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Iwaszkiewicz's Venice

SUMMARY

The article offers an overview of Iwaszkiewicz's Venice works, starting with his early poems from his first visit in the city on a lagoon, and all the way to a work in his final poetry collection. This overview helps one realise that the writer's autobiography is the key to all of them. Both poems and prose works followed the writer's rhythm of existence. The presented images not so much extract the features of the city but rather refer to the author's age, mood, and mental disposition. Another major factor that shaped the image of Venice in Iwaszkiewicz's works were the conventional topoi consolidated in culture which build the artistic means of symbolising actual spaces. Iwaszkiewicz's text, which developed for nearly sixty years is a praise of art understood, per modernist principles, in an absolutist manner.

Keywords

Venice, Iwaszkiewicz, aesthetics, poetry, modernism

In March 1956, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz recorded in his journal: "Each time you come to Venice you get a completely different impression."¹ When he was writing those words, he already had visited the city several times, a few more still to come. Do the images from Iwaszkiewicz's consecutive visits to the St. Mark's Square included in his works reflect the diversity of experiences? Are they

¹ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Dzienniki 1956–1963*, ed. and notes by Agnieszka and Robert Papięski, Radosław Romaniuk, introduction by Andrzej Gronczewski, vol. II (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2010), 46. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

just as varied and dynamic as the feelings and experiences of a traveller wandering through Venice's back streets? Are the descriptions of Venice, the recollections from consecutive journeys, and the imagined returns to places he once had visited sufficiently unstable and diverse that they form a kaleidoscopically shimmering image subject to the rhythms of the ever-changing times of the day and seasons? Or maybe they tried to construct a variable in terms of details yet persistent in its essence image of the city on a lagoon?

Let us start from the beginning. The same journal entry of 26 March 1956 reads: "I was first here with Hania in April 1924, two months after Marysia was born. The weather was beautiful then and lilac cascades of wisterias were hanging from the walls."² Somewhat more details regarding his visit can be found in an account from his first Italian trip he published in the *Wiadomości Literackie* journal, during which the Iwaszkiewiczzes visited not only Venice, but also Rome and Florence:

If anyone asks me what I liked in Italy the most, I respond that mainly the little dog of the station chief in Conegliano, and then a cat in the Fine Arts Academy in Venice, making a racket throughout the huge building without the slightest respect for Titian or Tintoretto, and particularly for an old English woman whom he kept interrupting trying to catch flies on an armchair over her head. Of course, this answer does not mean that I did not like Italy – it only symbolically means that that which is most striking there, which triggers the imagination the most, is the exuberant and loud life as if devoid of any consideration that something is a mummy, a corpse basically, a beautiful corpse yet devoid of life. That exact triumph of the strongest of lives, not looking behind, is what is the most beautiful there.³

That praise of everyday life happening at the surface, over the "beautiful corpse," seems emblematic for the Iwaszkiewiczzes' accounts of their first visit in Venice. The series of poetic miniatures entitled *Bilety tramwajowe*, a poetic description of the Italian trip, which he dedicated to his wife, Iwaszkiewicz included four works referring directly to his Venetian experiences:

Wenecja	Venice
Pytałem wczoraj, jakie Najpiękniejsze są kolory.	I asked yesterday, what Are the most beautiful colours.
Rzekł portier w Luna-Parku: Żółty, biały, różowy.	The porter in the amusement park said: Yellow, white, and pink.

² Ibid.

³ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, "Dwa tygodnie wycieczki po Włoszech," *Wiadomości Literackie*, no. 24 (1924): 2; further on, Iwaszkiewicz was critical of an art exhibition held at that time in Venice; he began with the telling words: "Sadly, that pungent life, pulsating so strongly, has not achieved a worthy expression in art. Nowhere can one feel that more intensely than during the 16th «international» art exhibition in Venice, which is basically an exhibition of Italian painting, and more specifically: an exhibition of the fall of Italian painting."

Noc

W Wenecji ciepło nocy
 Płucze w nocy owoce
 I pełne cukrzanej miazgi
 Strzepuje jak figi – gwiazdy.

Night

In Venice, the warmth of the night
 Rinses fruit at night
 And full of sugary pulp
 Shakes down stars like figs.

Glicynie w Wenecji

Liliowa szarfa na różowym domu,
 To śpiewaczka, co śpiewa swój szlagier,
 Tu w nocy gondolą po kryjomu
 Przyjeżdża Herr Schmidt mit seinem
 [Schwager.

Wisterias in Venice

A lilac band on a pink house,
 It is singer singing her hit song,
 Here at night in secret in a gondola
 Comes Herr Schmidt mit seinem
 [Schwager.

Herr Schmidt mit seinem Schwager

Nie chcieliśmy się przyznać,
 Ale nas najbardziej zajął w mieście obcym.
 Nazwaliśmy tak najciekawszego
 [mężczyznę,
 Który podróżował z najpiękniejszym
 [chłopcem.⁴

Herr Schmidt mit seinem Schwager

We did not want to admit,
 But he drew us the most in the foreign city.
 We thus called the most interesting of men,
 Who travelled with the most beautiful of
 [boys.

One should note a few issues here. First of all, what is most visible in those miniatures, resonating with the echoes of aestheticising Parnassism known from *Oktostychy*, is the sensuality of the experiences of the poetic persona reflected in the synthetic combinations and transformations of colours, images, tastes, and smells. They include poetically transported impressions from a journey through Italy discursively recorded in Anna Iwaszkiewicz's diary: "For the past few days we have been living in a kind of a fairy tale, starting with Venice, which seemed to us as if from a dream, some white and pink fantasy miraculously harmonised with the blue skies and the sea, until the wonderful evening in Rome, to that golden sunset behind distant hills."⁵ The record of the a sensory experience turned in *Biletu tramwajowe* into that "white and pink fantasy" – clear, bright, smelling of wisterias, and enveloped with the warmth of the night. Secondly, it was less about recording the unique individual experience and more about searching for beauty as if trademarked by Oscar Wilde. The relationships between words, sounds, and images more to the forefront, basically obscuring rather than opening a view of the real Venice. In the art vs. life antinomy, art always wins. Even though a few real details can be saved, beauty remains

⁴ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Wiersze zebrane* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1968), 205–206.

⁵ Anna Iwaszkiewiczowa, *Dzienniki i wspomnienia*, submitted for print by Maria Iwaszkiewiczowa, ed. Paweł Kądziała (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2000), 80.

the highest form of perfection. Thus, the aesthetic convention which influenced Iwaszkiewicz in the works from his youth shaped the poetic image in a greater degree than the surrounding reality.

Anna Iwaszkiewiczowa, conscious of the pressure exerted by the images of famous places consolidated in culture, which destroy the separateness of individual consideration, wrote:

Even though you have known St. Mark's Square, Piazzetta and all of the old buildings in general since you were a child, you do see them differently still, and most of all you absolutely cannot imagine that wonderful colour pallet of Venice or even the exceptional grey and pink tones of the interior of St. Peter's church.

