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A City Full of Life or a City Buried Alive? Vittorio Alfieri's Venice and Venice in the Travel Journals by Polish Artists at the Turn of the 19th Century

SUMMARY

The article raises the topic of the evolving image of Venice from the perspectives of three travel accounts: by Vittorio Alfieri, Fryderyk August Moszyński, and Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski. They were all bound by the figure of the Italian playwright Alfieri. In the article, I propose a new look into the accounts from the travels of Polish intellectual elite: an enlightened journey described in the recollections by Moszyński, and a 19th-century journey depicted in the journals by Borkowski, following Alfieri as the guide. Considering his tragedies in support of national liberation, he perfectly matched the ideas in the minds of Polish artists at the turn of the 19th century. Even though the author may be forgotten today, the reception of his works, depending on the historical period, political situation, and literary streams, evolved interchangeably placing him in the spotlight and ignoring him. In the first half of the 19th century, he was a significant figure, a fact which triggers interesting observations, particularly in the context of the journeys of artists to Venice.

Keywords

Polish-Italian literary relations, travels to Italy, Vittorio Alfieri, reception of Italian literature in Poland

In 1768 Vittorio Alfieri, a young playwright, departed for Venice. At his destination, he experienced particular apathy and powerlessness, a state which would soon be broken in his plays encouraging for national liberation. Soon afterwards, in 1786, August Fryderyk Moszyński set out on a journey and, in his accounts written for Stanisław August Poniatowski, he prophesied the fall of Venetian independence at the same time offering a warning for the Polish nation. In the early-19th century (i.e. in 1815), Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski watched a play by Alfieri in a theatre in Venice and discussed the similarities between Polish and Italian histories. All three artists focussed on Venice, which had particular significance in the minds of Poles who travelled to Italy. In the late-18th century and in the first half of the 19th century, it constituted a symbolic city. The fact that one of the most beautiful major European cities was held by the same oppressor strengthened the Polish-Italian bond and elevated the whole relationship. The “myth of black Italy” is a well-known phenomenon in Polish travel journals.¹ Venice as a metropolis of death and decay, a vampire city only famous for its predecessors, has been a topos often discussed by researchers. However, if one applies the filter of the role of figure – Vittorio Alfieri in this case – who becomes a kind of a porte parole around the Italian city, that enables a new view of the Polish-Italian relations at the turn of the 19th century. That offers insight into the roles of individual recollections in the formation of the history of the reception of Italian literature in Poland.

By the late 1760s, when the young poet from Asti was setting out on a journey through Italy seeking inspiration for his planned grand “national” tragedies, no one in Poland knew about his existence. Nearly 30 years later, just before the turn of the 19th century, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz and Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski were among the first people to report back to Poland about him. In their accounts, they described the poet as a unique figure distinguished not only for his playwriting talent but also his relentless spirit in demanding individual freedom. Alfieri was “a fervent defender of reasonable freedom, his soul resented the bloody madness of the French, as shameful and detrimental for the cause of oppressed humanity,”² and “a noble man, viewing the world from up high yet often swayed by his vivid imagination.”³ That was the beginning of the most vivid reception of the Italian playwright in Poland. It must be said at this point that his presence in Polish cultural space was as significant as it has been forgotten. Even though he seems absent now, works in literary criticism have continued to prove that he is constantly being discovered anew.

¹ Olga Płaszczewska discussed this in more detail mainly in her two comparative works, see Olga Płaszczewska, *Wizja Włoch w polskiej i francuskiej literaturze okresu romantyzmu* (Kraków: TAIWPN Universitas, 2003), and Olga Płaszczewska, *Przestrzenie komparatystyki – italia-nizm* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2010).

² Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, *Pamiętniki czasów moich*, Warsaw, vol. 2, ed. Jan Dihm (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1957), 64. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

³ Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, *Pamiętniki i memoriały polityczne 1776–1809*, ed. Jerzy Skowronek (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1986), 264.

