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Fragments of the Venetian Discourse

I. Hieroglyph

1.

It was probably Henry James who was one of the first admirers of Venice to distinctly draw attention to the fact that the veritable building material of the town is neither sand, stone nor water but something much more powerful: light, conceived as *materia prima*: *The light here is in fact a mighty magician and, with all respect to Titian, Veronese and Tintoretto, the greatest artist of them all. You should see in places the material with which it deals—slimy brick, marble battered and befouled, rags, dirt, decay. Sea and sky seem to meet half-way, to blend their tones into a soft iridescence, a lustrous compound of wave and cloud and a hundred nameless local reflections, and then to fling the clear tissue against every object of vision.* [1]

More than a hundred years later, the phenomenal *Watermark* by Brodsky contained a distant reflection of that observation, albeit this time in a more concrete form. Brodsky made an observant remark about the particular variant of Venetian light: *The winter light in this city! It has the extraordinary property of enhancing your eye's power of resolution to the point of microscopic precision [...]. It carries no warmth or energy, having shed them and left them behind somewhere in the universe or in the nearby cumulus. It's particles' only ambition is to reach an object and make it, big or small, visible.* [2]

What is the light mentioned in those two fragments, how is it comprehended? Quite certainly it is not merely a physical quality. It is no longer ordinary electromagnetic radiation, but possesses the power of extracting things out of non-being. To put it in stronger terms: it has the power to create the world and render it visible. This gesture changes things fundamentally: it takes the conceit of light out of the space of physical description and strict measurable parameters and introduces it into curious space with properties that only partly succumb to rational description.

2.

Each successive Venetian narration carries traces of comments by predecessors and is added *above* or *along* other texts about the town, even if not always aware of this fact. The foundation of the discoveries made by Ewa Bieńkowska in her intentionally palimpsest novel: *Co mówią kamienie Wenecji?* [3] is Venetian light in its assorted forms and versions. They are thus an open reference but also - and this must be stressed - an original and creative development of the above-cited observations of her predecessors.

Already the fragment opening the book is highly symptomatic: *This person stood in the centre of Piazzetta on a cool but sunny autumn morning, and holding a book looked at the cover and then at the view before him, raising and lowering his head in a regular rhythm, over and over again (...). His facial expression was both astonished and delighted to such a degree of bliss that I could not prevent myself from a gesture of indiscretion. I came close and looked over his shoulder. Obviously...*

This was the cover of a cheap album of works by Guardi, reproducing precisely that, which was situated right in front of us. The slabs of Piazzetta leading towards the water, St. Mark's, the church on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore on the opposite shore, and translucent sky marked with several swift clouds. The veracity of the image bordered on the uncanny, one felt the same chilly air, the same suffusion with light, the glistening quality of the dark colours (as if with an addition of bottle green), the strong vibrating white colour of the church facade, and the surface of the canal, whose smoothness was produced by tiny waves ruffled by the wind. One had the impression of a model, which in some manner rendered the view more accurately than our eyes (...). (CMKW, 7-8)

This thoroughly Venetian genre scene is not concerned solely with measuring the distance between the real and the painted, the reduction of the intensity of the painterly *mimesis*, which in a moment will reveal its illusory character. Here, the heart of the matter is different. Recalling the morning frame from Piazzetta, Bieńkowska openly demonstrated her writer's intention: a wish to discover Venice predominantly in the images created there, to extract and name the Venetian *eidos* manifested in those disturbing objects made of colour and light.

In other words, this is a richly documented book about Venetian painting... or more exactly, about Venetian art and Venice as a work of art. Undoubtedly, the key to the town is painting, the works of Venetians. An undertaking, and this cannot be concealed, that remains highly risky (*If I could describe the Venetian courtesans...* , as in Miłosz's famous reservation about the possibility of depicting the canvas by Carpaccio), since it embroils the narrator of the story into all the problems faced by the ekphrastic statement.[4] Regardless whether this intention succeeds or not it must be underlined that it is in this particular gesture of abandoning literature for the sake of painting that the originality and force of Bieńkowska's book lies.

Venice, Photo: Joanna Benedyktowicz

Whoever would like to perceive Bieńkowska's publication primarily as a compendium on the history of art would be wrong.[5] Although it brims with erudite comments bibliographical details, sophisticated descriptions, and interpretations of particular canvases, it remains obvious that this is more than just a guidebook on Venetian art, although one cannot exclude the possibility that this is the way in which it could be perceived. Following the complicated adventures of Venetian painting, delving deeper into the art of Bellini, Giorgione, Tintoretto, and Titian all the way to Guardi and Canaletto, the author revealed for our sake a complicated pattern, still only partly recognised, of spiritual and technical borrowings, affiliations, continuations, and negations occurring between their *oeuvre*. Actually, this feature is not the most relevant. It is merely factographic substance from which one can depart towards an intellectually subtler concept.

Precisely. As I have mentioned, the book by Bieńkowska is usually read "transparently", without understanding that this prose, sometimes with a strong underpinning of style, is not solely a thorough report on library and museum surveys but, first and foremost, a literary construction. And if this is so, then it is not - because it cannot be - conceived without committing a cognitive "sin". In other words: it is an attempt not only at an account but also tries, sometimes in a highly evocative manner, to impose with the assistance of rhetorical operations an image of Venice. Hence my task: to take a look not only at the designates towards which the text steers us but rather at the text itself, the way in which it creates a vision of the town and the linguistic operations with which it fulfils this task. To put it differently: to discover the mythological component contained in the book. This is particularly interesting in view of the fact that many parts of *Co mówią kamienie Wenecji*? possess a distinctly meta-textual nature and the discursiveness revealed therein could suggest that this sort of narration is free of all myths. Unfortunately, this is not so simple. There, where we fall into the trap of the language mythical matter reveals itself with all force whether we know this or not. More: it is worth remembering about a certain recommendation that has all the features of a self-fulfilling prophecy: there where there is Venice there you should search for a myth!

Apparently, the mythical narration present in the book is organised predominantly by two closely connected motifs: the metaphysics of light and the nature of the creative act. The whole erudite and impression-oriented "rest" is based on these two foundations. Let us try to take a closer look at them.

3.

The first question posed by Bieńkowska is totally essential: how did it happen that it was precisely here, in Venice, at the turn of the fifteenth century, that there emerged painting so dissimilar to all that that was being executed all around, for instance, in the workshops of Tuscany? Were the *Madonnas* by Giambellino, *The Tempest* by Giorgione or *The Pastoral Concert* by Titian conceivable outside Venice? - she asked rhetorically and is clearly inclined towards some sort of a version of geographical-aesthetic determinism. It is Venice, the author added, and its unique light that left such a strong impression on local painters. Venetian space is an inimitable laboratory of light, a place exceptionally suitable for observing its changes and for seeing how it behaves in a confrontation with matter: *Whoever toured Venice or looked at its paintings in foreign museums was aware that something special was taking place as regards the question of perception and the puzzle of the visible nature of the world. Here this feature was exceptional and provoked unique responses. The simplest elements of the world exist in Venice in a manner not encountered elsewhere, granting ordinary activity an additional aura, semi-ceremonial and semi-intimate. Light shines differently across the lagoon, builds space, enfolds things, draws forth and conceals their matter, and endows the latter with scores of guises.* (CMKW, 237)

In this town everyone, whether he wishes to or not, becomes engaged in looking. Here, we all are only a mere addition to the eye, the author echoes the lesson taught by Brodsky. Venice is the sole space in which the eye reveals its autonomy so distinctly, in which it not so much separates itself from the body as totally subjugates the latter: *Venice taught how to look and suggested perception. Each of its seasons and time of the day, each caprice of the weather was a lesson in the manner in which the theatre of the visible is arranged, the manner in which plans and depths are constructed, the way in which they occupy their surfaces and abandon them. It teaches what happens with colours when they are illuminated by the variable glimmer of the lagoon, when they outline the meandering canal or the line of the coastline with its half-moon shape. That what is light becomes doubly reflected from the water and the stone; the degree to which it makes it possible to penetrate the concealed substance of things and the extent to which it maintains us in a state of illusion.* (CMKW, 238)

Here we counter an interesting and creative application of the metaphor of Venice as a theatre. Now, Venetian space will no longer be the patinated, old, and crumbling stage design that it is often perceived (in vain would we add that this is not a compliment!), but will become a living and pulsating panorama transformed into a theatre of perception. An instructive panopticon of the stirring work performed by light, texture, and colour. In other words, an instrument with distinctly positive commutations enriching cognition.

Remarks about the variable and disturbing nature of the visible are developed in another beautiful and

instructive metaphor of the space of Venice possessing the features of a magic telescope whose simplified version is the kaleidoscope. It combines the narrow field of vision and depth evading our gaze, concealed but foreseen in each element of the vision. The slightest movement and tremor of the telescope shift all the components that upon each occasion arrange themselves into a different world, into related micro-cosmoses that, however, vary with every moment. The limited field of vision – the narrow canals, streets, and squares, whose majority are streets slightly expanded to make space for a church - produce the impression that the centre of vision is transferred elsewhere, always further on, and will be reached by walking ahead, by discovering the point of an encounter, the point of an equilibrium, somewhere where the eye can no longer penetrate. Each step causes an alteration, a rearrangement of elements creating an inexhaustible number of configurations; a walk across Venice is tantamount to slowly twisting a kaleidoscope and the transformation of its countless virtual versions into reality. (CMKW, 71-72) This game with the unknown appears to be endless, since each consecutive version shows a successive one. Interestingly, the town planning configuration, narrowed down, stifling, and at times claustrophobic, does not become tedious due to the incessant presence in this restricted space of the elements: the sky and water.

One could outright have the impression that Venice extracted itself from non-being as if specially for the sake of painters. The latter took up this challenge and devoted themselves to studying colour and light. Venetian painters discovered, albeit each in his own manner, an astonishing thing. As if contrary to all sorts of Platonic approaches they recognised that the mystery of reality lies in its skin, its surface appearance. That e v e r y t h i n g is already given to us h e r e, and it is only necessary to be able to see it. It is in Venice that convincing arguments were provided demonstrating that the corporeal is merely a form of the spiritual and that only a thin line divides optics from metaphysics.

For all practical purposes, the entire book by Bieńkowska is an attempt at describing this mysterious and, from the viewpoint of common sense, impossible abutment of opposites.

4.