In general, I have concluded that the fact popularising all works of art in postcards results in abasing it all. When you look at them you need to forget what they looked like in their reproduced forms and learn to look anew. (...) I, too, when looking at Venice and Rome, had to erase in me all my previous visions of them.⁶

Even if during their Italian trip they both "were learning to view things anew," it would be futile to search for traces of fresh experiences not obscured by culture in Iwaszkiewicz's initial Venetian poems. The author of *Dionizje* viewed the city the way a poet, according to him, should: in a gondola, an older man with a young boy strongly resembles the protagonist of *Death in Venice*, and the observed reality was enveloped in a yellow, white and pink glow as if in some cheap reproduction. Thus, Venice was lost underneath a thick layer of stereotypes and clichés. It is noteworthy that in *Hilary, syn buchaltera* (1923), one of his first novels, Iwaszkiewicz made his protagonist think about art exactly the same way:

Art. (At that time in a forest, somewhere in a forest filled with the smell of resin, he was reading *Dorian Gray*, a book about which our entire generation was crazy). Art! That meant marble and roses, wine and alabaster, asters in white vases, vases in lilac pinks, Venetian lanterns...

- and Venetian coppices, laughter, that sleigh ride, that only true sleigh ride in the world, the one from *Popioły*?⁷

Although "Jarosław," his wife wrote, "liked Venice the most,"⁸ his first visit to the city on the lagoon did not change his earlier cliché vision of it, consolidated earlier in *Hilary*. Those visions made it either a space of Venetian lanterns, lilac wisterias, and pink and golden glow, or they referred to images consolidated in literature (Mann, Żeromski, Byron⁹). The cultural vision of Venice was more vivid than the direct experience of it. As Oscar Wilde, whom Iwaszkiewicz considered a master at that time, put it:

⁶ Ibid., 80–81.

⁷ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Hilary, syn buchaltera* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1975), 10.

⁸ Iwaszkiewiczowa, *Dzienniki i wspomnienia*, 80–81.

⁹ Vide *ibid.*: "We keep recalling Byron, who lived there for such a long time," (81).

The sense of form (...) is the basis of both creative and critical achievements. A true artist cannot reach form through emotion, but rather through a form to thoughts and passion.¹⁰ (...) He draws inspiration from form and only from it, as a true artist should.¹¹

Bilety tramwajowe does not strive to imitate external reality as "truth as understood by the followers of aestheticism was only and exclusively a reflection of how artists perceived the world being created in a work. Wilde considered artists as the creators of beauty, and through the models they created he perceived the world. When describing the world in a beautiful and decorative form, an artist performs an aestheticisation of trivial reality."¹² In line with those stipulations, Iwaszkiewicz's works were dominated by aestheticism, overt artificiality, a strive to emphasise form, though, mind you, it would be difficult to consider the series which consists of the recollections from his first Italian trip as successful in artistic terms. The Venice inscribed in *Bilety tramwajowe* fluctuates between a refined decorative trinket (*preciosité*) and a banal landscape painting (surely contrary to what the artist intended). The special nature of the city on the lagoon is reduced in it to decorative beauty, yet instead of an exceptional painting the outcome is often a cliché picture. As if the process of aestheticisation inevitably led to repeating cultural stereotypes, both at the level of the language, and image-based representations.

In the 1930s, Iwaszkiewicz visited Venice several times. As Romaniuk indicated: "The outcome of the writer's last visit to Italy in April 1938, when he saw Venice as the backdrop for the triumphant march of fascism, was that in his eyes the city of St. Mark was no longer the cradle of modern European civilisation, but rather its coffin."¹³ He provided a literary transposition of those experiences from his final pre-WWII trips in the poems which he wrote in the attic of the house in Stawiska, which formed the series entitled *Wenecja* dated 24 October 1939.¹⁴ Out of a total of six, three poems directly reference the reality of the "dark greenish city," evoking the image of evanescence, loss, and death. "It [Venice] is," as Iwaszkiewicz's biographer interpreted, "a spectre city, the capital of « pale poets », empty now. Yet in the undefined near future, at some stage of the construction of the perfect society of slaves, it may become a refuge for poets exiled from

¹⁰ Oskar Wilde, *Eseje. Opowiadania. Bajki. Poematy prozą*, ed. Juliusz Żuławski, trans. Ewa Berberyusz (Warsaw: PIW, 1957), 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹² Aleksandra Giełdoń-Paszek, *Obywatel Parnasu. Sztuki piękne w życiu i twórczości Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2014), 28.

¹³ Radosław Romaniuk, *Inne życie. Biografia Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza*, vol. 2 (Warsaw: Iskry, 2017), 17. At this point, it is worth mentioning that in 1939, before the Second World War, Iwaszkiewicz started writing, and later burnt, a novel "about the tearing down of Rome, the conclusion of which was the settling of Venice as a new culture form, as something which would start a new stage of humanity" (Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Podróże do Włoch* (Warsaw: PIW, 1977), 34).

¹⁴ This date was inscribed underneath his final text: 24 X 1939. (vide Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Sprawy osobiste i inne wiersze rozproszone*, selected and ed. Piotr Mitzner (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2010), 56).

politeia. Therefore, the city becomes reborn in wartime poems as a myth, a refuge in the terrible world."¹⁵

Even if one could offer an optimistic conclusion upon reading those works in their initial shape from 1939,¹⁶ the whole series, altered and extended, and excessively deprived of a master title which would add coherence to the whole, published in *Ciemne ścieżki*, could hardly be viewed in any positive light, which could spark any faith in the existence of a safe haven. Therefore, not to shatter the chronology, at this point one should remember the poetic image of Venice consolidated in the first weeks of the war to confront it at the right moment with the later version from 1957.

Venice also appeared in his two short stories from 1940–1941. Neither – i.e. in *Koronki weneckie I* and *Koronki weneckie II*, similarly to the already mentioned *Wenecja* series – is a simple description of his recent visit in Italy, but rather of the transformations of memory which occurred during the grim times of Nazi occupation. One could assume that the act of recollecting and its mechanisms would place a major role, in line with Iwaszkiewicz's deepest need at that time: "The current moment, both external and internal, is suitable – in my opinion – for starting writing a memoir."¹⁷ Let us examine those short stories.

Even the beginning of *Koronki I*, through its use of the imperfective aspect of verbs, suggests a multiplicity of the phenomena being referred to, thus creating a space of recurring phenomena, typical for recollections:

In Venice, March can be chilly. Wind from Dalmatia brings violent clouds, and you get downpours. Yet that bad weather does not last long, already the next day you get a pearl dawn, saturated with a drizzling glow, dispersed pink light, which exists only in Venice, and the houses, and cottages, hotels and palaces, and towers big and small become a dispersed bunch of pinkish bones, of whitewashed graves.¹⁸

When compared to the poems included in *Bilety tramwajowe*, a distinct change in the perception of the city on the lagoon occurred: the pink and golden glow which enveloping the visible reality exposes its hidden morbid face. The light pearl-like Venice darkens before our very eyes. Of course, one could treat that as a trace of the author's wartime experiences laid in a palimpsest on the Italian images stored in his memory, which continued to assume an ever darker tone: "Rain instead of sunlight burning on the grey and white of Venetian architecture is truly a huge sadness."¹⁹ The sadness of the lonely narrator was all the greater considering that his only other companion in the hotel "was an elderly very thin English woman, with traces of

¹⁵ Romaniuk, *Inne życie*, 17.

