggage, and finally agreed on a price.

We took a swim and sat around having a beer as the family scene suddenly turned to horror. A boy of about ten decided to jump from the balcony into the pool and landed instead on the concrete rim. His parents screamed, tried to lift him up on his possibly broken legs, dragged him around, patted his face, and dabbed his bruises with iodine. To add to the chaos, I shattered my beer glass. We tried to phone the shipping office to say we would be sailing the next day; the call, a mile away, took half an hour to come through. In the evening, we went to a shop that advertised foreign newspapers but in fact had only Turkish ones, and bought some cunningly disguised but rotten peaches.

We were reading in bed the next morning at 8:30 when there was a loud knock and some incomprehensible words in Turkish. When I finally opened the door, the hotel clerk informed me that the boat was leaving at 9 A.M. We frantically packed, stored the luggage, rushed down to the office, bought round-trip tickets (for which the agent tried to overcharge me), and raced to the dock. There we found a grimy crew servicing a wretched Greek boat. I asked when we would leave; they replied at ten or later since we were the only passengers. They swore the boat sailed back to Turkey every day, clearly a lie. I was furious. We'd bought round-trip tickets for a filthy, even dangerous boat, which might never bring us back to Turkey.

We raced back to the ticket office and explained, in German, to the Turkish agent that we preferred to wait for that fast, new Turkish boat that sailed at 3:30. To our amazement, he confessed that there was no such boat either today or tomorrow (yesterday he'd tried to sell us tickets for it), and no boat from the neighboring port of Dikili. I angrily demanded a refund, and he promptly returned our money. What now? The island was so near, yet so far. He produced a long pas-

senger list, with many English names on it. These people, he assured us, would soon arrive. It was the wretched Greek boat or nothing, he said, and it was leaving right away. Encouraged and eager to be off, we repurchased the tickets and went back to the dock. Still no passengers. We went quickly through the police and customs, and hesitantly stepped on board. After a brief delay, we cast off—ourselves the only passengers.

A week later, we sailed back from Lesbos to Ayvalik, had the usual delay at customs, retrieved our car, and returned to the hotel to swim and sleep. Next morning, the winding coast road led us to the ruins of ancient Troy. The plains of Homer's Ilium are still windy, and the site magnificent. But most of the loot was carried off to Berlin long ago, and the ruins and museum were disappointing. Just beyond Troy, at the Dardenelles, a deep blue strait of water between two peninsulas, the fierce Turks defeated the British in March 1915. We waited in a long line of cars for the ferry to cross the straits. At the last moment, a huge Turkish Mercedes drove past the waiting line of cars, up the ramp and through a narrow passage, barely missing another car and the ticket taker. Despite the outraged cries of the other drivers, the cop in charge shrugged his shoulders and let the Mercedes go ahead of everyone else.

In the late afternoon, we reached Istanbul and went to the airport to find out how to leave the car at customs before flying to Israel. The place was so small and squalid that at first we didn't realize that it was *the* international airport. After searching for 20 minutes, we found the customs shed—closed. The tourist information desk directed us to the airport hotel, which refused to store the luggage.

The nearby Flora hotel, new and unlisted at the tourist office, agreed to store the luggage without charge, though they had no room for us. The owner asked us to bring her some coffee and tea back from Israel, and we agreed. She then said she might have a room after all if two American girls would share a room with a third who'd just arrived. We drove down to the beach and found the girls, who agreed to share. At the hotel, we were served the only bad meal we had in Turkey, at double the normal price. We then discovered that our room, rented for an extra half-day, would not be ready until 9 P.M. Insects and noise kept us awake all night. As we left the next morning, the owner, no longer feeling generous,

told us we had to pay to store the luggage. Forget the coffee and tea from Israel.

Leaving a car at the customs in Istanbul was not so easy as it had been at sleepy ports like Marmaris and Ayvalik. At 8:45 A.M., we went to the huge airport customs shed, which contained not only cars but mountains of radios, tape recorders, televisions, and suitcases. The department head arrived at nine and sent us upstairs to the office of the chief of customs to fill out a form. The typist directed us to the female chief, who sent us back to the typist. Using one finger, he typed out the form, taking five full minutes for my name alone. We returned to the chiefess, caught her powdering her nose, showed her our passports and plane tickets, got her signature, and returned to the customs shed with the paper. A boy showed us where to park the car. In the shed, we got another form, filled out in triplicate with the car's license plate, motor, and serial numbers. I completed this form, went outside with the customs scribe, and showed him the car. We then took all the papers to a third office, packed with protesting Turks.

We kept repeating that our plane left in half an hour and we had to hurry. Finally, the third chief checked the forms against my passport and registration and said he had to have another look at the car. On the way, he stopped to involve himself in a wrangle over a misplaced radio. Feeling more and more trapped in an unending bureaucratic labyrinth, we desperately begged him to speed up. When he'd seen the car, we returned to his office, and, after scrutinizing several pages of Turkish stamps in my passport, he stamped the forms a few more times. (To complicate matters, I'd brought in another car on a previous trip, and this summer I'd entered Turkey four different times. We could hardly blame him for wondering what we were up to, and we began to wonder ourselves. Who planned this ridiculous trip, after all?) After we'd left his office, he ran after us, and we had to go back again. He wrote something in pencil in my passport, already quite full of unintelligible Turkish scrawls concerning the car, our luggage, and various entrances and exits. Back in the first office, we had the forms surveyed and stamped again, surrendered the car keys, and got one page of the triplicate. All this took two painful hours. I now understand the word "Byzantine" and why the Ottoman Empire collapsed.

