

A Phenomenology of Piazza Bellini

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Out of habit, I walk to the piazza nearly every day. Divided by small rectangles of plane trees and a couple of palms, it contains a central statue of its namesake – the composer, Vincenzo Bellini – an excavated gorge revealing the sunken walls of the old Greek city, Neapolis, and a number of cafés along the enclosed side of the square. Sunlight makes the place languid and anciently decrepit at a certain stage of the afternoon, and a combination of shade and tables where you can sit untroubled by waiters makes it an excellent place to read and think.

Following my progress, from an aerial perspective, as I walk from my apartment on Via Foria, through the centro storico and its tight, irregular grid, you would notice a series of evolutions in the city's plan. Whole communities of tiny alleys, mazed as nerves, develop at certain junctures into streets, which open onto the clear light of little squares.

As I negotiate the narrow, nameless alleys, I enter into a type of attention; an onerous tension and submission to the interruptions and soft collisions of motorcycles and

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vespas, as they sputter past and dust me into the margins. Disintricating myself from a street vendor, passing the last wet-stalls of garfish, octopus and clam, I take a right and suddenly there is clear space, the plain opens – I reach Piazza Bellini.

I've experienced something common to southern Mediterranean cities: a narrow, convoluted passage is relieved by a sudden widening, as if, for felicity's sake, the architecture had breathed. Across the plan of the old quarters, this theme is replicated, with variations, many times: the labyrinthine unravels and gives way to the plaza – adopted by the city fathers, perhaps, in some elementary way, because of this sustaining and relieving of tension, gratifying the dual instincts for density and space.

From a friend's balcony on a stormy afternoon, when sulphurous clouds from Vesuvio broke on the heads of a rustic jazz band and rain darkened the face of Vincenzo Bellini; from a table at Café Arabo, with a spritz and Federico and Marcella, surrounded by language students from L'Orientale; out in the middle of the square, after midnight, trying to locate a cicada trilling inside a potted shrub; hanging over the railings and studying the vague, geometric lines of the archaeological dig; then, reading alone, in the levelled, aquatic interior of café Intra Moenia, somehow apart from the main body of the piazza and its crowd, but proximate.

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Alone in this little anteroom of the square, with its framed postcards of the volcano, I feel comfortably present – socially flexible and astride certain important culinary periods.

I've also developed a kind of topographical awareness – the mind noting the upward vertical axis of the Bourbon facades, where my friends drink and smoke on their balcony, the horizontal axis, that stretches out across the piazza with its tables and foliage, and then, a downward vertical axis, where the dust of the city's forefathers drifts in the subterranean latrinae and tunnels. I feel fully realized in the spatial dimension, fully articulated – the mind stretching and filling out in the piazza's recesses, plains, heights and underworld, like warm light finding its shape early in the day. Back home in Suffolk, on a barren suburban estate of the late 1960s, my spatial oneirism is sealed off, truncated by shallow concrete foundations and the terrible English privacy of the prefab.

Sitting at a table removed from the main orbit of the waiter, I'm surrounded by little coterie of students uniformly in jeans and black jackets, by well-dressed older couples picking at antipasti, by single men with slicked and greying temples, by those waiting restively for their friends or dates, by sudden excitable arrivals and departures – by a soft continuous verbiage that seems to flow away in arabesques as far as the limits of the square.

The waiter doesn't bother to chase away stragglers who mill around the tables. There's no security patrol to remove

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sleepers from the benches or the stone steps of the sanctum.

There's an easy company in solitude, the possibility of conviviality without it being formalised or coerced, without having to pay expensively for it, as you might as a participant of the social in a cosmopolitan bar or restaurant. It reminds me of how I like to fall asleep in large rooms to the sounds of my friends.

Emerging from the narrow alleyways of the centro storico, where the buildings pile and topple into one another and drying sheets are strung window to window (like the white angel's wings in Caravaggio's Neapolitan street scene, *The Seven Works of Mercy*), I realise the piazza is the only place where the sky can be seen unobstructed.