¹⁶ In this form, the series was published based on manuscripts as late as in 2010, and it remained unknown before that; vide Iwaszkiewicz, *Sprawy osobiste...*, 51–56.

¹⁷ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka moich wspomnień*, manuscript, introduction dated: 6 I 1941. As quoted in: Romaniuk, *Inne życie*, 37.

¹⁸ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Nowele włoskie* (Warsaw: Muza SA, 1994), 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

tuberculosis on her tired face. I assume it was the last trip in her life.”²⁰ That presumption turned into an anticipation of tragic news – a message arrived informing him of the death of Staś, his friend, a young, very promising poet. That event revealed the frailty, transience, and a kind of “insignificance” of human life when compared to grand works of art (e.g. Titian’s *Assumption* in the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari basilica). And even those do not last for ever:

Assunta burned in front of me for a moment longer. I observed that superb old and everlasting work of art. When too shall it fall to ash? I felt exactly as the river of time passed by my fingers. The coolness of the water shrank by nerves in my hand. I tried to contain myself.²¹

The intense experience of the inevitability of passing, the movement of everything towards ruin was in that case inexplicably linked to the aquatic dimension of space – the water of the canals metaphorically, yet also in an overwhelmingly sensory manner, constituted a trail which one follows towards death. In *Koronki I*, Venice became a space of loneliness, passing, and death. In the rain and cold, the lonely narrator could not find his way back to the hotel. He tried to reach St. Mark’s Square. He met a boy who, as if a spectre, had a smile like Staś once did. That wandering would conclude not at a specific location but a despair-filled thought: “Staś did not achieve anything. Everything was left unfinished. He could have written for many more years. But even that is insignificant. How many others have passed, even among my beloved ones.”²²

The dark symbolism of Venice, initiated by the first story as if in a musical introduction, was expanded upon by Iwaszkiewicz in *Koronki weneckie II*. It offers a sense of loneliness, even more nostalgic and obstinate references to the past and the death of someone with whom the narrator was once close... This time the writer/narrator, living in a small room overlooking Santa Maria della Salute, tried in Venice to overcome his crisis and give a meaningful shape to the female protagonist of the “romance” he was writing. Although the plans proved impossible to fulfil, the writer’s block was not able to immediately extinguish the joy of the stay in the city:

The loneliness was a somewhat happy one as it was surrounded by a merry, colourful, kind and loud crowd moving slowly through Saint Mark’s Square and through the narrow streets, which hang around the square as if a spider’s web. (...) – and suddenly I saw I was being surrounded by a holiday or some unknown celebrations. Huge red, green, and white banners billowed on long poles in front of a church, and a cold Dalmatian wind rolled them up and unravelled them, from time to time expanding them like sails. Saint Mark’s Square was filled with a dense crowd rocking

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 131.

²² Ibid., 132.

in a dance-like movement to the music played by a military orchestra standing on a clear iron structure in the centre of the square.²³

The narrator got a feeling of “melting into the anonymous mass,”²⁴ of losing his separateness, and at that moment he met Oswald Sosnowski, a friend from long ago, who was permanently living in Venice. That chance meeting changed everything, triggered his memory: a return to past events suppressed almost completely in his mind. A return to the past began for good at the apartment of his friend, to which the narrator was invited. The space he ended up in remained in a sharp contrast to the colourful Saint Mark’s Square:

Huge rooms, extremely high, filled solely with huge dimmed mirrors, resembling windows overlooking nothingness, were cold. (...) In the coldness of that damp room cooled by the breezes of cold wind, among dead, damaged, and dusty furniture, a few everyday items offended with their vulgarity. (...) In the dining room, there were woven chairs, a few sports photographs were hung on the walls, including a large portrait of a French navy officer, some still-life by a second-class eastern painter – and all that seemed bright and redundant in that dead museum.²⁵

There, among various photographs, the narrator found by accident a picture of a young girl, whom he met many years back in Ukraine: “the face which looked back at me (...) from a distance of thirty years triggered in me some very distant memories, which I have suppressed deep into my subconscious as they are unexplainable.”²⁶ That later became the direct trigger of his recollecting the time he spent as a tutor in Szapijowo, where Zosia, the girl from the photograph, was the teacher. Slowly from his subconscious, images began to emerge of what had seemed long gone and lost for ever. In particular: his evening talks with Zosia in the parlour, a ball in the palace which was also attended by Oswald Sosnowski and professor Żalwat, who came for the very event, a lovers’ quadrangle, as if from Dostoevsky’s novels, in which they became entangled and which in time became increasingly melodramatic. Therefore, for the protagonist/narrator, the actual topography of Venice began to change more and more into a spectral space of recollections, which had occurred thirty years prior, first in the Szapijowo palace, then in Kiev and Warsaw before the Second World War, and finally in Venice, yet the one from Oswald’s story, when Zosia committed suicide drowning in the waters of a canal. The return of the past constituted the narrator’s realisation of his own complicated attitude towards Zosia and her feelings (“she came to seek revenge on me for not understanding and disregarding her feelings”²⁷). As a result, the narrator began to understand that

²³ Ibid., 137.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 138–139.

²⁶ Ibid., 138.

²⁷ Ibid., 165.

I came to Venice not to complete my novel. That was only a pretext: the search for solitude, the immersion in thought in the pink Venetian rain about the irreversible past, that sudden recollection of the distant days of my youth, which I much disliked and which I have never recalled before, or at least I have never thought about them with tender emotion. No, no, my return to Venice was only a return to Zosia, an attempt to recall the most distant of years and to atone for my past offences. Perhaps my conscience pestered me for so long so that I would finally return to Venice, like Twardowski returned to Rome. Here, I had to pay for my past ignorance by rejecting the character which I intended in my novel.²⁸

Therefore, the writer's block experienced by the narrator at the beginning of the story concealed something much deeper – a sense of guilt and rejected responsibility for suppressed events and feelings. With its labyrinthine space meandering into the past, Venice opened other dimensions of forgotten events for the narrator, which he had avoided to confront. That particular initiation would not enable him to create, but it did bring him a major observation: "Sometimes events kill the reality of art with their brutal reality. The world is too intrusive, and it rips the fabric of our thoughts like delicate, much too delicate lace. Life seems too terrifying to become a model for art."²⁹

The final sentence seems to refer directly to the time when both short stories were created, which in turn could constitute a mask for wartime experiences. It is worth noting that Venice in the early 1940s was for Iwaszkiewicz, as it had to be, a space stored in his memory and not one which he experienced directly. From his visits in the 1930s, which preceded the writing of both stories, he retained in his memory an image of a cold and dark city:

In 1932, when I was travelling for Rome and I only stepped onto the pre-water platform (the old Santa Lucia station was still there) it was pitch black and cold, and the water in the canal was black as ink. And later, as we were driving with Borman and Władek, in March 1937, what a terrible storm caught us when we were going by a gondola with two rowers (not a motorboat) to "Albergo Luna."³⁰

The cool, rainy Venice with dark water in the canals in *Koronki weneckie I* and *II* was, on the one hand, an image with a distinctly autobiographical character,³¹ and, on the other, a costume for the occupation period in Poland, and, on yet another, the literary fulfilment of the strongly consolidated

²⁸ Ibid., 164.