Alfieri's reception has not yet been discussed in monograph form, though one should mention the major researchers who have contributed to his vivid reception in Poland: Edward Porębowicz, Wiktor Hahn, Piotr Chmielowski, Juliusz Kleiner, Józef Ujejski, Marian Szykowski, and Adolf Nowaczyński.⁴ Alfieri began his career in Polish theatres under the patronage of Wojciech Bogusławski, who himself translated *Saul*, Alfieri's first play, staged at the National Theatre in 1809, and who played the title role. Some of the first people to mention him also included Ludwik Cappelli and Ludwik Osiński, i.e. the directors of Alfieri's plays in Poland, people who introduced Alfieri to Polish theatres, and critics who discussed Alfieri's fame in journals. Playwrights who drew inspiration from the style of Alfieri's tragedies included Alojzy Feliński, Franciszek Wężyk, Antoni Hoffman, and Juliusz Słowacki. All of them played their part in triggering Alfieri's lively reception in Poland. Considering the travel accounts by Poles who travelled to Italy,⁵ articles about stagings in Poland,⁶ the surviving translations of his tragedies,⁷ and critical literary studies, one should consider Alfieri in artistic terms. That would offer the image of a poet eager to create new theatre, shaping his works in such a way to use words in his fight for the freedom of the individual. In following the arguments of Polish critics and writers, Alfieri evolved: from an individualist always moving upstream abandoning existing classicist rules to enrich tragedies with passion and terror, to a national hero on whom consecutive generations have relied.

It would be difficult to state whether the individualist, essentially bored by the forms which were forced upon him, set out on his journey in search of adventure, love, inspiration, or fame. He himself remarked: "throughout 1768, I was completely certain that I would be able to run through the

⁴ Wiktor Hahn, "Przyczynek do genezy Marii Stuart Słowackiego," *Ateneum*, vol. 1, (1984): 71–86; Józef Ujejski, "Wstęp," in *Tragedie Antoniego Hoffmanna* (Warsaw: Związek Artystów Scen Polskich, 1929); *Dzieje literatury powszechnej z ilustracjami*, vol. 4, part 1–2, ed. Edward Porębowicz et al. (Warsaw: Własność, nakład i druk S. Lewentala, [ca 1893–1897]), 440–453; Piotr Chmielowski, *Dzieje krytyki literackiej w Polsce* (Warsaw: Gebethner i Wolff, 1902), 516–517; Adolf Nowaczyński, *Szkice literackie* (Poznań: Ostoja, 1918), 163–176; Marian Szykowski, *Dzieje nowożytnej tragedii polskiej, typ pseudoklasycyzny* (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1920), 133.

⁵ Alfieri was discussed not only by Niemcewicz or Prince Czartoryski, but also Łucja Rautenstrauchowa, Michał Wiszniewski, and Józef Kremer.

⁶ Reviews of his staged plays were published in the *Gazeta Warszawska*, the *Gazeta Korespondenta Warszawskiego i Zagranicznego*, and in the *Kurier Warszawski* in relation to the staging of every one of Alfieri's plays on the national stage in Warsaw, as well as in the *Tygodnik Wileński* in celebration of the Wojciech Bogusławski benefit in 1816 in Vilnius. Furthermore, articles devoted to Alfieri and his plays could be found in, e.g. *Astrea*, *Dziennik Wileński*, *Kłosy*, and *Pamiętnik Literacki*.