If it is true that, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty maintained in his pioneering analyses of the phenomenon of perception, painting, in its most profound vocation, is an incessant examination of the mystery of the visible [6], then Venetian painting is certainly the most credible confirmation of this declaration. It was in Venice that a discovery was made of the creative force of colour and its fundamental role in the creation of painterly reality. Painting was revealed as a passionate celebration of the visible.

Take a single instructive example. *The Tempest* by Giorgione, still puzzling and resisting all exegetes, belongs definitely to the canon of Venetian masterpieces. Here is an ekphrase of this famous canvas as proposed by Bieńkowska: *It is impossible to describe* The Tempest *without succumbing to a paralysing feeling of helplessness. Sometimes, personal recollections can assist us in coming closer to it. The eye first registers a cloudy sky and a snake-like line of lightening against ominous heavens. Lightening is the source of light, it illuminates the walls of the town and the tops of the trees in an abrupt flash, which everyone recognizes from his experiences of summer storms. This flash brings forth the phosphorescent whiteness of the stones and for the single blink of an eye changes leafs into constellations of glistening points, accentuating the dark shadows of trees standing against the light. Before the eye rests on a mysterious Gypsy woman in the lower part of the painting it is attracted by the view of a town as if straight out of a dream. The flash of lightening for a single moment changes not only the appearance of things but also their substance, and leaves us convinced that for a split of a second we took part in a different, ceremonial, and secret existence of the world.*

Only later does out gaze pause at a female figure and even later extracts the figure of a man – his white shirt and dark red jerkin. Both figures are less absorbing that that, which is taking place in the sky and on earth, but we feel that that the painting could not do without them. It is thanks to them that it evades pan-aestheticizing "Romantic" savouring and gains an equilibrium. (CMKW, 46-47)

Not by accident in her description of the canvas the author did not concentrate on a mysterious anecdote, which is the case of so many difficulties for its interpreters, but on the just as puzzling purely colour stratum, sensual and visual, not to say: formal, if it were not for the contemporary, almost exclusively "technical" comprehension of that term. The landscape of *The Tempest* is so extraordinarily rich as regards colour that it reveals in Nature qualities whose existence the "ordinary" eye bypasses and simply does not surmise. Contrary to commonplace habits the painting is not a carbon copy of reality but its creative construction, created in an alliance of the eye, the imagination, and the intellect. It is the painting that reveals and projects into the visible the reflections of the invisible.

It would be difficult to acknowledge an abuse or exaggeration in the author's claim, placing *The Tempest* among religious works. Naturally, this is quite a different religiosity than the Renaissance (only?) comprehension of a religious canvas. She discerned in the perception and reflection of Giorgione an unprecedented attempt at a totally new understanding of its meaning:

Giorgione - as far as we know - did not leave behind any religious paintings (...). This too is not unusual for those times. I have the impression that this fact is connected with the attitude, which we sense in The Tempest, *as if he wanted to discover a different form for the* sacrum, *a form not foreseen in the official canon and one about which he too did not know, matching shapes and colours, eliminating the first sketch, and conducting a further search. According to him the* sacrum *was further from man (further than in the Christian missive - after all, so strongly anthropocentric) and closer to direct experiences of the world, that vibrating light, air, and earth shown in such a disturbing manner in* The Tempest. (CMKW, 49)

Giorgione discovered and with brilliant virtuosity demonstrated that a painting, regardless of the theme, can be a congenial medium of metaphysics.[7] That a patient contemplation of the puzzle of the visible, the concentration of ways of the appearance of light, guides beyond its boundaries, towards a harmonious coexistence of "the visible and the invisible". That the greatest achievement of the art of painting is not aesthetic entertainment, but can become the most profound form of cognition. To put it differently: that a painting does not have to be merely a screen of reality, but can turn into an instrument of its r e v e l a t i on, disclosure, as the Latin interpretation suggests. A revelation of the limits of the visible.

5.

In Polish: "light "and "world" (*światło* and *świat*) are connected by an astonishing lexical similarity. As we have seen, in Venice light assumes extraordinary creative power. It reveals the world and extracts qualities in it that were not anticipated. It is the fundamental building material of paintings – those specific products, "new worlds". Yet another unusual component of Bieńkowska's narration is connected with the nature of the latter: reflection on the miracle of the birth of Venice. An attempt at an explication

of the creative act. At this stage, we abandon the aesthetic discourse and plunge into the dark terrains of ontology.

Taking into consideration purely rational reasons, Venice, that strange civilizational and aesthetic product, simply should not exist. This is obvious. It should not be and yet it is. Despite all gathered knowledge about the history of Venice it is impossible to find some rational reason for its existence. It is pure impossibility, a paradox, a curiosity, a freak of Nature, or, as some claim, a miracle. It follows that Venice actually engages the mind not only and not predominantly as a town-planning problem but as a serious ontological puzzle, as a cipher that has to be decoded. What is the origin of Venice, what are the reasons for its existence? If for a moment one would relegate - since it is impossible to reject them completely – political, economic, and sociological reasons based on otherwise serious and scientifically confirmed arguments [8] then there remains only a single possibility of a purely poetic nature: according to it, the town built on a lagoon *ex nihilo* is a folly of human imagination, an insane creative gesture devoid of pragmatic reasons. It is *creatio ex nihilo* repeated in a human dimension.

Venice is an entirely imaginary town. Note, however, that this insane conception lacks the same sort of cold calculation that took place in the case of St. Petersburg, another town on water brought into being by the human *fiat*. Hence, perhaps, in both cases the unreal and phantom-like character, the mixture of dream and awakening that is part of their nature has quite a different dimension. But was it only the human hand that was involved in this project? In the emergence of Venice from non-being the motor force was not merely human imagination. Here, something more was needed: imagination outfitted with divine prerogatives, as in Blake: *The material – and all others - being of Venice at each moment depended on a miracle, a constant preservation in a being which philosophers described as the Supreme Being. Not only did it decide about creation, but in addition it conserves its work from moment to moment; without its incessant attention it would have dissolved in nothingness. The miracle of Venice, basically and actively human and arbitrary, forces us to think about constant, extraordinary intervention – so that which is could exist. So that it would not vanish together with springtime mists, so that it would survive wintertime attacks of freshet, floods flowing from* terra firma *and drowning St. Mark's Square, filling basements and undercutting foundations.* (CMKW, 98)

Exactly: the wonder of Venice consists not only of the fact that it was created at s o m e t i m e and was brought to life, but to an equal degree that contrary to all else, and despite the incessant destructive work performed by Nature, political failures or civilizational crises, it s t i l l goes on. Consequently, there emerges the question: *What calls for greater effort: to create or to ensure duration? To this query, which once excited learned minds, Venice replies: I am, I continue being, the improbable became reality. Today, we know that the danger of gradual and systematic annihilation is real. But do we believe it? It is impossible to treat it seriously when we stand, for example, in Fondamenta Nuove facing the glistening stretch of the lagoon, the cemetery island of San Michele, and to the left, in the background, the less visible and Impressionistically outlined coastline of Murano. It is impossible that the Supreme Being resigned from its achievement, the masterly operation when with human hands and with the assistance of millions of beech posts it lifted out of the salty marshes one of its most magnificent works. What does this mean? Would Venice have to cease existing since the eternal work performed by the sea, the creative-destructive work of man, successfully tackled its*

solidity? With its essence, one that does not have any counterparts in some sort of an emporium *of ideas and came into being only across the ages, connected by a dramatic bond with time?* (CMKW, 98)

Not for the first time did Bieńkowska make it obvious that Venice is a reality that cannot be explained with a metaphysical dimension, regardless of the way in which it is comprehended. From time to time, therefore, she shifted reflection from languages suitable for architecture or the history of art to unambiguously theological rhetoric. Thus comprehended, not only Venetian masterpieces but Venice as such and conceived as a holistic ontological project containing not merely the miracle of creation but also the mystery of duration, are proof of the living existence of spiritual reality. Here, Venice is not "solely" a magnificent town, nor is it a superficially understood aesthetic dimension, its most profound component constituting its *differentia specifica*.

Venice, as a multi-strata, unique reality is a work of art in its vivid meaning, accentuating predominantly the creative gesture. In other words, it is something that has been produced thanks to the creative act, and this means that it had been elevated to existence *ex nihilo*, without emulating the model of an already existing image. The aquatic *genesis* of Venice matches the exegesis of the creative act performed by George Steiner who showed convincingly how in the emergence of each work of art (a painting, a poem, a sonata) the essential element is randomness. This means that it could be totally non-existent and that the very essence of a work of art includes the fact that it could have been never embodied: *The work of art, of poetics, carries within it, as it were, the scandal of its hazard, the perception of its o n t o l o g i c a l c a p r i c e* (my emphasis – D. C.). [9] There is no beguiling logic of the necessity of its emergence. How rarely do we realise that such an admired work of art could have never existed! That thanks to some force, which cannot be fully analysed, it emerged from original nothingness. In this sense - one could add - each great work of art (including Venice) fully deserves to be regarded as a miracle since it comprises an open and brutal overcoming of the logic of necessity.

To put it yet differently: in the perspective outlined here Venice proves to be not only one of elements of the visible world (one of many) but something much more: it is a world on a reduced scale, a place in which all the most essential issues of our worldly existence are concentrated, the most profoundly symbolic reality in which, as in textbook definitions of the symbol, extremities and contradictions merge. *Symbolon* combines the spiritual and the material, the totally alien and that which is profoundly own, the conceptual and the imaginary. As Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote: We understand the symbol (...), the experience of the symbolic, to mean that the individual and the special resembles a particle of being, that the something, which corresponds to it is a promise of supplementing entity and happiness, or that the still sought particle supplementing the whole is a second particle matching our fragment of life.[10] The experiencing of the symbol contains the warmth of the binding mystery but also the poignant certainty of participation in some sort of completeness transgressing our individual nature.

In a genuine, deeply experienced encounter with the reality of the symbol our gaze seems to be turned towards the observer. The symbol is a mirror, in which our most profound spiritual "I" is looking at itself. This cognition is not only the recognition of that which is different but also self-cognition. Perhaps it is in this particular circumstance and not in literary inertia, the film legend or the pressure exerted by mass-scale tourism that one should seek the true force of the endless attraction of Venice and its hypnotising gaze. All those seduced by Venice constantly stressed that they suddenly found themselves in a totally alien and exotic space, but at the same time never felt more at home. More, they argued that despite the cognitive resistance initially put up by the town they ultimately felt an inexplicable unity with it. Such statements make it possible to understand a certain recurring circumstance: extremely emotional reactions to rumours about the annihilation of Venice. This is not difficult to comprehend: what would we care about the death of Venice, prophesied time and again, if we did not notice in this fact a prefiguration of our death?