²⁹ Ibid., 162.

³⁰ Iwaszkiewicz, *Podróże do Włoch...*, 19.

³¹ Vide Romaniuk, *Inne życie*. Romaniuk indicated an evident autobiographical key: "In *Koronki weneckie I*, the writer returned to his experiences of two farewells, i.e. the deaths of his two artist friends: Jerzy Liebert and Karol Szymanowski. (...) The circumstances of the last meeting with Stanisław [the short story's protagonist] recreate the author's farewell with Karol Szymanowski, similarly to the motif of a message received in Italy about the death of his friend" (46). In *Koronki II*, then, "there appears the literary figure of Zofia, which refers back to the biography of Zofia Kurkiewiczówna, the author's friend during his stay in Byszewy and his studies in Kiev. She, associated with Józef Świerczyński, another man with whom Iwaszkiewicz was close, lived with her husband in Postawy near Vilnius," (44–45).

metaphorical meanings in culture typically assigned to the city on the lagoon. It was those dimensions that overlapped in a kind of a palimpsest. A few symbolic tropes applied in wartime short stories and used by Iwaszkiewicz in his later works drew unbreakable associations between Venice's space and the act of wandering in a labyrinth, with darkness, spectres, and death.

However, before I proceed to other descriptions of black Venice, allow me to quote, in order to lighten these dark tones, a passage about Iwaszkiewicz's visit with his wife in September 1949:

Then, maybe the only time in my life, Venice was so golden, warm, there were not that many people there, and it was just as it was in our life at that time, very warm and calm. Afterwards, there once again came the cold and clouds. And it was that fair weather day in Venice that was as if a farewell to our former life.³²

It is now time to return to the six Venice poems included in *Ciemne ścieżki*, which form a poetic mini-cycle. They have little in common with the Parnassising *Bilety tramwajowe*, maybe apart from wisterias appearing here and there, which, however, when they bloomed earlier they had resembled lilac girdles, and later they hung dead like grey ropes. That change emblematically and suggestively reflected the general transformation which occurred within over a quarter of a century. The poetic journey unfolded similarly to those in wartime texts – through the power of imagination. Yet it began differently than in the poems written in 1939: from an autumn native landscape (pines, extensive fields) saturated with overwhelming sadness (“a chasm of time,” “sky (...) full of despair”) the focus immediately moves to black Venice

Lecz tylko zamknij oczy: usłyszysz szmer [wiosel	But only try to close your eyes: hear the [whisper of the oars
I przemówią do ciebie miast umarłych [głosem	And you will hear instead of the voices of [the dead
Różowy marmur i czarna gondola. ³³	Pink marble and black gondola.

Further, the story unfolds in line with the initial sequence offering overlapping and mutually amplifying suggestive images of decay and death:

W tym mieści czarnozielonkawym, Pełnym różowych kościotrupów (..)	In this black and greenish city, Full of pink skeletons (..)
W podwodziu błyszczą martwy kamień (..)	A dead stone glistens in the undercarriage (..)
A przywiązane do obramień Czarne trumnice klaszcząc tańczą...	And the tied to the frames Black coffins dance clapping...

³² Iwaszkiewicz, *Podróże do Włoch...*, 20.

³³ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Poezje*, selected and notes by Bohdan Zadura (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, 1989), 211.

Na zgnilej wodzie złote smugi (...)

Golden streaks on rotten water (...)

Zielona woda oczy zjadła,
Zielona woda duszę wyje.

Green water ate the eyes,
Green water howls the soul.

Aż po wiersz zamykający cykl:

Until the poem which concludes the series:

A dziś w zamarłych wód laguny
Wypływa pusta, czarna łódź.
I nikt nie widzi czarnej łuny,
I nikt nie woła: zbudź się, zbudź!

And today into lagoons of dead waters
An empty black boat sets off.
And no one can see the black glow,
And no one cries: wake up, wake up!

(...)

(...)

Wśród dzwonów, które kościół grzebią,
Tak obojętne, choć podniebne,
Nie widzę nic – i nawet ciebie,
Miasto umarłe niepotrzebnie.³⁴

Among tolling bells, which bury the church,
So indifferent, though sky-high,
I cannot see anything – not even you,
A city which died needlessly.

In his consistent, almost obsessive use of a multitude of props and images, Iwaszkiewicz created the space of Venice as a space of death. In one of the stanzas, he additionally deepened, and expanded considerably, the process referencing the figures of several artists who had previously visited the city and who had special connections to it – through conventional topoi, which they used and co-created.

Tu na malachit tych rozwalin
Spadali zewsząd bladolicy
Poeci, władcy białych krain,
Z pękami w ustach tajemnicy.

Here on the malachite of the rubble
Fell from everywhere pale
Poets, rulers of white lands,
With clusters of mysteries in their mouths.

Tutaj Krasieński nieprzytomny
Joannę stroił w amaranty,
I tu na piersi swej ogromnej
Utulał jego żal Konstanty.

Here the unconscious Krasieński
Turned Joanna into cannons,
And here on his huge breast
Konstanty consoled his grief.

Tu Wagner ujrzał śmierć jak Kundry
Z płomieniem purpurowych ust,
I zagapiony, ale mądry
Siedział w kawiarni czarny Proust.

Here Wagner saw death like Kundry
With a flame of purple lips,
And absent-minded, yet wise
Black Proust was sitting in a café.

I z kraju, który gdzieś się ukrył
Za gór na wschodzie siny stok,
Zielonooki, z krwi i z cukru,
Przyjeżdżał Aleksander Blok³⁵.

And from a country which hid somewhere
Behind mountains in the east a grey slope,
Green-eyed, of flesh and bone and sugar,
Alexander Blok would come.

³⁴ Ibid., 211–213.

³⁵ Ibid., 211.

And so, Zygmunt Krasiński not so much appears as the author of works which fulfilled the topos of romantic Venice,³⁶ but rather as a passionate lover, who in the spring of 1834 travelled together with his lover, the then famous beauty Joanna Bobrowa and her husband Teodor Bór-Piotrowicki, to Venice and Florence. In that frame, as if in works by Byron or Shelley, Venice became Aphrodite's city, the location of a fiery romance and, consequently, a scandal.³⁷ For Proust,³⁸ just as for the protagonist of *In Search of Lost Time*, Venice was a city of dreams; the French writer visited it twice, whereas Marcel visited it in the novel only after Albertine's tragic accident – therefore, the direct reason for the journey was the experience of the death of the love of his life. That was also where “Wagner saw death,”³⁹ as argued by Iwaszkiewicz for whom music was the most important of all arts. Venice greatly fascinated the author of *Lohengrin*. Significantly, as indicated by Ewa Bieńkowska,

This is what Venice suggested to Wagner, what impression it made on his imagination. The sun-soaked palaces of the South fall into the shadow of

³⁶ As noted by Janusz Ruzzkowski: “Almost everything that Krasiński wrote about Venice was an endless comparison between the city and the history of Poland. (...) The main events in the city's history in the 18th and 19th centuries, i.e. the fall of the Republic, the Napoleonic short period, and Austrian occupation evoked associations with the history of Poland, even if the similarities were somewhat superficial.”