⁷ One of the most comprehensive lists of Alfieri's translated works can be found in *Dramat obcy w Polsce 1765–1965*, ed. Jan Michalik, vol. 1, ed. Stanisław Hałabuda (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2001), 17–18. The list covers ten works ascribed to Alfieri which had been translated into Polish: *Agamemnon*, *Antyгона*, *Filip*, *Mirra*, *Orestes*, *Polinik*, *Rosmunda*, *Saul*, *Wirginia*, and *Zbieg*. However, the list should be complemented and corrected as there are also fragment translations of Alfieri's works published in the press and in studies of the history of literature. *Zbieg* is not a translated work by Alfieri, and the names of the translators should also be corrected in some instances.

world."⁸ Before Alfieri decided to leave the walls of the Academy in Torino, he completed his first journey, i.e. to Genoa. This journey is worth noting considering his first love, and his first encounter with an unknown world and true freedom. When he finished the Academy, he departed for Venice and Rome, and in the following year he visited Naples. What were his journeys like? The Italian playwright was in a constant search for himself, so he could never stay for long. During all his Italian travels, which he described in his unique autobiography *Vita scritta sa esso*,⁹ and to Venice in particular, he was accompanied by the same feelings: melancholy, *mania*,¹⁰ boredom, want, and anxiety. They would have an indirect impact on his later works, yet they would also stimulate him to search further.

The second component of Alfieri's awareness was his political engagement, yet that only appeared during his journey to France, specifically Paris, in 1769. It was an important moment though the earlier experiences, the boredom and the soul's want constituted the foundations of Alfieri's texts.¹¹ Venice – one should state, was never Alfieri's "pearl," – did not carry as much significance for him as Florence or his native Asti. Nonetheless, it left a permanent mark on him. It was a mysterious city, a spectre city, a city which enticed him with its beauty only to be enclosed within the walls of the house he was renting. What did emerge then in his head? It was probably still not the idea of revolution, but certainly a growing anxiety. One should stress his *malinconia*,¹² his fact of being enclosed in a Venetian house, and his loneliness in the crowd:

I was not waiting for anything other than Venice, of which I had heard many wonderful things since I was a child (...) So there I was finally in Venice (...) A foreign crowd, the sheer number of theatres, celebrations and entertainment (...) made me stay until mid-June, though I could not say I was content with that. Still that melancholy, boredom, the pain of existence, they all slowly devoured me, so much so that any novelties were deadly for me. I spent my days in Venice alone, without stepping outside my house, without doing anything other than standing by the window where I sometimes chatted with one lady (...) Observing myself later somewhat better I noticed that in that period [from April to June – O.SzM.] my heart and my mind were emptier and more idle. My intellect worked

⁸ Vittorio Alfieri, *Tragedie e vita di Vittorio Alfieri*, ed. Silvestro Centofanti (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 1842), 610. In this article, fragments of Alfieri's biography were translated from Italian into Polish by the author, and later translated into English.

⁹ The first part of the autobiography was created in 1790, while the second in 1803, a few months prior to his death. It was released posthumously in *Opere postume in 1804*.

¹⁰ In Italian: obsessive thirst, an overwhelming intent, a sudden desire, a hunger.

¹¹ He met Louis XV in person, so he had a chance not only to observe how power functioned, but also to meet the king – who personified the qualities which the playwright would condemn with much ferocity in all his later plays. His aversion, hatred even, towards the king and the court were the basis of his unfavourable disposition towards the French, which Alfieri expressed in his work *Il Misogallo*. Later, by the end of his life, he returned to France, and the sight of the country in revolutionary turmoil shocked him deeply once again. He could not accept the tyranny of the majority which replaced the tyranny of one man.

¹² In Italian: melancholy, sadness, grim fate, despondency.

accordingly – depending on whether the air was more or less bearable, I displayed more imagination and abilities towards winter (...) I was then convinced that I have almost no power to do anything.¹³

Alfieri's Venice was certainly a space for thought, a space which evoked recollections. It was a city full of life in which he seemed (to himself) a person without life. Despite that, he decided to travel further: the stop was almost necessary for him so he could continue his journey in search of inspiration and new ideas. Venice's space in itself did not generate any desire to act – it only inclined him to react. How could those values have been transferred into the Polish reality? What could they have added to the minds of travellers, and how could they have inspired them?