Open to the sky, and to transients – I've seen a blue bee-eater flashing through the fronds and scarred torques of the palm trees. Then, mysterious arrivals from the sea: tumbleweeds of dried wrack, the half-skeleton of a red mullet with an eyeless head, drifts of sand and beachy dust blown in over the rooftops. As if it had accepted an esoteric invitation, the burnt musk and spiced particles of the Sirocco wind arrived one day and whipped around the awnings. Various casts of weather seem to announce themselves only in the square.

The piazza as a landing, a great lobby, a continuous reception to the wider world. Maybe this goes some way to explaining why, as I sit at my café table, I sometimes feel

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as if I'm waiting for a courier to arrive, travelling always implacably from somewhere to meet me.

Rather than my courier, I see that the piazza has a regular traffic of experimental life and secret economies. There are the quiet transactions, a backroom printing enterprise, a bucket of fresh octopus passing from one pair of hands to another, a guitar being mended by a mysterious technician who stops to talk to one waiter and then disappears with his little metal kit. Then, more definite fixtures. A pale elderly lady arrives at around four o'clock most afternoons and distributes little folded pieces of paper sealed with star-stickers, all of which contain her poesia: short, aphoristic stanzas that trouble me with a vatic line or two. Then there is a tall, elegantly made-up transgender woman who moves from table to table with her box of contraband, announcing herself with 'sigarrette, sigarrette, signore e signori'. A young boy with fat, fleshy hands and rough-cut hair turns up sometime after, hungry and haunted-looking, with a show-card displaying various faded tat: keyrings of Pompei, magnets of Vesuvio, manufactured in Taiwan. He's eventually summoned to the edge of the square by a middle-aged man with fleshier hands and wilder hair, and they quickly count their earnings, and disappear – emissaries from old and roaming caravans of poverty.

I notice how like the backstage of a set the place is, with its props and illusory devices strewn around for anyone to see

– here is the cardboard back of Bethlehem, some tinselled wings with staples showing, and the actors, scurrying around between scenes in full view, with paper crowns and thorns slipping over their eyes.

Over this gentle debacle, there are the obvious ropes and levers and pulleys, each part leaning on the others in a spirit of indulgence and lethargy, as new ones are fixed and jimmed into place – the whole apparatus impossibly balanced.

I naturally digress, and I digress most in the piazza. Encouraged by the way the early light enters the square, my friend and I talk right through the morning, a conversation that moves from reading books in beneficent places (botanical gardens, libraries of marble and porphyry, sea-facing promenades), whether or not a bottle of ancient perfume is reinterpreted as soon as it is sprayed into the present, to the Swedish doctor Axel Munthe who loved Capri so much he stayed there as the sun and sea blinded him. At this point, our conversation is interrupted by a woman at the next table, who remarks, in Italian, that the house of Axel Munthe is very strange. The waiter, Luigi, collecting glasses, then drops in and informs us that today would be a good day to visit Capri, and the syntax of our conversation broadens to include these two interpolators, becomes a composite of four minds, and is receptive to others, as the bartender who serves at Café Arabo leans

against the wall and listens. With a changing cast, our conversation continues in broad, discursive paragraphs through the morning, inflected by the latest participant, until my friend and I have little else to say and settle our bill.

Standing a moment under the ancient masonry, just before we say goodbye, I wonder at all of the other participants of the square. How sometimes its syntax widened and spoke a public into being: the hundred musket-butts begin to knock against the flagstones, the moustachioed recruit pinches his blood-red shirt and the Garibaldian troupe swear their patriotic oath; and in the dark, the motley Resistance resolves that it will drive the fascists from the port and castles; and hoisted into the air, one after another, by longhairs and dreads, the placards of anticapitalismo on the march.

Then a simpler, more ancient precedent – the two old friends sitting on the warm ground, gesticulating, scratching their heads, drawing a company of loose togas and sandals, sophists and amateur geometricians, talking for hours in the open spaces of the classical square.

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This essay has been extracted from Pamphlet Issue Three,
which also features **Richard Scott** and **Tamsin Snow**.