[Janusz Ruzzkowski, “Wenecka Apokalipsa. O Niedokończonym poemacie Zygmunta Krasińskiego”, *Pamiętnik Literacki*, no. 3 (1990): 55.]

NB, letters from Krasiński to Konstanty Gaszyński from 1932 are full of dilemmas regarding his absence from the November Uprising; vide Zygmunt Krasiński, *Listy do Konstantego Gaszyńskiego*, ed. and introduction by Zbigniew Sudolski (Warsaw: PIW, 1991), 34–58.

³⁷ Yet in time, the love proved an ill-fated one: the author of *Nie-Boska Komedja*, submitting to his father's suggestions, ended his relationship with Bobrowa, whose marriage later fell apart. This is what Krasiński wrote about their relationship in a letter to Henry Reeve, his friend, on 25 August 1934: “And so, since that moment, and if I'm correct it was Easter, right after the pope's blessing, I had lived a life filled with reality and dreams, a life of the body and the soul, a life eventually human, not free from serious dangers or amusing trifles, sometimes irradiated by a sudden flash of poetry, sometimes saddened by an irritable situation, from time to time rising to tragedy and falling into ridicule; a life in which awe was intertwined with mockery, weakness with ups, trifles such as fashion, a ribbon, or a gossip, with serious elevated things like love's seduction and intoxication, remorse of a noble woman when she sacrificed herself, hate for that who was her husband, countless worries about surprises and revenge, countless hopes for happiness, failed a hundred times, shattered just once; finally despair, the common dance of such a drama in which, as Balzac would say: “all laws divide and all nature's allures combine two elevated souls.” But those events, dear Henryk, unfolded in Florence, in Venice, in spring, on wonderful evenings, when everything smelled of love (...) When I left Italy, everything became covered by clouds, both the sky and the surrounding nature. Munich, Kissinger, Frankfurt – those were days of passionate emotion, moments of heavenly delights; yet the circumstances were becoming increasingly unpleasant. The husband became vigilant, jealous, restless. We finally broke up: I stayed in Wiesbaden, she continued her trip. Sometimes I leave for two three days and I see her there.

[Letter of 25 August 1834, Wiesbaden, in: Zygmunt Krasiński, *Listy do Henryka Reeve*, trans. Aleksandra Olędzka-Frybesowa, ed., introduction, chronicle and notes by Paweł Hertz (Warsaw: PIW, 1980), vol. II, 157–158.]

³⁸ It is noteworthy that the novel *In Search of Lost Time* constituted a major point of reference for Iwaszkiewicz and a focus of polemic, while Proust's concept of time had its critical reflection in one of his best known short stories, i.e. *Panny z Wilka*.

³⁹ Iwaszkiewicz, *Poezje*, 212.

the night – they stop being of colour, radiant clarity of plastic form, and they become some ghastly beauty carved out of the matter of darkness and the faint light of the Moon. They become filled with the wail of an old song recalled by the waiting Tristan. That is Wagner's Venetian alchemy: day transforms into night, shapes transform into sounds, and that which is alive changes into death.⁴⁰

One could say that he transformed quite literally – on 13 February 1883 Wagner died of a heart attack in the Vendramin-Calergi palace by the Grand Canal. The vision of the death in Venice of the grand composer surely had a major influence on Iwaszkiewicz, who was a great admirer of the former's works. That does not, however, explain why in the poem he did not reference the play *Tristan and Isolde*, the score for which was written in Venice, and which constituted a reinterpretation of the famous Celtic legend about the tragic and unfulfilled love, which would perfectly match the myth of Venice, the city of love. He did, though, reference *Parsifal*, or more specifically, the character of Kundry, the female protagonist. The explanation is associated with the second figure that appeared in the Venetian series, i.e. Salome – in this case, a mosaic in the baptistery in Saint Mark's Basilica and in a poem by Alexander Blok.⁴¹ Both figures personified dark sensuality, eroticism, and cruelty. The poet further amplified the Russian tone:

⁴⁰ Ewa Bienkowska, *W poszukiwaniu królestwa człowieka. Utopia sztuki od Kanta do Tomasza Manna* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1981), 285.

In the essay *Wagner i Wenecja* Dariusz Czaja wrote: "Wagner not so much invented but rather discovered that deadly nature of the city, a property which not much later became the axis of the decadent image of Venice at the turn of the century. It took a man from the North to extract that dark side of Venice, to show emphatically that that aura of sensory beauty is being eaten from the inside by destruction and slow decay." [<http://mwm.nfm.wroclaw.pl/articles/132-wagner-i-wenecja>]

⁴¹ The Russian poet was for Iwaszkiewicz a major author, which is clear from his study "Blok" included in the *Petersburg* collection, in which the author of *Brzezina* saw the influence of the neighbourhood where the poet lived on his works: "The apartment is located on the fourth floor, it has a balcony overlooking a canal referred to as «Priazka», meaning the Cleaning Lady. (...) Behind the canal, there is an empty quay, with makeshift piers, full of abandoned ships – the quay seems to be an abandoned shipyard. One can suppose that from the balcony of Blok's apartment, from the fourth floor, you could see the sea." (Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, "Petersburg," in *Podróże*, (Warsaw, 1981), vol. 2, 246). This fragment reflects a water analogy between Petersburg (also known as the Venice of the North) and Venice.

Alexander Blok was the author of three poems entitled Venice; the second one, presumably in its original form, constituted Iwaszkiewicz' direct inspiration. I quote it in Józef Łobodowski's translation [English version: https://medium.com/@Cindy_M67/venice-aleksandr-blok-1880-1921-c5c5f024e3ba]

Z laguny mrocznej wieje chłodem.
Gondola, jak milczący grób.
Zbolały w taką noc i młody –
leżą u lwa groźnego stóp.

A cold wind off the lagoon.
The silent coffins of the gondolas.
And I, on this night – young and ill –
[Am lying] stretched out beside the lion's column.

Z wieży giganty przebudzone
ślą głos północy ponad gród.
Marek wzorzystych ścian ikonę
utopił w głębi srebrnych wód.

On the tower, with iron song,
Giants beat out the midnight hour.
Mark has drowned its lacework portals
In the moonlit lagoon.

W cieniu pałaców, mroku domów,
pod blaskiem księżycowych fal
przechodzi kryjąc się Salome,
mą krwawą głowę niosąc w dal.⁴²

In the shadow of the palace arcade,
In the moon's faint light,
Stealthily Salome passes by
With my bloody head.

Therefore, death no longer reached John the Baptist but the poet, a fact which marked the space of the city with bloody crime and cruelty. Black Venice became more and more black.

All of the cultural tropes used by Iwaszkiewicz had at least three functions. First of all, they indicate that the author of *Ciemne ścieżki* intentionally drew inspiration from symbolic meanings assigned to Venice deposited in art (the city of passionate and tragic love, dark eroticism, crime, and death), and thus the particular inability to see it anew, "with a clear eye"; his own sight became an inevitable reflection and repetition of already consolidated images. Secondly, Venetian poems saturated with images of death perfectly fit the dark tones of *Ciemne ścieżki*, a collection which still resonated with the echoes of the war, which additionally explains the presence in it of poems written in October 1939. Thirdly, Iwaszkiewicz consistently, with considerable determination, reactivated the myth of Venice as a space of decay and death, which unfolded, as accurately noted by Dariusz Czaja, "around a few clearly noticeable significant motifs and topics. (...) What is significant is its persistence and constant returning in European imagination. At least since the late-18th century, the motif has emerged emphatically through various vivid forms, and in various symbolic arrangements."⁴³

The space of the water city, which triggered symbolic meanings fluctuating around passing, decay, and death returned in *Opowiadanie z kotem* (1964), and, even more significantly, the array of signs connoting the Thanatological meanings was expanded, while the semantics of the text was obtrusively shaped by the myth of black Venice.