Those questions are best answered using two accounts: one from the 18th century, in which Alfieri's name was never mentioned directly yet the traveller's experiences were similar; the other, from the 19th century, did clearly indicate inspiration through Alfieri. August Fryderyk Moszyński, Pantler of the Crown, an architect, a director of royal constructions, due to numerous financial failures and failed enterprises departed to Italy in 1784. Moszyński did not mention Alfieri, but his reflections on some matters, mainly political but also psychological, corresponded with the observations made by the Italian writer. It should be noted that there is some indication that Moszyński was familiar with the works of the Italian – the architect had a strong connection with King Stanisław August Poniatowski. Their relationship was unique. The king was especially kind to the pantler, and their friendship, which began when they both still young, lasted throughout their lives. Stanisław August cared for Moszyński. He paid his debts. They exchanged correspondence for many years, and he endured Moszyński's bitter memoranda. As indicated by Bożena Zboińska-Daszyńska in the introduction to *Dziennik podróży do Francji i Włoch*, Moszyński wonderfully repaid for the friendship – he wrote a report for the king from his foreign journey and dedicated his dairy to him.¹⁴ Their relationship also had a cultural dimension, certainly not only within the domain of architecture, but also painting and sculpture. One could assume that Stanisław August shared his favourite reading recommendations with Moszyński. And the king's collection was extensive.

He also knew the Italian playwright's works well – that is confirmed by the fact Stanisław August's personal items included the cover and title page of a collected edition of Alfieri's works. A small brochure¹⁵ included in Stanisław August's literary collection was a promotional folder associated with the second Parisian collected edition of *Tragedie di Vittorio Alfieri* (1788–1789). Right at the beginning, there is a note from the edition's author: "Cette

¹³ Alfieri, *Tragedie e vita ...*, 611–612.

¹⁴ Fryderyk August Moszyński, *Dziennik podróży do Francji i Włoch*, trans. Bożena Zboińska-Daszyńska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1970), 25.

¹⁵ *Recueil de littérature. Stanisław August: Carmina, espitolae, orationes, acta inaugurationem, statuæ Joannis Sobieski regis Poloniae anno 1788 concernentia (cum descriptione festi Karuzel dicti) variaque alia – tempore regni Stanislai Augusti*, Biblioteka Czarotoryskich, Manuscript ref. no. 983.

edition est fort belle, et il est impossible d'en faire une plus correcte." The brochure included a list of five volumes which constituted the edition. Stanisław August read and knew the Italian writer. Therefore, Alfieri's plays (and letters on the criticism of the staged plays) had been present in Polish literary space before they were translated into Polish. Interestingly, the edition proves that the introduction of the Italian playwright onto the Polish stage in 1809 by Wojciech Bogusławski was not an accident. The process of absorbing his plays had begun a dozen or so years earlier triggered by the Polish intellectual elite. Moszyński could not have known that brochure but there is no question about August being familiar with Alfieri. As he orbited the king's court, Moszyński could not have omitted that piece of information, even more so considering the fact that his knowledge of Italy and Italian issues was surprisingly extensive.

Moszyński saw in Italy many causes of the evil that happened later, which made his account somewhat prophetic. It is worth noting that Moszyński's visit in Italy should be considered in the context of Polish-Italian relations at the turn of the 19th century.¹⁶ Moszyński, a free thinker, a man of the Enlightenment, saw the downfall of Italy, and the Papal States in particular; he saw the economic crisis; he monitored the agriculture which was neglected – one of his observations was that cereal was not produced to be exported but only to satisfy internal demand. Rome was surrounded by emptiness. Around it there were non-cultivable fields, scarce meadows, and farmers were not interested in producing food as they were not able to sell it freely since everything was hindered by fiscal regulations. Moszyński, which was a kind of a sign of the times, often commented upon the political and economical situation of the country. Those prophecies were gloomy, yet one should admit the traveller possessed a keen sense of observation, a critical approach to the surrounding reality, and he offered accurate social diagnoses. Moszyński's account could be sometimes likened to a dynamic reportage, a personal form yet perfectly illustrative of the revealing cultural stereotypes cultural existing at that time. Those "prophecies" applied to the dangers Italy faced and how Italy and Poland were related to one another.