6.

There is not a shadow of doubt: in her book Ewa Bieńkowska disclosed extremely aptly several earlier unknown or only slightly recognised faces of Venice. Do not delude yourself, however, that we have finally found out what Venice is r e a l l y like, and that while reading the book we have reached some sort of an "objectively existing" essence of the town that can be measured, tested, and confirmed. Actually, Bieńkowska has added to the web of the myth, laboriously woven for centuries, yet another thread by writing a successive version, this time her own. Her two-motif narration – the one about the creative power of light and the one about the origin of Venice – is only a camouflaged variation of the Biblical story about *creatio ex nihilo*. This is the reason why the narration assumes the properties of an archaic myth according to the meaning proposed by studies about religion: a holy story about a powerful event, about the way in which something appeared in the world, came into being, emerged from primeval chaotic magma. This endows the story with a hieratic feature (in the literal, etymological meaning derived from the Greek *hieros*), and ensures that in the intimate discourse about Venice

the heart of the matter involves undoubtedly prime things. Here, Venice is a sign, but not – as in the novel by Brodsky - a *watermark*, but rather a hieroglyph. Not always lucid, sometimes rather illegible, but with all certainty: a holy sign.

II. The deceitful beauty of the mask

1.

One of the images appearing most often in attempts at reaching the essence of Venice is, as we know, the figure of an unreal town. This image, depending on the view, can assume two diametrically different classifications. The unreal, in the eyes of a person enchanted with the town, can mean something extraordinary and dazzling, and describe a world situated at the pinnacle of the scale of his wishes and bewilderment. The unreal is a designation of an object that remains beyond the limits of the imagination, something for which there is no comparison in visible reality. Thus comprehended unreality is the utmost degree of adoration and aesthetic sublimation. It is also, paradoxically, the name of a powerful and multiplied existence. This is a being whose actual unreality is not subject to any sort of discussion or appeal.

The same adjective in the eyes of a sceptic can, however, signify space with deformed ontology. Something that does not exist truly, strongly, and in reality. On the contrary: in this case, unreal Venice proves to be merely collective hypnosis, a cognitive illusion inherited across the centuries and concealing the real image of things. In that case, the town on the lagoon is no longer an enchanting *curiosum*, but a being with an extremely doubtful identity; a town that not so much exists as pretends that it exists. A town of artificial beauty and tawdry glitter. Tombac pretending to be gold. A town-planning phantom. This impression is visible in *The Venice Text* [11] almost from the very first words.

Here are several instructive examples from different time perspectives.

Eighteenth century. Edward Gibbon, author of the classical *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose acrid statement quite often inaugurates a lithany of complaints about Venetian reality, did not conceal his disgust after a brief visit: *I was afforded some hours of astonishment and some days of disgust by the spectacle of Venice*. [12]In this statement let us accentuate not only the historian's extreme disillusionment with the city but the word "spectacle", rather clearly stating that Venetian space is not a real world; on the contrary, it is a world put on show, fleeting, and unreal. In addition, it is a case of poor art producing only distaste and thus worthy of swift oblivion.

Nineteenth century. Mary Mc Carthy quite aptly described the behaviour of John Ruskin, the great codifier of the precious stones of Venice (*The Stones of Venice*), who from an initial enthusiast changed into a faultfinder and a demystificator of Venetian allure: *Ruskin, who was her overdue Jeremiah and who came at the end to detest nearly everything in Venice, spent half his days trying to expose her frauds - climbing ladders in dusty churches to prove (what he had suspected) that the Venetian Renaissance was a false front, a cynical trick* (...).[13] Here too Venice deludes and pretends to be something

W. Turner, *Veduta dal canale che porta al Lido: la Riva degli Schiavoni* (fragment)
(Source: *Venezia. Acquerelli di Turner*, L'ippocampo, Milan 2008)

that it is not; uttered by Ruskin, such a declaration is a veritable kiss of death.

Twentieth century. This motif of deceit and mendacious illusion returns in the text of yet another serious destructor of the Venetian myth, the outspoken Regis Debray. In a modest volume whose title leaves no place for ambiguities: *Contre Venise*, we encounter entire sets of epithets. The author compared palaces along Canal Grande to a Potemkin mock-up, barely resembling human adobes and totally lifeless. [14] Here is the culmination conclusion: *This city with its theatres, its opera, its masked balls is a theatre itself. (...) Venice is not a city but the representation of a city*. [15] In other words, Venice is a town-model, a town pretending to be a town, something that imitates real life. A town that cultivated a beautiful illusion and celebrated a world of theatrical illusion for so long that it exhausted itself and died, ultimately becoming that, which once was its valued hallmark: a mask devoid of a living, real face.

Twenty first century. In a whistle-blowing article published several years ago in the "Independent" about an apparently immortal question concerning the purposefulness of conserving the crumbling palaces and churches of Venice, the author already in the first sentence pinions the readers with a strong end line: all who had just returned from Venice had taken part in horrendous deceit. [16] This is followed by customary lament concerning the Venetian world of illusion – the effect is enhanced by statements made by eminent men of letters (naturally, including the classics of the destructive current, i.a. the abovementioned Gibbon and Debray, but also the Italian Futurist Marinetti, with impetus turning Venetian lies inside out [17]). The text ends with the poetics of a verdict eliminating all possibilities of an appeal: Venice is not endangered, it is dead. [18] In other words, touring Venice resembles strolling amidst rotting and musty sets, across a gloomy cemetery of past splendour. It is participation in collective hallucination, for which in addition one pays a high fee. But there is something more. This rather funereal description shows clearly that the old slogan *Venice preserved*, so strongly affecting the imagination, is already very outdated.

What is there to conserve, and for what purpose? There is no longer any rational reason to be concerned about a declining town, just as there is no sense in dealing with a painted corpse.

Apparently, times are changing but this dark thread present in Venetian accounts remains almost unbroken. Arguments vary, different comparisons and metaphors circulate, but the basic intuition appears to endure undisturbed.

2.

Among numerous testimonies expressing aversion towards Venice, which in a more or less sophisticated manner reveals the town's artificiality, falsehood, and phantom status, we come across an essay by Georg Simmel:*Venedig* (1907) [19] This brief text – sometimes issued in a separate volume together with two other portraits of towns (Florence and Rome [20]) – is not only a handy catalogue of negative opinions appearing in publications written earlier but also, as can be easily proven, a true a r c h i t e c t of demythologisation statements made already after the publication of Simmel's essay.

Simmel presented his hermeneutics of suspicions in a series of arguments. His demystification of Venice construes images and comparisons that, probably contrary to his intentions, are not semantically transparent and as such outright invite to embark upon an interpretation. It is worth taking a closer look at them. First, let us read this text as neutrally as possible, trying primarily to capture and name the "negative" sets of meanings in it, and then see what they mean and in what manner, but already without the deciphering intention and rhetorical custody of the author. In the case of Simmel the unreality of Venice has many names.

In order to understand something of Simmel's Venetian lesson it is necessary to first comprehend the way in which he interpreted urban space. This is certainly not rhetoric characteristic for an historian, an architect or a town planner. True, Simmel made fragmentary use of languages typical for professional researchers but he did not identify himself completely with any of them. He did, however, merge them into a peculiar synthesis, typical only for him. Simmel interpreted urban space, first and foremost, as a series of signs or, better still, indices referring to a reality more profound than the visible one. [21] Hence he saw the town predominantly as a text providing much food for thought. This is an ambiguous and multi-dimensional reality, a significant organism that is not a simple sum of its parts. A laboratory example of such an approach involves fragments dealing with the space of Rome. Here, ordinary sensual perception of urban space became a point of departure for a wider conclusion: hence the multi-storeyed form of Rome is capable of translating the haphazardness, contradictions and irregularity of the history of erecting the town into a cohesive whole, with the top and the bottom granting the sinuous lines of the image of the town guidelines realised by all the details. This is the direction followed by the dynamic of the urban life of Rome: no element, even ancient, alien and unnecessary, can evade its extraordinary vitality. Even dissimilar elements are drawn into this current. The inclusion of old and oldest monuments into later development is a symbolic expression or frozen form of the same element that the dynamic of Roman life presents in a fluid form: the creation of own life unity out of endlessly different elements. [MiD, 56-57]

Simmel depicted Rome as a curious town, which draws the power of its influence from the variety of the elements comprising it. This process takes place both in the spatial dimension (particular "monuments" exert an impact not as isolated objects but as an entity) and temporal dimension (individual epochs in some incomprehensible way merge together, thus creating a palimpsest configuration of harmoniously coexisting strata). In doing so, he disclosed the phenomenon of the w h o l e, which, strangely, individual parts do not cancel but build, although not by means of simple addition. This is why, Simmel insisted, the typical tourist rushing from monument to monument understands little of the genius of Roman space because he does not notice the beauty of the second power inferred from particular beauties and imposed upon them. [MiD, 57] In other words: he is unable to penetrate the veil of the senses and to cross over to the other side of the looking glass, which discloses the spiritual depth of the town, just as he is incapable of putting together particular phenomena of the visible world so that the miracle of the whole could reveal itself.

In a similar – anatomical, holistic, and spiritual - manner Simmel wrote about his favourite Florence, demonstrating at the same time the miracle of its cohesion. Everything in this organism matches: the past, albeit severed from the present, still pulsates in current life, and Nature, which the spirit encircles as if it were its astral body [MiD, 163], remains in a strange symbiosis with works of art. Everything here adds up and mutually supplements, creating a semblance of implemented utopia, an ideal town. Florence is the cosmos of realised Harmony: it is the joy of the mature man who has achieved all that is most essential in life or resigned from it and now wishes to only seek a form for his conquest or relinquishment. [MiD, 168]

3.