Already at the beginning of the short story, just as it had been the case in earlier works, a space opens there which is painfully cold, adverse, and

W cieniu pałaców, mroku domów,
pod blaskiem księżycowych fal
przechodzi kryjąc się Salome,
mą krwawą głowę niosąc w dal.

In the shadow of the palace arcade,
In the moon's faint light,
Stealthily Salome passes by
With my bloody head.

I wszystko śpi – świat sen ogarnął.
tylko widziadła lekki krok,
tylko ma głowa z misy czarnej
z tęsknotą patrzy w nocny mrok.

All is asleep – palaces, canals, people,
Only the gliding footsteps of the phantom,
Only the head on the blank platter
Gazes with anguish into the surrounding gloom.

[Aleksander Błok, *Wiersze włoskie*, trans. Kazimierz Andrzej Jaworski and Józef Łobodowski (Lublin: Biblioteka Kameny, 1935), 10. Online <http://dlibra.umcs.lublin.pl/dlibra/plain-content?id=1466>]

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Czaja, *Wenecja i śmierć. Konteksty symboliczne*, 59, http://www.cyfrowaetnografia.pl/Content/2209/Stroony%20od%20PSL_XLVI_nr3-4-12_Czaja.pdf

rainy, "with dampness permeating to the bone."⁴⁴ The sensation becomes amplified further: "Saint Mark's Basilica became even more unreal behind a web of clear rain."⁴⁵ Reality dissolves and one enters an oneiric/spectral world, in which everything assumes qualities only partly real: the meeting with Carmen,⁴⁶ which initiated a night-time gondola trip in search of a cat, the gondolier, the emerging figures which resembled phantoms (a nun, Angelo, a man in a cage), a cat's corpse floating in the ink-black canal, and a labyrinthine path leading nowhere. In that space, there were no clear lines between the land and the sea ("The narrow street suddenly ran into a small square, from in darkness you could only see the surface of a growing lake. Or maybe that was water?"⁴⁷), but also between houses, objects, and figures poorly visible at night, lit only by candlelight. Everything seems to create a dark and menacing whole, as if in a nightmare or a horror film.

Several elements assume exceptionally significant meaning. First of all, it is the water capturing the whole surrounding area. "Quiet water, morose water, dormant water, unpenetrated water," as Bachelard argued, "those are the lessons offered by matter leading thoughts towards death. (...) it is a lesson about death in stillness, about death in depths, about death which is next to us, by us, in us."⁴⁸ The Thanatological meaning assigned to the water element in the discussion by the French philosopher was fulfilled almost literally by "Opowiadanie z kotem"; one could treat fragments of *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie* as a commentary to Iwaszkiewicz' text. Even more so, the symbolism of other elements of the presented world is also associated with death: the gondola, morbidly black in its aesthetics, carries the bane of Charon,⁴⁹ while the gondolier fulfils the role of a farer to the land of the dead protecting the secret.

Thus, water becomes the material surface for death: "All it takes is a gust of evening wind for the silent water to murmur once again... All it takes is the moonlight, so gentle and pale, for the spectre to flow over the waves, only just touching it with its feet."⁵⁰ The spectral nature is the ontological status of the characters which appear in the short story: the narrator's female friend ("It was so dark. I couldn't see Carmen's face, as if it wasn't there"⁵¹), whose hand was devoid of any bones - ("It's only an empty sleeve"⁵²); there is also the mysterious gondolier Vlado dressed all in black, "re-

⁴⁴ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, "Opowiadanie z kotem," in *O psach, kotach i diablach* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1968), 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁶ The autobiographical key for the short story was suggested by Iwaszkiewicz in his study *Wenecja*. Vide *Podróże do Włoch*, 32-34.

⁴⁷ Iwaszkiewicz *Opowiadanie z kotem*, 29.

⁴⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *Wyobrażenia poetycka. Wybór pism*, selected by Henryk Chudak, trans. Henryk Chudak, Anna Tatarkiewicz, foreword by Jan Błoński (Warsaw: PIW, 1975), 145-146 (the quoted fragment was translated into Polish by Anna Tatarkiewicz and from Polish translated into English).

⁴⁹ Bachelard continued: "all the mysterious ships, so common in mythical stories, have something in common with the death ship," (*ibid.*, 149).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵¹ Iwaszkiewicz, *Opowiadanie z kotem*, 31.

⁵² *Ibid.*

sembling (...) some character from Michelangelo's works."⁵³ And all of them participated in a spectral trip, a labyrinthine meandering at night through the canals, which seem never-ending and most probably leading to the world beyond.

Spectral nature as the status of a presented world is a quality of Venice perceived as a "dead substitute for a real living city."⁵⁴ As Chaja argued when discussing a 1903 essay by Georg Simmel: "life in this city is unreal, and people wander it like spectres."⁵⁵ For the German theoretician of culture, Venice had, however, in the early-20th century not so much the elusive nature of a phantom, but rather that of a mask concealing emptiness and simulating true life. "The whole of Venice is on the side of lifelessness and death. Short and simple: it is a corpse."⁵⁶ However, throughout the century it underwent a significant metamorphosis changing its way of being, as per Agamben's diagnosis: "Venice is no longer a corpse as it still functions somehow, naturally, transitioned to a stage which occurs after death and the body's decay. A spectre corresponds to that stage."⁵⁷

Can the spectral Venice from Iwaszkiewicz's short story have anything in common with the arguments of the Italian philosopher produced fifty years later? It would seem that such an assumption is anachronistic. But is it?

The author himself did not value his text highly. He wrote in his journal: "I've recently read *Opowiadanie z kotem* to my family – a week on and full of reminiscences from other authors,"⁵⁸ so he was drawn to stereotypical clichés. Indeed, Venice vanishes in the story under a multitude of intertextual associations becoming a kind of a simulacrum consisting of a multitude of overlapping cultural representations. Instead of a living city, readers receive its seeming image. For Iwaszkiewicz, the semantics of a text as the outcome of events occurring within the story line, ambiguously appearing images, and looped nonlinear composition could not have been satisfactory – it must have appeared to him unclear, and barely original, derivative even. Yet from today's perspective, *Opowiadanie z kotem*, considerably exposing its anti-mimetic nature and revealing its simulational potential, seems a kind of anticipation of the diagnoses by postmodern thinkers. Maybe literature, even outside a writer's consciousness, is able to grasp a phenomenon which will only have received discursive descriptions long afterwards? Maybe the spectral nature revealed in the structure of the short story, based on the model of a journey as a wandering inside a labyrinth, constitutes an identification of the special character of Venice as having no tangible substance? Hence, presumably, the sense while reading it

⁵³ Ibid., 34. One should note Iwaszkiewicz's strong inspiration drawn from Mann's novella, particularly in terms of the development of the character of the mysterious farer and in the description of the gondola ride.