Moszyński had a particular weakness towards Venice. He devoted the final chapter of his journal to it, leaving his discussion of the republic to the very end and turning it into a summary (or maybe a crowning?) of his Italian recollections. When discussing Venice and Venetians, he was not able to be as cynical and critical in his judgements, a thing he admitted himself:

¹⁶ Allow me to indicate some of the major Polish works which referred to the period I am discussing: Maciej Lorent, *Życie polskie w Rzymie w XVIII wieku* (Rome: Scuola Tipografica Pio X, [ca 1930]); Alojzy Sajkowski, *Włoskie przygody Polaków, wiek XVI–XVIII* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1973); Wiesław Müller, "Pielgrzymi polscy w Rzymie w XVIII wieku," *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, vol. 34, issue 2 (1986): 357–365; Bogdan Rok, "Zagraniczne podróże Polaków w pierwszej połowie XVIII wieku," *Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny „Sobótka,”* issue 1–2 (1992): 171–178; Marian Chachaj, *Związki kulturalne Sieny i Polski do końca XVIII wieku. Staropolscy studenci i podróżnicy w Sienie. Sieńczycy i ich dzieła w Polsce* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1998); Stanisław Burkot, *Polskie podróżopisarstwo romantyczne* (Warsaw: PWN, 1988); Olga Płaszczewska, *Wizja Włoch w polskiej i francuskiej literaturze okresu romantyzmu* (Kraków: Universitas, 2003); Małgorzata Ewa Kowalczyk, *Obraz Włoch w polskim piśmiennictwie geograficznym i podróżniczym XVIII wieku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2005).

I finally had to travel to Venice, the goal of my desire for the past two years (...) I found Venice almost as it was in 1747. No new buildings, and the old ones just as black as the surrounding gondolas (...) The same reserve regarding the matters of the government, identical policy regarding courts and foreign envoys (...) Few indicate the justness and wisdom of these people more than I do (...) The day will come when one or five powerful monarchies shall swallow and completely divide all which does not accept their systems of governance. Those monarchies shall use their conquests until a time when revolutions, necessary in the general scheme of matters, shall lead to their downfall, just like so many other great powers (...) But forgive me, Lord! Clearly, I am talking about politics. Is it possible that the country's air has already affected the fibres of my mind because here everyone is a politician; yet Venetians do not appreciate foreigners talking politics about them. So, we remain silent.¹⁷

Interestingly enough, that “talking politics” indicated by Moszyński was a common element of Venetian reflections. The traveller was struck by the strength of the bonds of despotism which were present in public space. He indicated how fossilised the system was while exposing the hypocrisy of the people who decided about the most important state issues. There might not be a better symbolic figure for exposing hypocrisy and the dictatorship of the rulers than Alfieri. It is worth remembering that it was Alfieri who indicated the formation of the tyranny of the majority, which replaced the tyranny of a single man.¹⁸ Moszyński also noted shameful examples of the rule of privileged groups:

A few years ago, there was an idea to strongly oppose Masons. There was even a hilarious ceremony of the public burning of the lodge's decorations and outfits held in a square. Since Masons included merited figures, and even the clergy, the severity was condemned, and mostly its application. The outcome was that most friends left three inquisitors the moment their office receded, and they were almost forced to withdraw from public affairs. And yet the decree directed against the maintenance of the

¹⁷ Moszyński, *Dziennik podróży do Francji i Włoch...*, 563–571.