The essay written by Simmel about Venice starts as if with an anacrusis, i.e. by defining the principal features constituting a work of art. At first glance, this might seem rather strange but Simmel knew very well what he was doing: he was preparing solid ground for further reflections. A work of art, he maintained, should be always assessed from the viewpoint of its truth or falsehood. A work is genuine when its outer form is a living and adequate expression of reality. Sometimes, however, it may happen that a work of art seems to be referring us to some metaphysical world, which should be expresssed in it, but nothing of the sort takes place: particular fragments can be perfect and remain in mutual harmony but the w h o l e is detached from the roots and the greater its perfection the more radically does it lie, pretending to be some sort of inner life, world outlook or religious conviction that it actually denies. [MiD, 177-178]

This is a very relevant statement because the inadequacy of form and content, here depicted by an opposition between the empty interior and the lavish exterior, will become a pair of opposites that will work brilliantly in the further part of the text, i.e. the interpretation key to Venetian space.

The entire ideological construction of Simmel's text is based on a juxtaposition between Florence and Venice. As we know, such an approach is by no means new in the history of ideas. Already once in the history of European culture we have dealt with such an acute contrast of both towns. Then, the heart of the matter was the essence of painting and the way of constructing a canvas. Renaissance treatises endlessly discussed a certain fundamental problem: what comes first, what is more important: drawing or colour? [22] In this dispute the names of both towns were for the time being extracted from the space of geography and politics and rendered legible emblems of a certain painterly attitude. Florence, therefore, is a model-like embodiment of *disegno*, the primacy of drawing over colour. Venice is just the opposite, i.e. the domination of *colorito*, a passion for the constructive role of colour and the weaker role of the line. This is a contradiction not to be reconciled.

In the writings of Simmel we also encounter a harsh contradiction, but the principle of the opposition is different. This time we are dealing with the function fulfilled by architecture, and more precisely: the idea of the town concealed behind real buildings. Or perhaps something more: the very conception of life obscured by town-planning premises. In Simmel's essay Venice is the model-like reverse of Florence, its sick contradiction, an ominous anti-thesis.

Start with a comparison of the architecture of both towns. The most profound differences between the architecture of Venice and Florence probably lies in the fact that in the palaces of Florence, or rather the whole of Tuscany, we perceive the outer aspect as an adequate expression of the inner meaning: as a vainglorious, grave and lavish demonstration of power tangible in almost every stone. Each palace represents confident, sovereign personality. On the other hand, Venetian palaces are sophisticated playthings, whose uniformity masks the individuality of their residents, a veil whose folds are arranged in accordance with the rules of its beauty while showing the life concealed beneath only by hiding it. [MiD, 178-179]

Simmel did a lot so that his conceit would become convincing. Earlier remarks about the work of art are skilfully transferred into urban space. The yardstick of the evaluation of architecture is the degree of concurrence between the expression and the contents or reference to an archaic differentiation between form and contents. Florentine palaces are transparent in the function of expression and do not conceal anything.

W. Turner, *Chiarore mattutino sulla punta di Santa Maria della Salute, sullo sfondo de Zitelle*, (fragment).
(Source: *Venezia. Acquerelli di Turner*, L'ippocampo, Milan 2008)

They find total fulfilment in their revelatory function. The opposite is true in the case of Venetian architecture. In order to defend his thesis Simmel was willing to sacrifice even elementary respect for facts and common sense, i.e. only someone for whom the initial conceit is more important than *empiria* verifiable at a single glance can maintain that Venetian palaces are identical (by way of example, take a look at Ca'd'Oro, Ca'Rezzonico, Palazzo Dario – what depressing similarity!). Let us move on, since palaces concealing life are not the end.

Sailing along Canal Grande we know that life, regardless of its nature, is certainly different. Here, in St. Mark's Square, the piazzetta, we feel the iron will of power, the murky passion embedded behind this tranquil phenomenon. The latter, however, seems to live in a state of ostentatious separation from being, and the exterior does not receive from the interior any sort of guidelines or nourishment; it heeds only the laws of art, which appear to be outright established for denying the former. When, however, even the most perfect art does not conceal a meaning of life – or when it opposes it – then art becomes artificial. Florence is perceived as a work of art since its obvious form is connected with life, which has undeniably abandoned it but still loyally stands by its side. *Venice is an artificial town*. Florence will never become a mere mask because its phenomenon resounded with the pure voice of real life, while in Venice, where all tranquillity, lightness, and freedom served only as a facade for a sombre and violent life, unrelentingly striving towards its goal, the twilight of this life left behind only unfeeling decorations, the false beauty of the mask. [MiD, 179]

The same old story. Florence is transparent for the inner senses while Venice is falsehood that conceals emptiness. Florence continues being, as in the past, a work of art while Venice is a mere extract of artificiality. Despite lexical similarity, art and artificiality are not quite the same. The reason lies in the fact that historical life, *ergo*, true life, even though it has abandoned both towns (here Simmel does not seem to protest so strongly), in some mysterious way still exerts an imprint on Florentine architecture, continues being present in it, and permeates it in an outright intimate manner, while a Venetian *palazzo* is only an old skin (the external) cast off by a once living and vital organism. We are compelled to accept this intuition at face value in view of the fact that Simmel did not offer any arguments. One could ask the justified question: what was that "real life" supposed to mean and why does it still appear in Florence while totally abandoning Venice?

Simmel went even further in intensifying an image of artificial (unreal) Venice. Apparently, in the Venetian *theatrum* it is not only buildings but also people that lose their vitality, while the town sucks their blood and changes them into a collection of shadows. Simmel made creative use of the not particularly original figure of Venice as a theatre, without losing anything of his initial intuition:

W. Turner, *Porta della Carta, Palazzo Ducale*, (fragment).
(Source: *Venezia. Acquerelli di Turner*, L'ippocampo, Milan 2008)

In Venice *people walk as if across a stage*, busy with barren dreams or undertakings that yield nothing; they incessantly appear around a corner and immediately vanish around another one, always resembling actors meaningless beyond the stage because on it there takes place a play devoid of causes and effects for the reality of the next moment. The work of art binds particular elements into a single whole and imposes its own meaning; consequently, in Venice the image of people appears to be shallow. They walk and stand, buy and sell, watch and speak – all within the enchanted circle of the town, where illusion is detached from being and seems to be two-dimensional, added to its real and definitive essence. But this concealed essence appears to be dead, and all activity resembles a facade without a background, one part of an equation whose second part has been obliterated. [MiD, 179-180]

Anticipating by several decades the statement made by Debray about Venice, which is no longer a town but only pretends to be one, Simmel demonstrated the way in which in Venice the most ordinary town-planning elements creating every other town are subjected to striking deformations causing a significant shift of their normal function:

Here even bridges lose their exhilarating power. As a rule, a bridge accomplishes an extraordinary feat and in one swoop establishes tension and conciliation between points in space, moves between them, makes it possible to experience their division and union. This dual function, which endows a purely picturesque phenomenon with deeper and vital significance, fades in Venice, the streets s l i d e over innumerable bridges as if along an even road, and it seems that at this point a street is only taking a deep breath without interrupting its unvarying course. [MiD, 180]

Worse yet. In Venice changing seasons become almost invisible. The poor and fragile vegetation of Venice, Simmler claimed, seems to be deprived of roots, and thus while normal vegetation always testifies to the vitality of the base, here it appears to be suspended in air and easily merges with the lifeless stone mock-up. The reason why Venice appears to be devoid of all symptoms of life, and that, which intensifies its phantom-like dimensions, is a special daily, routine rhythm not encountered in any other town:

There probably does not exist another town whose entire life would possess a s i n g l e and i d e n t i c a l tempo. No vehicles or draught animals compelled to chase each other at the same speed, or gondolas moving at the rate, and according to the rhythm, of pedestrians. This is the reason why Venice always appeared to be a "dream". As a rule, reality stimulates us: the spirit, left to its own devices or subjected to a uniform impact, would remain in a state of inertia and only a change of experiences directs it towards an external existence, which would interrupt its leisure.

W. Turner, *Santa Maria della Salute e la Dogana, viste dalle Zitelle, sullo sfondo Il campanile di Santo Stefano*, (fragment).
(Source: *Venezia. Acquerelli di Turner*, L'ippocampo, Milan 2008)

This is why uniform and long-lasting stimuli act in a hypnotic manner and the continual rhythm creates a dimmed state of unreality. The monotony of all Venetian rhythms deprives us of the stimuli and shocks necessary to experience reality and trusts us into a dream of sorts, in which we are surrounded by illusions of things – without the things as such. The spirit, embroiled in the rhythm of this town, becomes immersed in an ambiance that the aesthetic image of the town proposes in the form of objectivity: as if only the upper, reflecting strata of the spirit breathed while its

W. Turner, *Gondola e chiaro di luna*, (fragment).
(Source: *Venezia. Acquerelli di Turner*, L'ippocampo, Milan 2008)

full reality remains on the side, apparently submerged in idle slumber. Living by means of contents severed from the substance and experiences of real life we participate in the lie of Venice. [MiD, 181]

It is precisely this sensoric deprivation offered to us by Venice that contributes on yet another level to experiencing it as a phantom deprived of the substrate of reality. In the final conclusion, maintained in a pessimistic mood just like the previous comments, Simmel returned once again to initial intuition according to which Venice is pure surface devoid of all foundation, an illusion through which no being can be seen. Once again there appears the positive figure of Florence, whose buildings, images, and space preserve the life current that once was the source of their existence. If, however, an illusion to which no being ever corresponded and whose contradictory beings had perished, pretends that it constitutes life and entirety, then it is a common lie and as if an embodiment of the ambiguity of life. The dark and symmetric squares without vehicles that appear to resemble a chamber are just as ambiguous as the crowds unavoidable in narrow lanes and creating the illusion of intimacy and the "cosiness" of life (...); the small, dark canals whose water uneasily quivers and flows, but one cannot distinguish the direction in which it moves without reaching a goal, are equally ambiguous. [MiD, 182]

The horror of the hollow and the horror of unextinguishable ambiguity. If I am correct, in the definitions accentuated above Simmel anticipated a phenomenon of *simulacrum* described several decades later. Venice is a gigantic lie, the illusion of all illusions, a facade that conceals nothing. This is probably the most brutal disillusion performed by the philosopher. There is nothing behind this otherwise beautiful screen, which Venice is according to universal belief, behind this curtain.... A dark well of nothingness. Time, therefore, to remove the film off our eyes and start looking at Venice open-eyed. To see what it r e a l l y looks like. *Also sprach* Simmel.

4.