⁵⁴ Dariusz Czaja, "Wenecja jako widmo," in *Inne przestrzenie, inne miejsca: mapy i terytoria*, ed. Dariusz Czaja (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2013), 134.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Giorgio Agamben, "O zaletach i niedogodnościach życia wśród widm," in *Nagość*, trans. Krzysztof Żaboklicki (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2010), 4.

⁵⁸ Iwaszkiewicz, *Dzienniki 1964–1980*, 63.

of its strange elusiveness and transience, as if neither the story, nor the characters, nor the meanings could be systematised or stabilised, as if it would not be subject to specification only dissolving in every reading as if a fog. Thus, the meta-plan would be an equivalent of Venice the spectre, and its spectral identity would be reflected in the deepest dimensions of the text. Is it possible that Iwaszkiewicz was not aware of how omnipresent the city, made of signs and resembling dreams,⁵⁹ “which simulates real life,”⁶⁰ thus became in *Opowiadanie z kotem*?

Further Venice-themed texts by Iwaszkiewicz can be found in *Śpiewnik włoski* (1978). Those include “Wielkanoc w Wenecji” and “Smutna Wenecja.” Both poems offer records of fleeting moments in St. Mark’s square, combining visual and sound experiences. In the former, the sound of bells tolling at midnight, through synaesthesia, transform into pigeons flying around. In the latter, as if in a kaleidoscope, a colourful mosaic is formed by several small images: brick walls, blooming wisterias by a wall, a smile of girl met in the street, and a barking dog. The tones in both are definitely light, sometimes colourful and resonating, which might trigger an association with his 1924 poems. Yet the conclusions of both are strangely:

Pytam się: co to? Powiadają: to ptaki. wyleciały w nocy z tonącej arki ⁶¹ (“Wielkanoc w Wenecji”)	I ask: what is it? They tell me: those are birds. they flew out at night from a sinking ark (“Wielkanoc w Wenecji”)
(..) i psa blondyna co szczekał [zażarcie na świat i na mnie na deszcz i gondolę	(..) and the blond’s dog which barked [ferociously at the world at me at the rain and a gondola
I już był gotów skoczyć do kanału ⁶² (“Smutna Wenecja”)	And it was ready to jump into the canal (“Smutna Wenecja”)

The impressionist images in the poems included in *Śpiewnik* become evidently darker though they do not assume a colour saturated to such an extent as in the *Wenecja* series in the *Ciemne ścieżki* collection.

“Oda na zagładę Wenecji,” published in the *Muzyka wieczorem* collection (1980), already after the author’s death, constituted the final chapter of Iwaszkiewicz’ “Venetian text.” The poet utilised a classic genre (the ode)

⁵⁹ Vide Agamben, “O zaletach i niedogodnościach życia wśród widm,” 48–49.

⁶⁰ Czaja, *Wenecja jako widmo*, 128.

⁶¹ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Śpiewnik włoski. Wiersze* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1978), 12.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.

to draw in the form of a vision, which is subject to formal genological constraints, in a restrained yet suggestive manner a catastrophic image of the city falling into an abyss.⁶³ That vision begins with an apostrophe to a lute symbolising the inseparability of music and poetry:

Oda na zagładę Wenecji

A Thing of Beauty is a Joy for ever
John Keats

Ty, pogrążona gigantyczna lutni,
w której zamilkły gwarne gargaryzmy,
śpią razem z tobą aniołowie smutni
i gęste gąszcze przekleństw i charyzmów,
nadzieje zgasłe, zalane ogniska,
gnieźdzą się gniazda podwodnych
[kryształów,
niepomne głębie zimna czy gorąca,
struga materii z krwią zmieszanej błyska,
sięgając w wirów gałęzisty parów,
fala podskórna struny śmierci trąca.⁶⁴

You, buried gigantic lute,
in which the loud gurgles went quiet,
together with you there sleep sad angels
and thick thickets of curses and charismas,
faded hopes, extinguished bonfires,
nest of underwater crystals nestles,
unbelievable depths of cold or heat,
a stream of matter flashes mixed with
[blood,
reaching into the trench of branched whirls,
an epidermal wave strikes the strings of
[death.

Now the “gigantic lute” plays only for mice within a space marked by decay (“You underwater strings resonate for mice”), covered with black sediment, in which sea waters carry shoals of dead fish. In the depths, there is quiet and death. As Aleksander Reimann aptly noted:

A musical instrument remains silent, dead, and dormant. So, if Iwaszkiewicz reached for art as a symbol of unwavering beauty, that would be only to indicate its powerlessness. (...) The buried soundless lute becomes a harbinger of death as an image of decay, a world half flooded, unreal, a world of resonating sleepy fogs and dark voices.⁶⁵

Venice in *Oda* is a city which is “half flooded” and “half erected” – half alive and half dead – which after centuries of its power and fame experienced an annihilation that occurred before readers own eyes. In this context, it is extremely interesting to consider the change of the position which the speaker occupies in the text: initially fulfilling the role an external observer of the ongoing process to gradually, in the course of the annihilation, become ever so strongly associated with the dying city. “When faced with the grandness of Venice,” Janusz Drzewucki argued, “which on the one hand

⁶³ Vide Stanisław Stabro, *Klasycy i nie tylko... Studia o poezji XX wieku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012), 44.

⁶⁴ Iwaszkiewicz, *Poezje*, 453.

⁶⁵ Aleksandra Reimann, “Podstuchać muzyczny motyw.” *O cyklu muzyczno-poetyckim na przykładzie Muzyki wieczorem Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza*, 222. [3333-Tekst%20artykułu-6333-1-10-20151007%20(7).pdf]

was mysterious but, on the other, quite open, the poet faced himself, his own human grandness and futility.⁶⁶ The old poet, nearing the end of his life, found an analogy between his own fate and the fate of Venice sliding into oblivion. Yet that was not the essence of his finding. In Oda "the author outlined the axiological vision of crossing the final frontier and yet a return to the Greek kalokagathos."⁶⁷ Eventually, beauty vanquishes both the passage of time and death:

I wtedy wszyscy, co dla prawdy żyli,
słoneczną chmurą wzniosą się nad wodą
mówiąc: dla szczęścia my się urodzili
i w krąg wplątali wieczystej urody,
bo co jest piękne, to już trwa na wieki,
słońcem karmione rosną ludzkie lata
i mądra dźwięczy praw wieczystych
[lekcja,
którą zachwytem wzniesione powieki
odkryją niby ciemne światła świata
i powstającą Nieczystą Wenecję.⁶⁸

And then everyone who lived for the truth,
shall rise in a sunny cloud over the water
saying: we were born for happiness
and entangled in a circle of eternal beauty,
because what is beautiful it already lasts
[for ages,
human years grow fed by the sun
and the wise lesson of eternal laws
[resonates,
which shall be discovered by eyes filled
[with awe
as if the dark lights of the world
and the emerging Foul Venice.