¹⁸ His attitude towards nationality and the sense of responsibility for his country were demonstrated in his words included in the first text of *Il Misogallo*, a work directed against the French occupying Italy: “My name, Vittorio Alfieri; place where I was born: Italy; no land is homeland for me” (see Vittorio Alfieri, *Il Misogallo. Prose e rime* (London, 1806), 40). When considering the words in terms of the poet's patriotic and political engagement, one might note that he mainly presented himself as a universal individual in time and space, an independent and autonomous being. However, the fragment cannot be analysed without considering the entire work, which was, mind you, created under the influence of certain political events and as an outcome of the author's deep concern about national matters. The hatred towards the French was mainly triggered by France's seizing of Italian lands, yet it also had a broader context: Alfieri's hate towards tyranny in general. Works devoted to Vittorio Alfieri's political engagement include, e.g. Bernardo Chiara, *La gloria di Vittorio Alfieri: evocazione e ricordi* (Turin: E. Toffaloni, 1927); Carlo Calcaterra, *Vittorio Alfieri nell'Italia nuova* (Asti: Casa d'Alfieri, 1939); *Vittorio Alfieri: solitudine-potere-liberta'*, acts of the Congress, Berlin, 12th–13th November 2003, edited by Roberto Ubbidente (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006).

lodge remained in force as the Tribunal could not remove that which its predecessor had introduced. I am quoting this case to indicate the kinds of despotic bonds that exist here.¹⁹

Moszyński was aware that changes were necessary, and that without them Venice would become a backward place slowly slipping into decay. He also warned against the impending revolution, which was supposed to lead to a downfall. Finally, he noted that Venetians opposed any novelty (“trends move into Venice with great difficulty”). On the one hand, he called that, quite forgivingly, an attachment to traditions, but, on the other, he understood that such a situation would lead to missing the changes occurring in the international arena, which could prove detrimental for the Republic of Venice. So, he offered the example of Poland – he wanted Venetians to learn from its mistakes. At the same time, it is worth noting how Moszyński was careful not to assess Venice too severely, as he loved the city as a cosmopolitan:

Neither could I see any strive to improve the structure [of a ship – OSzM.], unlike in other countries, because they maintained the principle of not introducing any novelties. If only the wise Republic never abandoned this principle in basic matters, such as politics through which it overcame the efforts of the League in Cambrai, or in trade which might soon be limited to coastal seafaring. Finally, could not the example of Poland teach it that the common view in politics that the weakest state may endure owing to the efforts of stronger ones has some exceptions? But I am reminded that in Venice one should not talk either about politics or about the government; so I become silent as people should respect the principles of the place at which they are, and even the customs (...) It is befitting and prudent to love this homeland.²⁰

This kind of evolution of the image of Venice is surprising in his account: from an unwavering love for the city, through spinning unnerving reflections about the future of the Republic, to a re-grounding in unnecessarily talking politics. The author somewhat censored himself: he wanted to unfold his reflections on the system, and he started developing a diagnosis only to abandon any further discussion considering “the respect for the local laws.” He realised that Venetians did not appreciate being reprimanded, so he joined them in falling into a kind of torpor; once again he tried being only a tourist and abandon any critical evaluations.

Interestingly, Moszyński indicated the air, and the role the Venetian air played in triggering reflections – just as Alfieri did. Alfieri’s discussions focussed on his creative power and creative block, while Moszyński started “talking politics.” In the Polish architect’s account, everything was subject to historical entailment, and Italy was the perfect place to illustrate those transformations: from greatness, through reliving own past power, to the

¹⁹ Moszyński, *Dziennik...*, 569.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 583–584.

future downfall and re-uniting. In his extensive recollections, Moszyński devoted much attention not only to the customs, climate, social changes, and his observations of everyday life in Italy, but mainly to himself and his status in the country: "I no longer possess my former drive to visit palaces, churches, and all the ancient things. I feel a certain excess which makes me want to leave (...) So we get bored."²¹ At such moments, there could be no figure closer to Moszyński than the Italian playwright: similarly slightly tired with travelling, in search of something, and melancholic. That, apart from the political and social issues both artists raised, was a major indicator of the relationship between Moszyński's and Alfieri's reflections. Finally, it would be noteworthy to quote the observations of the Polish traveller about the seasons, a matter which was also discussed by the Italian poet. Moszyński noticed that much depended on the period when one visited Venice: Every city has moments when it looks the best: such moments can rarely be found in summer, especially in Venice. Great heat drives those can leave away from the city (...) The city blossoms by the end of October when the first frost can be felt (...) Currently, no one I know would dare to live in Venice.²²

