

Editorial



The year 2020 has been a special time: it has been marked by the pandemic, lockdown and quarantine. Never before have we felt so isolated, closed off and immobile and we have never been subject to such radical restrictions on social contacts, movement and travel. That is why we need movement, unlimited space and open trails. This issue of *Czytanie Literatry* was created in the circumstances of essentially hermetic isolation. When we were planning it, nobody thought of any dire “epidemic” in the near future. And yet, by an astonishing coincidence or a surprising twist of fate, we decided then to go on an expedition to Venice, a unique and an incomparable place as if we had somehow felt that we would desperately need this journey later.

It is common knowledge that everyone has their own Venice, including those who have never been there. The city on the lagoon is not so much a reality – though its existence is completely real – as it is a kind of simulacrum, created through overlapping and multiplying cultural images over the centuries. Even when wandering around the labyrinthine space on a summer or winter morning, we are more enslaved by what is established in tradition than trapped in the actual topography where sooner or later either GPS or a Venetian who we happen to meet will allow us to find the way. In European mythical geography, Venice occupies a separate place, characterised by a certain “overvalue.” None of the European cities has evoked such strong feelings and conflicting emotions. It is a city-model, a city-symbol that over the centuries has aroused feelings as diverse and contradictory as admiration, fascination, fear, and even aversion or abomination.

In this issue, above all, let us go to Venice following the route set out by Polish writers, from Old Polish authors to contemporary ones. It is therefore a journey that takes place simultaneously in time and space, during which we discover the image of the City that has evolved over the centuries. According to the 16th and 17th century writers, *La Serenissima* was an attractive political model for Poland: the Noble Republic was modelled on the structure of Venetian rule, which was perceived as the foundation of civil order and praised for its republican achievements. The eighteenth-century accounts of journeys are still full of delight with the smoothly functioning system of power in the Republic of Venice, worthy of imitation in the anarchising national reality. In the nineteenth century, Venice became the centre of the first political emigration of Poles after the Kościuszko Uprising and

the Third Partition. The two once mighty Republics were similar due to their the political situation: the loss of independence and the same invader, Austria, and, moreover, the same goal, namely the restoration of sovereignty. But that is also when the dark legend of Venice begins to function: taking advantage of the political weakness of other countries, flourishing thanks to the greed of the inhabitants and constructed on the denunciation and behind-the-scenes machinations of the Council of Ten, and most importantly, restricting the freedom of the individual. In the nineteenth century, the city on the lagoon underwent another metamorphosis in literary representations, following the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Byronic tropes will be taken up by many travellers, and the aesthetic admiration of the City will be combined with the thought of its ruin and demise. It is very interesting to see Mickiewicz's attitude – reconstructed from Odyńiec's account – to *La Serenissima* marked by feelings of disapproval, aversion, and abhorrence with the imperialism of the Republic of Venice, which took freedom away from nations and individuals.

In his canonical *Obrazy Italii* [Images of Italy], Paul Muratoff wrote: "There are two Venices. One which still celebrates some festival, still resounds with the bustle, carries on smiling and relaxing lazily on St. Mark's Square, on the Piazzetta and on the Riva degli Schiavoni. (...) And the second Venice sometimes allows us to feel loneliness, does not comfort us and does not fill us with glamour (...). Narrow streets suddenly startle us with their seriousness and silence. (...) What was only a picturesque detail on the Piazzetta, namely a black gondola, a black scarf on the shoulders of a Venetian woman, appears here in the austere, almost solemn character of an eternal ritual. (...) perhaps the gondola that brought us here from Venice so smoothly and quietly is only a shadow or perhaps these waters are the waters of death and oblivion?" Between these two visions there are twentieth-century literary images of the city on the lagoon, starting with one of the most important texts realising the myth of Venice: the novella by Thomas Mann. This path was also followed by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz or Waław Kubacki, who used the topoi which are fixed in the culture to symbolise real spaces. And Adam Wiedemann, a contemporary traveller, no longer continued the gesture of reactivating tradition, but wrote a humorous account of his stay in the Adriatic city, and finally asked about the possibility of saying something "new" about Venice today and the only positive answer can be found in the record of one's own "invalid" subjective perception. This may prove impossible, however, since the evocative vision of Venice recorded in paintings, books, films seems more vivid than its direct experience.

In addition to the expedition to present-day and historical Venice, the issue proposes exploring other seemingly already-discovered territories. We also suggest re-reading Jaworski's *Historie maniaków*, *Pamiętnik Stefana Czarnieckiego* by Gombrowicz, the early prose of Konwicki as well as works of Tuwim in order to see the unrecognised spaces in them. In the section "Reviews and Discussions," we encourage you to get to know all the faces of Grochowiak the poet and the specificity of British postmodernism as perceived by the Ukrainian researcher. Finally, it is worth reading two interviews:

the first one, with Prof. Jerzy Kandziora about his long-standing relationship with Stanisław Barańczak, and the second one, with Prof. Hubert Orłowski, devoted to his several-decade-long fascination with the works by Thomas Mann. Both interviews are unexpectedly connected by the author of *Death in Venice*, appearing this time primarily as the author *The Magic Mountain*. In this way, like a glimmer on the water, the canonical Venetian text returns in a blurred reflection at the end. As it was rightly pointed out by Manuela Gretkowska, an author of a very personal guide to the City: "Perhaps with this density of population and wealth, the pressure of history and passions Venice is a suspension of intermingling times, mirror reflections, water, the living and the dead. It appears the way you want to know it, depending on which chapter you start reading it. Preferably *da capo*, at the end, starting again." Now, let us embark on this never-ending journey, let us read...

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