The effect of the exposing interpretation proposed by Simmel is shattering. But naked truth is never appetising. Simmel believed that Venice finally disclosed its genuine self – naked and featuring ugly nudity, repulsive, devoid of the veil of sugar-coated images, *this grossly advertised wonder, this Golden Calf on clay feet, this trompe-l'oeil, this painted deception, this cliché*[23] – one could add at this point a contemporary (and so very "Simmelian" in spirit!) commentary by McCarthy to the opinions of those who had not succumbed to the charms of Venice.

Note that the philosopher's disillusion is multimotif and takes place on several levels. It is precisely because it appears in various domains simultaneously that it possesses such an extensive impact. Let us, therefore, gather all the invectives and epithets addressed to Venice. Venice is an illusion, a falsehood (the epistemological level), a lie, pretence, a theatre (the ethical level), an imitation (the aesthetic level) and, finally, an illusion, a dream, a non-being (the ontological level). We can see, therefore, that the infirmity of Venice cannot be reduced to only a single level. On the contrary, on all the essential levels of human experience the town is located in the decidedly negative regions on the scale of values. The diatribe by Simmel contains a striking thought, i.e. that Venice as a whole, in all of its aspects, is a being tainted by an irremovable blemish. It is, therefore, a reality that one has to decidedly oppose. This is the last nail in the coffin of Venice: an otherwise beautiful elegy written to commemorate its departure of no return.

As I mentioned, Simmel's text has an essential place in the long history of visions concerning Venice. He is probably the most eminent on the list of "negativists". His grimaces and maledictions did not remain, as in the case of many others, only upon the level of impressions but subjected the latter to a discursive analysis with a theoretical underpinning. There seems to be little sense in conducting a polemic with visions (I already mentioned certain doubts concerning, so to speak, "material truth" while discussing the text). The truth of visions lies in their very existence. One thing, however, in Simmel's writings is annoying and calls for a commentary: I have in mind the thesis about the ambiguity of life, mentioned at the end of his statement.

To put it in plain terms, I am concerned with the fact that the description of Venetian architecture and life performed by Simmel - many would call it extremely apt! (by way of example, who would question a thesis about the vividly theatrical dimension of Venice?) - does not have to produce the o b v i o u s conclusions, which he drew upon the basis of observation. If one were to delve deeper into *The Venice Text*, then for each of the "negative features" mentioned by Simmel one could easily find a neutralising "positive quality".

Here is one instructive example: the widely disseminated and known topos of Venice perceived as a dream, also present in Simmel's writings. Simmel keenly registered the monotony of the stimuli offered by the town, the repetitiveness of Venetian rhythms, the striking immobility of the sets in which local life runs its course. (And this is the reason why Venice always appeared to be a "dream"). These observations were rapidly associated with the nature of a dream in order to draw even quicker the conclusion that this slumbering Venice has an unambiguously negative (mendacious, depriving of real traits, detaching from the truth) impact upon the people residing therein.

This part of an observation, however, does not contain anything of preordained necessity. Here are two counter-fragments about somnolent Venice to support the thesis:

Venice makes an impression of things seen in the enchanted semi-shade of some sort of a dream. The curious magnificence of this town, resembling a flower emerging from deep waves, the strange absence of all noise – there are no automobiles, carriages or other vehicles – produce the illusion that we are strolling along the chambers, halls, and porches of a bewitched castle. Light, possessing the glimmer and sparkle of rays cast by diamonds, and isolation amidst the abyss of the sea grant extraordinary power to this vision-dream. [24]

This description seems to be somewhat familiar: the striking peace, quiet, and immobility of the town as well as the association of those observations with sleep. The conclusion, however, is totally different. Such drowsiness does not cause slumber. It does not lie. On the contrary: it intensifies impression and transfers into an extraordinary sphere, although there is no mention of any sort of betrayal of "real" life for the sake of some sort of passing illusion. Just the opposite, there is the joy of becoming familiar with another sphere of life and its intensity, not encountered on a daily basis. Instead of expected passivity and sensual torpor, as in the writings of Simmel, there is ecstasy.

Yet another fragment enhancing this recognition from another side and interesting not because it abrogates Simmel's definition (Venetian ambiguity) but demonstrates its one-dimensional character and limitation:

It suffices to free oneself from the carnival-spectacle Venice, to immerse oneself in it at night or at dawn, to come here in the autumn or the winter in order to understand its true nature. A dream experienced while awake. (...) What is the essence of the dream - reality intensified, enhanced and powerful and combined with endless changeability, fragility, and fleeting qualities - this is also the essence of Venice. There are no towns in the world equally concrete and full of life and, at the same time, illusory, enmeshed in echoes, sounds, the chiaroscuro, and mirrored reflections [25].

Here, in turn, Venice does not seem to resemble slumber but actually is its essence. Note, the person proposing the description not only does not become distracted while pondering the degree of the real nature of his experience, but outright cultivates this state of uncertainty, ontological suspension typical for the moment of transition between sleep and awakening. Just as in the previous example, Venice asleep is a different and, it is impossible to hide, better dimension of existence. It is a space in which one would like to live.

La vida es sueño, as Calderon put it. This phrase still possesses the power of somber recognition. Who errs: those, who like Simmel, refer Venice to the land of illusion and non-being, or rather those who see it as an instrument for the recognition of the true nature of the world?

What do the cited descriptions prove? I suspect that looking at Venice Simmel perceived it extremely keenly, as his comments convincingly prove. The trouble is that his perception is based on negative pre-comprehension (its causes could be perhaps explained by a psychoanalytical discourse). The latter is, in turn, founded on a conviction (illusion?) maintaining that there exists somewhere (where?) a world that is free of ambiguity. His animosity towards Venice is, therefore, not the outcome of a defect of sight but of the pressure of an intellectual project. Its source is unattainable longing for a realm of unambiguity, full of transparency and realised harmony. Such a world, however, occurs only in fairy tales.

III. Pasticcio

1.

For each visitor arriving in Venice for the first time, waking up in this town is an exceptional event. Waking up in Venice with a tremendous hangover grants this unusual experience an even more special flavour:

I awoke from the surrounding morning noises with such regret and sorrow inside that, even having opened my eyes, for a long time I remained motionless, without the strength to shake myself and to remove this torpor, uninvited just before dawn. (...) I ended up in Venice. I awoke in an antique bed, on multi-coloured sheets that smelled of quince and dry apricot blossoms. A high and clean ceiling is above me with an ornamental decoration, which doesn't remind me of anything. Around me is an entire collection of fine objects made of silver, walnut, ebony, sandalwood, ivory, bronze, terra-cotta, lace, velvet. Before me – five entire days and nights in this reality more like a hallucination. [26]

This situation, as can be seen, is unfavourable, to say the least. A headache, unclear recollections of yesterday's excesses, and all-pervading sadness. The person who one morning found himself in this opulent setting is Stanislas Perfetsky, the rarely sober Ukrainian poet, musician, performer, and main protagonist of the exciting book by Yuri Andrukhovych - *Perverzion*. Perfetsky was invited as one of several speakers at an international conference held on the Venetian island of San Giorgio Maggiore under the evocative title: "The Post-Carnival Absurdity of the World: What Is on the Horizon?" This is only the beginning of his Venetian escapade and nothing foretells its bloodcurdling successive course.

Perverzion can be read in several ways. It appears to be outright programmed for a series of diverse albeit not necessarily mutually excluding interpretations. One can, or rather should first read it with a naïve (this does not mean: imprudent) attitude, enjoying the

inane adventures of Perfetsky in Venice and finding extraordinary pleasure in participating in the untamed element of creating a fictional plot. One can conduct a useful analysis of the language and treat the novel predominantly as a tempting exercise in poetics. Or it could be read in a more cultural dimension, discovering the voice of its author among those who deliberate on the present-day shape of Europe.

Yet another, promising, and not at all marginal track appears to be an interpretation of Andrukhovych book from the viewpoint of the image of Venice depicted therein. Placing the plot in this particular town was a decision of great semantic importance. Consequently, there arise a number of questions. What sort of an image of the town emerges from the text? In what sort of meaning contexts does it appear? What are the characteristic symptoms of this portrayal? What is the relation of the portrait of a town presented in *Perverzion* to the long, after all, list of its literary representations? We shall follow the traces of those questions.

2.

Before we broach the topic of Venice and its assorted perverse images, first a few words about the book and its literary dimensions since literariness - alongside various other assets – is its chief substance. With Venice as the prime target one cannot forget this fact.

Perverzion takes place entirely in the language, is constructed of words (and not ideas!), and simply does not exist beyond abundant, rich, living, pulsating, unexpected, and innovative language. This is important since upon one of its levels of meaning it can be easily deciphered as a novel about language, its endless potential and causal force. This is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to propose a summary. The second reason is the multi-motif and polyphonic - in the precise meaning of the word – construction. There are numerous differently sounding voices, styles, poetics (an autobiographical confession, an interview, a report, an interrogation, official printed matter, a libretto text, a last will and testament...). By making use of those testimonies the narrator tries to determine what actually occurred to Perfetsky in Venice and to explain the mystery of his strange - possibly suicidal - disappearance. As a genre the book is a hybrid: a crime story, a romance, a picaresque novel, and a fantastic vision.

The novel has been classified rather unambiguously as an almost model-like example of a postmodern text, and such features as a mistrustful usage of language or genre unsteadiness were supposed to support this opinion. As is known, labels quite often serve the excellent mood of the person who does the labelling rather than actually describe the objects to which they refer. The adjective: "postmodern" granted to Andrukhovych novel wants to express in an abbreviated form everything but actually says nothing. The issue at stake is much more complicated.

True, superficial familiarity with the book might confirm the conviction that we are dealing only with unhindered literary fun and thrilling attempts at games played with language. From the viewpoint of the latter the narration is, first of all, an element of parody, pastiche, and the aping of assorted stylistics and types of articulation. Here everything is upside down. The presented world is governed by excess and caricature, an incessant mixture of comic and serious elements, and thus components of a literary convention known as the grotesque. These are, after all, distinctive signs of the text belonging to the postmodern camp.

On the other hand, there is too much meta-critical laughter and self-ironic attacks not to notice that this - ever so! – postmodern stylistic serves not solely fun but a l s o the process of doubting certain obvious traits of postmodern dogmatics. Quite possibly, it assists first and foremost the most popular postmodern mantra about the all-embracing game and lack of *gravitas* as a response to the breakdown of the fundamental intellectual, theological, and ethical orders of modern times. To put it still differently: Rabelaisian laughter conceals serious identifications. This observation already transfers us directly to the cultural reflection present in the novel.