The final interesting source I would like to use is the account by Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski, a man of letters, the publisher of *Psalterz floriański*, a geologist, and a mineralogist. He travelled to Italy twice, in 1815 and 1818.²³ Borkowski began his journey, as most visitors to Italy, from visiting Venice. He stressed that his account would not be a regular travel journal written for the entertainment of readers as "I doubt that those who only care about entertainment and search for it everywhere could find anything entertaining in this writing. The times are so harsh, books are so expensive, and knowledge so rare that it is time for our works to be solely devoted to learning."²⁴ It would be difficult to consider his journey as a trip consisting of only pleasant elements. Borkowski matched the type of intellectual journey of a man of the late Enlightenment – he listed all the historical sites and wealth that one should mention. Yet some of his observations triggered deeper reflections on the "spectre city," verging on the spirit of Romanticism:

Those monuments of Venetians' former greatness and wealth now stand empty and for passers-by are a terrifying spectacle of now minor yet once rich and ingenious nation. Cereal stores have been established in abandoned Palaces (...) We set off to Venice full of great expectations. Yet none of those could have matched the exceptional spectacle (...) No one can describe the impression that floating towers, buildings and streets have on the senses as this enticing spectre amazes and terrifies with the exceptionality of the place not leaving much to consideration (...) Alas, why! Why these beautiful tokens of national glory could not be maintained in

²¹ Ibid., 436.

²² Ibid., 597–598.

²³ Stanisław Dunin-Borkowski, *Podróż do Włoch w latach 1815 i 1816* (Warsaw: Drukarnia N. Glücksberga, 1820), 31–32.

²⁴ Ibid., II–III.

the posterity of the former genius and bravery, why the industries and the products of national work worthy of immortality could not last forever. It must be a terrible sight for every Venetian to watch these monuments of national greatness lost forever (...) Thus people easily become accustomed to misery and loneliness, and they multiply. Venice is certainly the most interesting city in the world as it is similar to none in any respect (...) A city which can amaze you with its uniqueness for a few days, but you would become bored with it if you stayed longer, as that which is wondrous at first quickly becomes common and people search for sustenance for their minds and hearts, not their eyes!²⁵

For that reason, Borkowski departed in search of food for thought to Venice. After discussing the Doge's Palace, the various churches, and the charming library, as well as the beautiful Arsenal, which since the beginning of Polish trips to Italy constituted a compulsory element of every visit, he proceeded to discussing Venetian theatre. At that point, the most interesting fragment which requires a commentary appeared. It was something more than the previous near perfect fulfilment of the imperative to describe "that which one should see." Borkowski's Venice was a city of former power, where suddenly, though not entirely unexpectedly, the Italian poet by the name of Vittorio Alfieri entered. The author referenced the poet in relation to his reflections on the economic standstill caused by Venice losing its independence. That economic torpor was reflected, according to Borkowski, in the cultural and artistic spheres. As a proof of just how much the financial status impacted the impoverishment of theatre life, the author quoted the number of theatres which used to entertain rich Venetians and the number of those which survived – the latter figure being just one. Operas were also closed as there was not enough funding for paying the casts and staff. Borkowski incidentally revealed that his visit to Venice occurred during a period of great popularity of the stagings of Alfieri's plays:

During my visit, tragedies and comedies were played at the San Benedetto theatre. Alfieri's tragedies were played there; Alfieri is the father of Italian tragedy, which he placed on a high level of perfection. He has combined the strength of Kornel with the taste and charm of Rasyń, and he approximated the tragedy to the Greek models by introducing a chorus. Italian actors emulate their French counterparts (...) Once in the tragedy *Saul*, in the fifth scene between Saul and the Archpriest, Saul moved in such a perfect motion around the priest that he ripped his noble hat off his head. It requires exceptional talent, the talent of *Talma*, to retain the pretences of naturalness in a sudden action and French declamation, and that great actor, if he is not animated by some grand item, becomes a diffuse declamator as all the others. Italians, just like the French, argue that a tragedy is not a showcase of human things (...), but that those are the heroic deeds of gods (...) who (...) smack each other and make a racket until someone

²⁵ Ibid., 3–9, 26–29.

kills them for peace's sake in the fifth act, and since that is the task of the learned, let us let them be with that.

That is a peculiar review of Alfieri's play – using the excuse of *Saul*, Alfieri's lofty play, Borkowski allowed himself to offer an ironic evaluation of the role of tragedy in the lives of Italians, which reminded him that tragedies are “the heroic deeds of gods making a racket until someone kills them for peace's sake in the fifth act.” Yet the entire passage about theatre was provided in a slightly humorous tone, though Borkowski was absolutely serious about the playwright. What is noteworthy in the travel account is the manner of writing about the Italian playwright. He was the “father of Italian tragedy, which he placed on a high level of perfection” and continued to be staged in Venice despite the city's obvious economic troubles and the fact of many theatres having been closed down. He thus stressed the high status of the playwright, as well as the influence of his tragedies, which was considerable in the period prior to the unification of Italy and in the *Risorgimento*, the “pre-Romantic” period.

All those interesting observations, inscribed as marginalia to Borkowski's main reflections, lead to one basic question: what did Borkowski actually see in Venice? A play by the Italian playwright, the patron of the soon-to-come *Risorgimento*? A staging of the tragedy of an unprecedented figure in the history of theatre and in the history of Italy's national liberation, i.e. Alfieri? Or maybe his own thought, his ideas? Surely Borkowski encountered a unique man in a unique city in the north of Italy. That encounter enriched his reception of that exceptional place giving a reflective nature to a visit to Venice “otherwise only pleasing for the eye.” It also encouraged him to consider not only the cause of the fall of the Republic of Venice, but also possible ideas for the city's future. At the same time, Borkowski presented Venetians and Poles somewhat through a mirror reflection, trying to show Poles their own image – Poland and Italy, or actually Poland and Venice, nations uniquely close to each other, joined on one stage of the 19th-century theatre. That was a significant reflection considering not only Alfieri's reception in Poland but also the significance of the power of the thought with which the Italian writer strengthened the Polish nation tired of its enslavement.

The image of Venice in the referenced recollections by Alfieri, Moszyński, and Borkowski oscillated and changed, which connected those journeys, as together they formed a triad: first there is melancholy, a “swallow's anxiety;” then one's visions on the former glory of the city, to finally seeing the fall of the metropolis. That was perfectly clear in the remarks of Alfieri, an 18th-century poet, who painfully experienced Venetian torpor, and later in those of Moszyński, who loved the place with selfless love yet who could not avoid his pessimistic prophetic visions. That same Venice was viewed in the first half of the 19th century by Borkowski – he watched Alfieri's play staged in a theatre in Venice. He watched the play by the Italian writer, who before him watched that same Venice and saw his own apathy in the city full of life. Therefore, the title question about the nature of Venice requires

a threefold answer, along the sinusoid drawn by the emotions included in the three discussed accounts: it was a city which from the outside seemed teeming with life, which amazed visitors and made them fall in love with it, yet in which one could intuitively sense (as in no other city) impending failure and decay. That, in turn, caused the seemingly unexplained weakness and torpor in artists. Yet its power would become reborn when the time would come – that was the case of Alfieri's outstanding talent and that was the hope which Borkowski tried to give his compatriots referring to the Italian poet in Venice.

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