Oda's motto, i.e. John Keats' "A Thing of Beauty is a Joy for ever," which Iwaszkiewicz translated as "bo co jest piękne to już trwa na wieki" [because that which is beautiful already lasts for ages] reflects an unwavering belief in the power of art. Those words, uttered twice – resonating even more strongly included both at the beginning and the end of the text – become a kind of Iwaszkiewicz credo, who believed in unwavering beauty, which was embodied by Venice, for centuries the symbol of man-made greatness, wonder, and perfection. The sacralisation and elevation of Venice were a gesture intended to save beauty, but not necessarily lifting the laws of passing which applied to its material form. Beauty did not fulfil a decorative function in this case, as in his youthful works, but it acquired a metaphysical dimension being the highest value in the world.⁶⁹

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⁶⁶ Janusz Drzewucki, "Poeta w Wenecji," in *Smak słowa. Szkice o poezji* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1999), 19.

⁶⁷ Reimann, "Podstuchać muzyczny motyw," 223.

⁶⁸ Iwaszkiewicz, *Poezja*, 454–455.

⁶⁹ Cf. Drzewucki, "Poeta w Wenecji."

In this context it is worth quoting the apt remarks by Jerzy Kwiatkowski: "(...) Orthodox Young Poland did not treat the «art for art's sake» slogan seriously: it used as a pretence for its idealistic and expressionistic assumptions. Iwaszkiewicz did not step outside the slogan – indeed. Young Polish aestheticism could be referred to as metaphysical. Young Iwaszkiewicz's aestheticism was, simply, aestheticism." (Jerzy Kwiatkowski, *Poezja Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza na tle dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1975), 37). Therefore, one might conclude that Oda do Wenecji existed metaphysical, and, therefore, Young Polish aestheticism.

"I have visited Venice so many times," Iwaszkiewicz wrote, "yet I have never had any deeper significant feeling about it, I have never felt in it anything other than admiration, or rather surprise even that something like that could exist (...)"⁷⁰ It seems that the author of *Muzyka wieczorem* did not fully appreciate the role of the city in his internal biography, that he even did not sense the multitude of meanings he assigned to it in his works. His journal entry of 31 December 1968 seems telling in this respect:

In this final day of the year I don't know why I'm thinking about our first visit to Venice. As we travelled, in the mountains you could here those bells which even now I can hear in my ears, and then through Mestre we arrived at the Santa Lucia station. There was no sea ferry then, you went straight from the exit to the canal. And you would start the always utterly stupid embarrassing scene of descending with your luggage to a gondola. In Venice you always get the impression that you are but an extra in an operetta. There were no vacancies at Alberi Luna and they gave us a tiny office room, a large bed under a muslin mosquito net.⁷¹

Iwaszkiewicz concluded this recollection with the following reflection: "And it's so strange to end such a year (...) there comes this trivial vision of the first visit in Venice, which was actually our first visit in the West. But a visit to a dead city, in a finished culture."⁷²

Therefore, Venice returned to him unexpectedly in a recollection of his 1924 trip. Was it truly so trivial since the impression it made on him was so strong that he used it to design a poetic novel under the title *Wenecja*,⁷³ and later, after over forty years, he returned with a diagnosis of the crisis of European culture?⁷⁴ Maybe Venice, as argued by Fernand Braudel, is in the eyes of the observer:

We imagine it [Venice – K.P.] too much before we arrive there to be able to notice what it really is like. (...) charm, illusions, a trap, distorted mirrors, that is what want it to be. (...) Each one of us has their own way of loving Venice, different than that reserved our loved ones, and we become

⁷⁰ Iwaszkiewicz, *Podróże do Włoch*, 32.

⁷¹ Iwaszkiewicz, *Dzienniki 1964–1980*, 199–200.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Vide Iwaszkiewicz, *Podróż do Włoch*, 22–24.

⁷⁴ That diagnosis links Iwaszkiewicz' thinking to Byron's *Ode on Venice* (1818) through the motif of grief over Venice's breakdown and decay. As it begins:

Oh Venice! Venice! when thy marble walls
Are level with the waters, there shall be
A cry of nations o'er thy sunken halls,
A loud lament along the sweeping sea!

between the ode by Iwaszkiewicz and the one by Byron there is a clear intertextual relationship: the 20th-century poet raised and expanded upon but also fundamentally modified the diagnosis of the author of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* about Venice's future.

immersed in it differently, finding what we want: life's joy, decline of death, respite, alibi, strangeness, or simplicity (...) ⁷⁵

The above overview of Iwaszkiewicz's Venice-themed works proves that the key to them is an autobiographical one. Both poems and prose works followed the writer's rhythm of existence, starting from clear and light works from the interwar period, through dark WWII short stories and the dark works from the 1960s and 70s, all the way to *Oda*, in which Venice became the figure of the old poet heading towards death. The "lightness" and "darkness" of those texts not so much extract the qualities of the city but rather binds itself with the age, mood, and mental disposition of the author. Therefore, the basic device in this case is psychizacja krajobrazu [mentalization of a landscape]. Another major factor which shapes the image of Venice are the conventional topoi consolidated in culture which build the artistic means of the symbolisation of the water city, though the sphere of personal experience would always have a leading role. ⁷⁶ The city's symbols are the cultural masks and costumes concealing the author's "self."

Iwaszkiewicz's Venetian text, which he developed for nearly sixty years, has a telling bracket: youthful Parnassising poems and late classicising *Oda*, though speaking through such different aesthetics they proclaim a grand praise of art, understood, per the principles of modernism, in an absolutist manner. The researcher of Iwaszkiewicz's aesthetic view aptly frames it:

The writer's life was an endless longing for beauty (...) Beauty seemed the highest value in life (...) Even though in *Dzienniki* there appears the thought about the ephemeral nature of art, it is also accompanied by a conviction that it is the only reality. Art is a sign of the highest human rise (...) By expressing himself through art the writer expressed his individual existential experience as well as a universal message hidden in the system of culture signs. All in all, (...) doubt is not borne by beauty but by aestheticism. Art (...) is eternal and good. ⁷⁷

Maybe it would difficult to use Iwaszkiewicz's books as a guide to Venice, ⁷⁸ yet they certainly reveal something which is hidden, according to the old poet, the deepest – the essentially understood core of the city: beauty which lasts despite the passage of time and bringing the only possible consolation at the threshold of nothingness.

⁷⁵ Fernand Braudel, "Venise," in Fernand Braudel, Georges Duby, *La Méditerranée. Les Hommes et l'héritage* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986), 157-158; as quoted in Czaja, *Wenecja i śmierć*, 58.

⁷⁶ Vide Aleksander Madyda, "Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz jako pisarz autobiografizujący (na przykładzie opowiadań: «Koronki weneckie I», «Koronki weneckie II», «Dzień sierpniowy», «Tatarak», «Opowiadanie z psem»)," *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 66, no. 1 (1981): 37-60.

⁷⁷ Aleksandra Giełdoń-Paszek, *Obywatel Parnasu*, 400-401.

⁷⁸ The study "Wenecja" in the *Podróże do Włoch* collection (1977) is a significant exception, which brings a description of Iwaszkiewicz's wandering through the squares and recesses of the city on a lagoon. It constitutes a special guidebook: by using it, one can follow the writer's steps and discover his favourite places, historical sites, and paintings. It is also worth noting that the study utilised his journal entries from March 1956 – cf. *Dzienniki 1956-1963*, 46-61.

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