Everyone who embarks upon a commentary to *Perverzion* is defeated at the very onset. It is not only impossible to summarise this book properly, but its gargantuan laughter effectively safeguards it against "researchers specialising in insect legs". Let us try, however, to perform several analytical motions while fully aware that in this situation they must resemble piercing a living butterfly with the dull pin of discourse.

3.

What does Venice look like in the text of *Perverzion*? One would like to say: this is Venice treated ironically, as is everything else. To put it as briefly as possible: we are dealing with an erudite discourse of parentheses. [27] The author is well aware that literary Venice - especially in its popular version – is to a considerable extent a lot of faded allegories and moribund metaphors. [28] And that he is writing his "Venetian" text on a thick pile of texts left behind by his predecessors. His originality, after all, consists of the absence of originality, however paradoxical that may sound. Instead of new allegory he creates a gripping and frenzied collage (or, perhaps even better, a patchwork) of all that had been written about Venice across the centuries. A number of conventional metaphors, comparisons, associations, and motifs present in numerous

descriptions of the town – all this has been subjected to parodistic travesty.

Take the first of many examples: a motif permeating European imagination from the end of the nineteenth century, the agony of Venice vanishing and slipping into the sea. Here is a pertinent declaration of aged (*He looks at least a hundred years old* [P, 71]) Professor Casallegro [29], who appears in the text as himself but also as a personified, so to speak, history of Venice. More, he fulfils the function of chairman of the "La morte di Venezia" (sic!) foundation and organiser of an international conference: *Venice is dying, Mr. Perfekcy (...) The true death of Venice will happen not from swallowing by the sea or sand, not from floods or heavenly thunder (...) All this is only external, that is, apparent, that is nonessential (...). Entire institutions exist that have been summoned to save Venice (...). They stirred up a multitude of ideas, each more clever than the next (...). And now – for the sake of saving this stone, this gold, this marble, these stuccos and mosaics, this pigeon dung – several eggheads even propose to move this entire Venice to some safe and drier place (...). The monuments that will perish in these dirty waters, as it were, are dearer than (...). Otherwise, asses would have wanted to chase away everything living from here including the shitty pigeons and to preserve everything here in perpetuity (...). They contend that no one should be living here in twenty-five years. Such an, you know, accident zone (...). So that only ghosts of people should rush along the canals on ghosts of gondolas (...).* [P. 64, 65]

This extraordinarily funny literary realisation of arguments about moribund Venice, usually presented with deadly seriousness, is yet another answer to the question: what should be done with Venice, how to put a halt to its gradual disappearance?

Further: the Venetian theatre and opera, Venice conceived as a theatre, and the opera-like qualities of Venetian life. It is worth checking how these lofty conceptions are faring today. In a bravura operatic sequence Andrukhovych reduced them to ground level, thus demonstrating their cheap and dubious side. The object of his sarcastic attacks is one Matthew Kulikoff, announced by the "La morte di Venezia" foundation as: *one of the most well known opera directors and innovators of the contemporary world.* [P, 171] It is he who was commissioned to stage the opera *Orpheus in Venice* so that it may function as a musical appendix to the scientific seminar. Here is the director, whose statement disgraces the entire undertaking in a manner that does not call for lengthier commentaries - his invitation to the premiere says:

I was terribly enthralled with the idea of doing an opera in such a legendary city. Because right here, in this island state saturated with culture and its institutions, is quite appropriate for embodying one of my mad intentions - to create an opera beyond operas, an opera of operas, where the very elements of operaness, its inner actuality, its substance, is parodied, rethought and, if You accept this, is elevated even higher. To my assistance came the old Italian experience of the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries (to the point, the centuries of the most luxurious flowering of Venice). I have in mind the so-called pasticcio, *when new operas were created on the basis of the deconstructing and recombination of elements of operas that already existed. The historical-cultural space of Venice, its topi, its* genius loci, *it seems, assisted me in my work. The spiritual landscape of the Italian opera tradition had no less meaning for me. Finally, the space of the stage and the hall - the magic of this fantastic space, the Teatro La Fenice, its aura. And countless other spaces in addition - the individual creative spaces of each, who believed me and worked with me on the same team.* [P, 172-173]

True, the director was not lying. The music of this opera is a combination of works by Monteverdi, Vivaldi, Donizetti, Bellini and several other composers, and its structure does recall a *pasticcio* – but this time comprehended literally, as a pâté . Or as an aesthetic monstrosity. The opera libretto contained in the book is undoubtedly the work of a madman. Thrilled with his own genius, the opera director Matthew Kulikoff, together with his crazed vision of an opera about Orpheus as an entity made up of fragments of the existing world, proves to be an idiot submerged in self-adoration. His opera about Orpheus in Venice turns out to be complete drivel and a postmodern fiasco of the idea of a total work. [30] Only literature salvages this verbal-musical pâté .

In order to take a closer look at the auteur strategy of demythologisation let us examine one of the figures often exploited in literature: Venice as a crossing of the worlds, as the *hinge of Europe*. [31] Venice as a meeting place of the culture of Western and Eastern elements. As a gateway to the East, a bridge between the East and the West. Those methodical tropes have become firmly embedded in European writings and imagination. Entering St. Mark's Square, the protagonist of Henry James' *Travelling Companions*, admitted: *I had left Europe; I was in the East*. Theophile Gautier described the basilica of St. Mark as an *Oriental dream*. Jan Morris in: *The World of Venice* wrote outright: *In Venice the Orient began*, and John Ruskin in his monumental: *The Stones of Venice* described the beauty of the basilica: *It possesses the charm of color in common with the greater part of the architecture, as well as of the manufactures, of the East*. In turn, Boris Pasternak saw the colour gamut of night-time Venice in the company of such words as: *halva and Chaldea, the magi and magnesium, India and indigo*.

It is to this well-established topos: Venice as a place where, as that old banal saying goes, "East meets West", that the novel makes an ironic reference. But is anyone actually meeting someone? And if so, then

what sort of West and what sort of East? What sort of a bridge is this?

One simply has to notice that Andrukhovych granted the well-worn metaphor of a "bridge" linking Western culture and the Oriental element an entirely new meaning, one with a changed sign. The East, the Orient, which usually acted as a cryptonym of a mythical and exotically conceived version of the world of Islam, here denotes simply post-Soviet Ukraine, while halva and magnesium are replaced by the products of the spirits industry.

At the conference a representative of the former Soviet colony is treated with condescending superiority. A constantly recurring motif is that of the absence of any sort of knowledge about Ukraine among envoys of the civilised world. The organisers of the conference perceive Ukraine as an earthly version of a Never Never Land, a phantom reality somewhere on the very edges of the inhabited world. A distant and peripheral land on the border of non-being. A land somewhere at the end of a map, assuming that it actually does exist. A country-phantom. Its real name means nothing and thus it appears in official papers in different versions as: Urania, Ukrania, czy Ukraya, so as to include this unmarked particle into the world of linguistic and cartographic imagination.

The Ukrainian, however, remains unconcerned and openly demonstrates his feeling of affiliation with Europe. During confession heard by the vicar of the church on San Michele, which smoothly turned into an alcoholic binge, Perfetsky admits to a number of truths about his origin. We learn about this dialogue from the priest's account: *"I've come here from a really distant land. May be you don't even know about it, Father Antonio. Suffice to say I was born in a little town in the mountains, quite close to the center of Europe" At this point it seemed to me that he wasn't completely rational. "What are you saying?" I was surprised. "Is it so far from here? Isn't the center of Europe somewhere in Switzerland?" "No, Father, amid different, entirely different mountains, far from here!" he insisted. "Perhaps in the Ural Mountains?" I myself remembered something from school lectures on geography. "No, not the Urals, but in the Carpathian Mountains, Father", he corrected me. "Some of you still call them the Caucasus".* [P, 110]

This exemplary lesson of cultural relativism demonstrates the scale of misunderstandings. The centre of Europe is not an immobile point. On the contrary, its location depends on the place where opinions are formulated. Hence the very concept of Europe has nothing of pre-established unambiguity and changes depending on who is speaking and where he lives. It is easy to guess, therefore, that the appearance of a phantom representative of equally phantom peripheries in the cultural centre of civilised Europe becomes the cause of a number of unusual events.

Perverzion is not, therefore, yet another text evoking close historical relations - actually intense and present in a multitude of domains - between Venice and the Oriental world, but introduces a refreshing and cognitively enriching *novum*. It confronts the old figure of Venice as the gateway to the East with the entirely contemporary dilemmas faced by Europe. Cultural Europe, focused on its centuries-old civilisational lineage, is now forced to tackle new savages. As always, they arrive from the East. Is this barbarian Ukrainian people a tribe totally alien or one of us? Perfetsky goes far to demonstrate in his complex lecture the reasons why Ukraine could never belong to this part of the world: *Where Europe was just beginning to arise, to grow, to be constructed, at the same instant Asia revolted, demanding the establishment of its despotic and simultaneously anarchic status. At this moment I am not saying that this is bad. But I am just saying that this is its essence, and this essence vehemently contradicts the other essence - the European.* [P, 224-225] The struggle of two tendencies, both facing different directions, determined the history of Ukraine. This exuberant historiosophy, formulated with deep conviction, is to serve Perfetsky simultaneously as a safe conduct pass enabling him to enter European salons.

4.

Another image, permanently linked with Venice, is carnival. Here things become more complicated. The image of the town in the throes of fun (*Are you familiar with Venetian Shrovetide?* [32]), with féeries of light and the inevitable parade of people concealed behind masks is almost an indispensable and thoroughly exploited element of numerous travelogues and literary and film depictions of Venice. By rendering the carnival the semantic axis of his story Andrukchovych envisaged it much deeper than a mere seasonal festivity. Now, carnival means something different (and much more serious!) than only a period of a temporary suspension of mores or festive debauchery. First and foremost, carnival or, more precisely, its decline – real or merely presumed – is, as we remember, the topic of a conference held in Venice. The invitations addressed by the organisers to the participants of the seminar say:

We in Venice are inclined to think that the loss of Carnival has occurred. We can see this. Almost no one can see this - for Carnival exists, it occurs year after year, several times, for various reasons, with fires and masks, with wine and dance. Carnival exists, anyone will tell you from among those who still (or already) do not see and of which they are of countless number. Carnival is becoming bigger and bigger, it's everywhere and uninterrupted, others who are of evil persuasion will tell you.