In the end, the Turks were not as fero-

cious as we feared. The waiters served excellent food, the customs officials cooperated in their laborious fashion, the truck driver stopped to help, the mechanic fixed our Volkswagen. One policeman gave us gas, another allowed me to escape after bashing a car. In a bizarre sort of way, our tensions and fears enhanced our travels. The bad moments were more vivid and memorable than the pleasant ones.

Jeffrey Meyers, biographer of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Frost, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, will publish a life of Orwell with Norton next September.

Letter From Venice

by Andrei Navrozov

Living Souls



Last spring, in one of my early letters from Venice, I promised that I would write in greater detail about Baron F—, who liberated me from Florentine bondage by letting me the *attico* at Corte Tron, with its lifesaving terrace looking over the courtyard of the Palazzo Volpi and beyond, to the motionless cranes over the ruined Fenice. Almost a year has passed, and we are still fast friends; last week I improvised a dish, along the general lines of Louisiana gumbo, with some mallards he had shot on a remote islet in the lagoon; moreover, Michael Palin has now exposed him as a public figure in a television series about Hemingway. In short, in print as in life, I can call him by his Christian name.

It is quite the first time, incidentally, that this business of calling a person by his given name has any significance in my life, and I want to put that new sensibility in a broader context. The other night, I was talking to a young woman about a dinner party in Porto Ercole we had both attended in the summer, where she and her friend the hostess were the only Italians. The other guests, with a whole pashmina of marriageable girls among them, belonged to the broad, fast, First World that is New York, Paris, and the new London. Ordinarily, in my for-

mer social hypostasis, I would have remembered with perfect clarity who they all were, especially the girls, by name and surname, stated occupation, last known address, and mobile phone number, as well as whose jokes they laughed at, what shoes they wore, whom they were likely to marry in the end, and whether it would be worth the trouble to get invited to the wedding. This time, nothing. A sociopath's blank.

I realized just how much I had been spoiled by Venice in the intervening period, by Venice where the person with whom one is speaking is by definition a public figure, a permanent feature of the civic landscape, who has been here, perhaps in the form of his ancestors yet in this very armchair opposite, for 200, 800, 1,200 years. One's awareness of one's interlocutor, in such circumstances, matures gradually, progressing in small increments from the superficial and ritualized to the covert and coveted, and the privilege of addressing a person by his Christian name comes with the social territory that is painstakingly, but above all slowly, explored. This habit of social slowness, which is really a kind of wary sloth, is in vivid contrast with the manners of the First World and even of the Second, which in Italy would include Milan and to some extent the new Berlusconi-Murdoch, television-executive, wheel-of-fortune Rome.

There, in those newer, more intoxicating, less *maigre* worlds, the very firmament is in ferment, with human particles borne by diverse currents appearing and disappearing from view like snowflakes in a storm, with the effect that your interlocutor at a dinner party—all the more so if she is a pretty girl looking over your shoulder in no fewer than three directions at once—must be apprehended, appraised, fixed, and charmed all of an instant, whereupon the trauma of transience, dislocation, and accident is momentarily allayed and social life reacquires a semblance of meaning. Quickness, rapidity, rapacity are the jabs of the anesthetic that makes it all possible there, just as reticence, or perhaps dignity, is what you have to inject yourself with in Venice “if you want to have a good time.”

It is interesting that the bit of hackwork aired on the BBC made the same point, albeit in a somewhat more politically tremulous key. The presenter noted Alberto's manifest “lack of urgency,” and even murmured that “the word languid could have been coined” for him. “I ask

what I should call him,” Palin went on, “should it be Signor Franchetti, or perhaps Alberto? He purses his lips gently, as if acknowledging some distant, unspecific pain.

“Perhaps *Barone*?” he suggests.”

Alberto may not be Venice, but he is as close to it as you can get without building a bridge of fine Istria stone between your pancreas and your liver. He is something more than a good old boy, he is an archetype, one of a tiny handful of eminent Venetians who are to their nation what Gogol's “old world landowners” were to the Russia of his day. The author of *Dead Souls* never finished his “poem,” which he had envisioned as a variation on Dante—only the part corresponding to the *Inferno* survives, and half of the *Purgatorio*—and thus the modern chronicler of Venice can plunge directly into the sort of book that might have been Gogol's *Paradiso*, without at any time feeling that he is treading on hallowed ground. And, insofar as what he aims to capture are the living souls of Venice, he must begin with Alberto.

As our landlord and neighbor, Alberto used to arrive on the terrace with a mess of dinner invitations for us in his pockets, and naturally we always wanted to accept all of them. A truly social foreigner in London would consider himself an outcast, perhaps a prisoner, if all of a sudden he had to limit himself to 300 dinner parties a year. Alberto would clear his throat, adjust a loose vine, fiddle with the ashtray. “No, but you know, you are going too fast. You cannot be so fast in Venice. You will burn out. You must be very careful. Why not have drinks with the M— on Tuesday, and then perhaps we can dine with G— on Friday, which will be very nice for you because they have a pleasant garden. But tomorrow I would like to suggest that you stay at home, and do nothing. No . . . thing at all. You will see, it would be much better.”

“Can we go somewhere with your boat?”

“I do not think we should this week, no. No, we had better not. There is a terrible virus going round, you see. It is in the newspaper. I know many people who have it already.”

Palin approached him to be the guide to Hemingway's haunts in Venice despite the fact that, when the American writer came here and was befriended by his family, Alberto was ten. But what I find so remarkable is how the BBC's Virgil, or rather my Beatrice, gradually up-