But is it really this way? Or is it only measured by what is gulped down and devoured? Or with unbelievable

swarms of tourists, Japanese, hotel services, amusements, or with the return of money and losses on pyrotechnics? And is this already only bare mechanics, machinery, cold industry, massive consumption, permanent parasitic behavior? What if it is just a trap? [P, 37]

In Andrukhovych's flamboyant narration "Venetian carnival" is thus a more or less legible figure of the poor world - European contemporaneity. It can be discovered already in the ambiguously sounding "post-carnival" in the title of the Venetian seminar. This peculiar carnival would be, therefore, a reality occurring after the carnival in the classical meaning of the word, some sort of a new mutation characteristic only for our era. Andrukhovych thus accepted similar connotations – such expressions as: post-religion, post-history, post-culture, etc. But if that prefix is changed into a noun then it becomes apparent that it can be understood as Lent (Polish: *post*) carnival, in the metaphorical sense: of little nutritious value, barren, poor. If the term were to be referred to events from the presented world (distinctly carnival events in the novel take place during Lent!), then it might signify also Lent, which assumed the features of carnival and resembled it to such a degree that the differences between them became unnoticeable.

All this is the reason why the contemporary Venetian *post-carnival* turns out to be an open oxymoron, a world based on a paradox. It is a special prank, something openly abnormal. In cultures of the past carnival was, after all, always a time directed against Lent. The formula: "the battle of carnival and Lent" expressed this contradiction well. Here, carnival possesses the features of Lent emanating exhaustion. Consequently, is carnival still possible? Lecturers offer different responses, as a rule do not speak on the topic, or simply jabber. Listen to the end of Perfetsky's speech; speaking chaotically, he at least from time to time refers to the essence. In this fragment he seems to be uttering words that he finds most crucial although the whole time they are affected adversely by the poetics of irony and endless play-acting:

Allow me a single truism just before the end of my talk. I expect that it won't excessively irritate you.

Only love can save us from death. There, where love ends the "absurdity of the world" begins. And I don't think then that "anything" can still remain "on the horizon". Besides emptiness, of course. It attracts, it calls, it pulls - how can we render resistance in this time of "postlove"?

At the least I would want to be like a prophet and forecast something here today. I proposed to your inattentiveness all of just several versions, each of which separately is erroneous, and all together contradicting each other. But all the same I will attempt, even out of such a hopeless situation, to emerge with honor, that is, with a certain conclusion. …

I hold to the traditional system of notions. If we understand carnival as the extreme strain of the powers of life in all their fullness and inexhaustibility or also the loftier manifestation of the battle between love and death (death as emptiness, as antilife, as nothing), than carnival truly should never end, or, at least, last as long as we have not spent our credit by the Heavenly observer. [P, 237-238]

Jokes aside, it seems that at this stage Andrukhovych said several essential things, already beyond laughter. Although his declarations lack the passion of a missionary and the certitude of the only correct prescription, is there any better place to ask about the future of the carnival than Venice?

The above statement introduced a certain dissonance to the earlier outlined likeness of *post-carnival*. In his sarcastic descriptions of Venetian reality the author unambiguously suggested that contemporary idolatry of permanent fun is no longer a source of joy; on the contrary, it is becoming a source of suffering. That, which once was an emanation of vital forces, today is a symbol of their disappearance. And if not of death then certainly of some form of non-life, pretended life, life deprived of a genuine vital force. The reason why this is taking place lies in the fact that in the past carnival frenzy was a clear-cut caesura in a world ruled by order, and even if norms were not respected it was acknowledged that they existed. Today, in a world of constant fun, a carnival-time mixture of matter, *post-carnival* ceased being a temporary suspension of stable order. There is no more "negative" background against which it would define itself. Everything is carnival, and there where this happens nothing is carnival and the carnival suspension of time is senseless. *Post-carnival* is, therefore, a sad figure of vain time. A contradiction of the frenetic carnival. Sheer exhaustion with fun…

Thus: is carnival still possible? Such questions are addressed to the participants of the Venetian symposium by its organisers, and this is the sort of query that *Perverzion* asks us. The question was formulated in a literary procedure, without any discursive justifications and footnotes, although I claim that it is cognitively profound and culturally essential. If I understood him well, Andrukhovych, who became familiar with the therapeutic properties of carnivalisation as a lifestyle in the Lent-like world of Soviet Ukraine, answers in the affirmative although it is not quite certain whether in the world of liquid values, a world in which the awareness of the tragic properties of life is vanishing (has vanished?), a return to differentiations introducing order into the experience of time is still possible.

It seems, however, that this positive assessment of the carnival is unconcerned with its institutional resurrection. The heart of the matter pertains rather to two issues. First: carnival conceived rather as a certain mental disposition, carnival as a creative emanation

of life, an antidote against false attitudes and impotence typical for the contemporary world, a liberating energy that supplements the already obligatory call: "Everything already has taken place" with the recommendation: "Yes, but everything still awaits to be discovered". Secondly: carnival laughter envisaged as the generator of culturally reviving behaviour. Not the sort, therefore, which takes its anger out in foolish destruction and turning all constant points of reference inside out, but the kind that would possess liberating properties and reveal uncrititcal attachment to old schemes and intellectual habits, which would disclose their barreness and cultural chaos. It is difficult to evade the thought that it is precisely *Perverzion* that is an embodiment of such a comprehension of Carnival.

5.

The Latin word: *perversitas* means: reversal. From the literary viewpoint *Perverzion* proves to be predominantly an intelligent and discerning strategy of reversing symbols. The image of Venice depicted in the book seems to be aimed against the most universal Venetian aspects of the discourse: the Bombastic and the Sentimental discourse. The most widely disseminated likenesses of Venice have been turned inside out. There is no fragile ecstasy of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, no desperate decadence of *Death in Venice*, no horror and tightening noose of fear of *The Aspern Papers*. Other, less distinctive examples can be multiplied. Instead of customary solemnity, seriousness, and mournfulness there is overacting and flippancy, and instead of suitable melancholy – irony and sarcasm. Such an in-depth, gut-feeling carnival Venice has never appeared in literature despite the fact that scenes of carnival festivities (in their strictly calendar comprehension) are not, after all, the object of the description!

In other words, carnival-time Venice from *Perverzion* turns out to be a world turned upside down twice and the disappearance of the chief protagonist grants yet another meaning to the trivialised expression: "death in Venice". Andrukhovych was clearly trying to bring the unbearable, contrived quality – so frequent in Venetian rhetoric - down to earth. His objective, however, does not seem to be some sort of a radical disillusion whose culminating conclusion is to set fire to Venice! It rather appears to be – as Debray put it so brutally – to kill in oneself the Venetian illusion (*fantôme de Venise* [33]), but not, as is the case in his diagnosis, in the form of hysterical rejection but by keeping a rather emollient, ironic distance. Further targets include the disclosure of the comical and trivial qualities of numerous concepts present in the popular language (only?) of narrations about Venice [34] in order to demonstrate how certain emulated images are separated from reality and start living a life of their own, as well as how insufferably flat and secondary is the shape of the Venetian image in collective imagination. At the same time it must be stressed firmly that this Venice *á rebours*, despite its jeering portrayal, belongs - on par with laudatory texts – to *The Venice Text*, with all that this entails. It plays the role of a counter-sign, an anti-structure, and a negative myth, but regardless of this deciphering gesture it does not cease being part of a wider narration.

Venice in *Perverzion* resembles a crooked mirror in which we might notice a caricature of our vision of this town – cultivated for years, stale, musty, and faded. It is up to us whether we would like to look at our reflection. But who is capable of such perversion?

IV. Resonances

1.

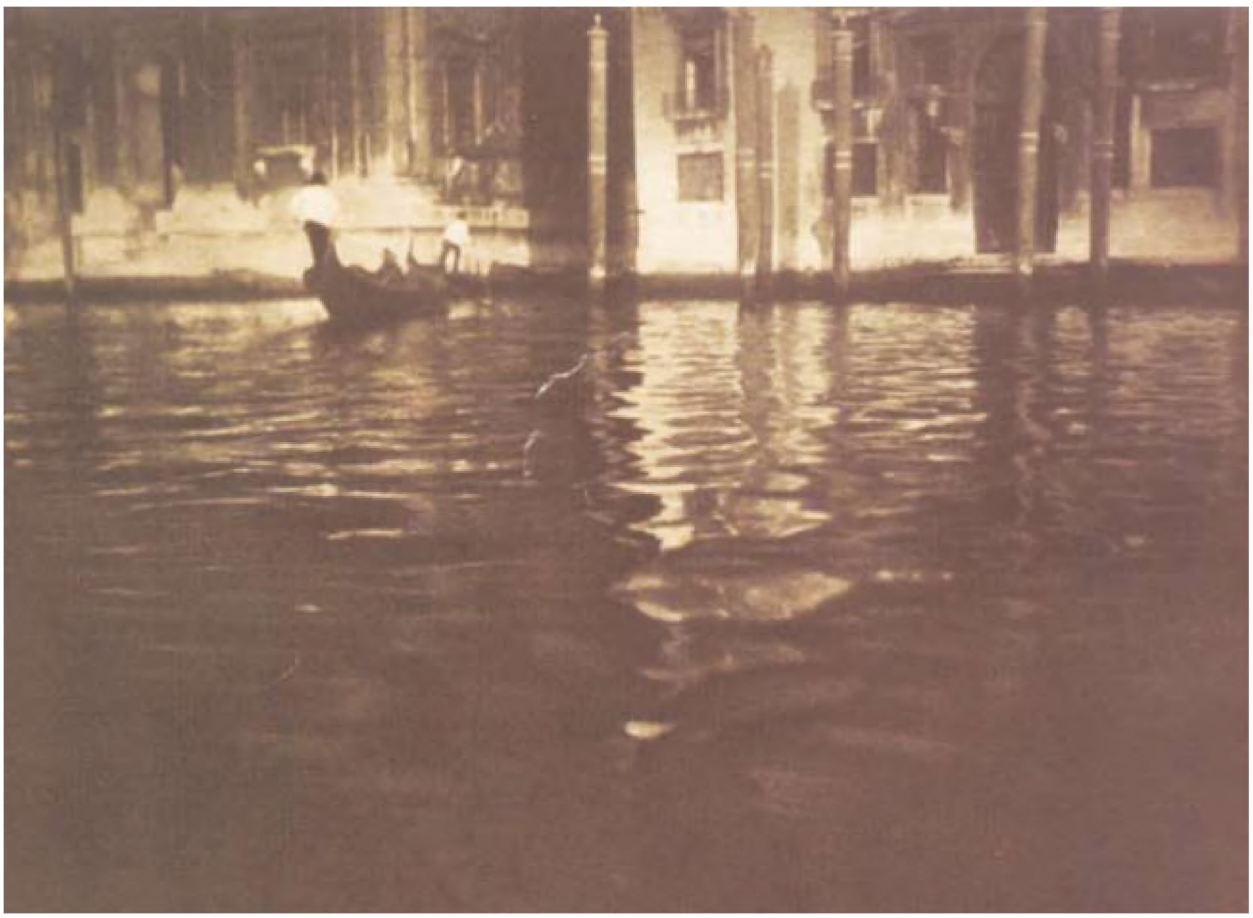
At the beginning - a puzzle. What film starts with the below-cited scene?

A fishing boat sails on a sea with a surface composed of choppy waves. It makes its way towards the dark outlines of islands concealed by a curtain of light cast from the sky. Pearly reflections trickle from the side of Venice, composed of marble and lace, still aslumber and already distant. From time to time they move upwards, piercing the mist suspended above the sea.

The boat contains, apart from the fisherman listening to the regular sound of the engine, also two persons huddled together. A balding, forty-five year old man, dressed inappropriately for this time of the year and observing, with his head lowered, the traces left begin by the boat. Later, we find out that this is Andrei Gorchakov. His face is turned but the general outline makes it possible to notice that he is fair-haired and slender. Gorchakov's right hand is lowered and almost touches the boat. He holds a lit cigarette, which has nearly turned into ash.

Gorchakov's hand remains just above the water. By some miracle the lengthy ash stays on the cigarette. The boat sails along the coast of San Giorgio, slowly moving next to a paginated marble statue. This Titianesque-shaped nude turns its back towards a carefully trimmed hedge. At this precise moment, right in front of the enthralled Eugenie, the marble, cracked, wet, and devoured by time, starts to slowly shift and disintegrates into tiny pieces, as if watched in a slow-motion movie. [35]

The puzzle is not that difficult. The name of the protagonist in the quoted fragment is already a sufficient clue for many readers. There is no doubt: this is the beginning of *Nostalghia* by Andrei Tarkovsky. I am right: this is not the beginning of the film but of the screenplay! A pity that the scene - stirring the imagination and offering interesting possibilities of its visual version – was ultimately not included in the film. [36] After all, it seems to be a distant echo of



Edward Steichen, Venice (1907)

the opening scene of Visconti's *Death in Venice*. A sailing boat, morning light skimming on the water. And Gorchakov ... . At the end of the take he dips his hand *into the water together with the ashes*. [37] Gorchakov is a late embodiment of Aschenbach, whose surname, after all, conceals ashes and water. From the very onset Gorchakov is split asunder and looks fleetingly at the surface, but his thoughts follow another direction and suggest distant images. He sails across the lagoon, but *his inner sight perceives the black water of the river Moskva*. [38] He is *here*, but he wishes to be *elsewhere*. And this is how things are going to be. The Russian émigré, tired of Italian beauty, longs for home and his native land. This *elsewhere* has very concrete parameters.

One way or another, the title of the film does not lie and is an excellent description of the main theme. Wherever the protagonist goes, and whatever he sees, he is not at home. He is in Italy but cannot bear being without Russia. He is *here* and *now* but he wants to be *there* and *at some other time*. He pines. In his poignant commentary on the film Leonid Batkin wrote a lot about this special Russian variant of nostalgia with its underpinning of despair and - we have to believe him – incurable. [39]. I evoke the initial fragment of the screenplay for other nefarious purposes. I do not wish to either comment on the film or name the colours of Russian nostalgia contained therein. Anyway, others had already done this quite thoroughly. [40]

I do, however, want to write about nostalgia. Nostalgia concerning Venice. This is why I evoke (nostalgically?) a scene with which numerous spectators of Tarkovsky's work are probably unfamiliar. Nostalgia is the reverse of anticipating an encounter with it. It is a backward glance. At this moment, I would like to bring to life that, which has turned into a dusty bookmark of memory. To disremember that, which has been ejected, lost, and forgotten. And first and foremost, to ask about the feasibility of travelling in time and what could become a vehicle of a journey into the past, into *le temps perdu*.

2.

We can see immediately that the above-cited scene is lacking something. Obviously, that missing element is music. The point, however, is not simply to add sound to the image delineated with the word. The objective is something more: music fulfilling the function of naming space. After all, there exists a firm conviction persistently recurring in the history of attempts at delving into the Venetian enigma, namely, that music is simply another name for Venice and that Venice does not exist without music. Thus comprehended Venice is in its essence musical, which means

that its distinguishing feature is not at all palpable space – those kilometres of marble beauty – but time. Something much more fragile and difficult to capture. To put it in more precise terms: a special experiencing of time, the flow and compression of time, its whirlpool, but also the halting of time. What sort of music could accompany the recalled scene, what sort of sounds would be capable of carrying its burden? Perhaps this could by the third, "Venetian" quartet by Benjamin Britten, his last musical score with open references to the earlier composed opera: *Death in Venice*? And in particular its last part, *Passacaglia*, whose second name is already much more precise: *La Serenissima*. [41] Music, some claim, is the quintessence of Venice and experiencing the town is purely musical. The most acute observers of Venice were capable of noticing this feature.

In a passage probably most classical for this trope Frederic Nietzsche wrote in *Ecce homo: I could not possibly dispense with Rosssini and still less with my Southern soul in music, the work of my Venetian maëstro Pietro Gasit. And when I say beyond the Alps all I really mean is Venice. If I try to find a new word for music I can never find any better than Venice*. [42] These are the words of Nietzsche – an admirer of Venice, seduced by the city. In the next sentence he immediately added: *I do not know how to draw any distinction between tears and music. I do not know how to think either of joy or the South without a shudder of fear*. [43] These are already the sentiments of Nietzsche the ecstatic and the nostalgic, author of a project for a strangely beautiful image of a town in which tears added to music produce a state of solace and in which beauty possesses an inevitable underpinning of horror.

Venetian music. What is its essence, what could be its perfect *audible landscape*, to recall a phrase from Rilke? Philippe Sollers wrote a subjective *Dictionnaire amoureux de Venise*, whose considerable part, unfortunately, proved to be a disappointment since it was painfully predictable (cf. such insightful entries as: "Byron", "Casanova", "La Fenice", "Stravinsky", etc.). In it he included a number of musical entries. In this tedious catalogue of well-worn images of

Venice the sound emanation of the town appears to be – depressingly obviously – Vivalidi. V like Venice and V like Vivaldi. One cannot hide the fact that this is even quite correct. *If there exists the spirit of a place and a perfectly harmonised spirit of the time then this is it. Two, three chords and we are already on the spot, on the lagoon, between the sky and water, in a sailing ship, a boat*. [44] *De gustibus non disputandum est*, and the same is true for visions.

It would be difficult to be ignorant of Vivaldi's birthplace and the town where he wrote his music. Just as it would be difficult to assess his *oeuvre* (still little known, and if so then in a caricature form). When I say: Venice, when I seem to be fingering this sound, and when I listen to the harmonics surrounding it I cannot help the fact that I do not hear Vivaldi. I do hear, however, Mahler's *Adagietto* from Symphony no. 5, and I see Dirk Bogarde on a deck arranging a blanket on his lap, the mercury sheen of the lagoon ... What is that you say? That it was not written in Venice or with Venice in mind? That is meaningless. The force of great art consists of the fact that it supplies a vision capable of overcoming us completely and imposing itself with some sort of mysterious ruthlessness. We succumb to it, offering no resistance,

softly. He who has seen the first takes of Visconti's film is lost for always. This initial phrase, slowly (*sehr langsam*!) unwinding as if a scroll of transparent fabric, those *crescenda* lost in thought, those dark swirls of Mahler's *Adagietto* – all this will follow him step by step. [45] The downbeats will always bring to mind Venice and evoke from memory its dark trace. We may defend ourselves, but this is always stronger than us: already after several phrases "Esmeralda" will emerge from the milky mist, in a moment

Aschenbach will cross the empty square where a bonfire will be burning, and thus, due to dark fatalism, he will make his way to the very end towards a chasm, and we shall follow him.

3.

For years, I have been convinced that Mahler enjoyed a monopoly as regards Venice until I saw and then heard a record titled: *Wagner e Venezia*!, made by the Uri Caine Ensemble. A *rara avis*, a true rarity, an audiophile's treat. [46] The corrugated cardboard of the navy blue cover, the embossed golden letters, and in the middle a reproduction of a painting by Antonio Rotta: *The Fiancée in a Gondola* (ca. 1880). In the foreground - the outline of a young woman. Her profile and décolletage glimmer. She reclines in a dark cabin (such gondolas were still used at the end of the nineteenth century) and floats on the lagoon. Sunrise seeps through a rectangular opening and the contours of the island of San Giorgio Maggiore (the same as in the scenario by Tarkovsky!) rise in the distance. [47]

In the booklet attached to the record carefully chosen excerpts of texts by Nietzsche and Wagner are accompanied by a series of excellent photographs from the turn of the nineteenth century. *Il teatro Camploy*, from 1876, *Rio del Santa Caterina* (1870), *Piazzetta* (ca. 1900), *Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi* (1855), *Grande gondola* (ca. 890), a portrait of Richard Wagner (1882) and especially the striking *Gran Caffè Quadri* (ca. 1900). In the foreground – five persons at café tables. Judging by their clothes it is early spring or late autumn. The men are wearing double breasted coats and bowler hats. A lady in a hat, with a veil across her face, holds a parasol resting on the ground. Between them

-a boy in a coat and a cap. Further to the right – a waiter in a black jacket, a white shirt with a stand-up collar, and a bow tie. He holds a tea kettle supported on a white napkin draped on the other hand. In the background - three men deep in conversation. Above them - a lampshade. Light coloured (white?) drapes hang from the arcades filling the space between the columns. All stood still for a moment at a sign given by the photographer, with the boy smiling and gazing straight at the lens and thus at us. I mention these reproductions in such detail because they are not ordinary illustrations to texts contained in the booklet. Here the past gains shape. Let us repeat after Barthes his favourite mantra: the photograph says predominantly: *what is*. It freezes the past in a frame.

Wagner first arrived in Venice in 1858 and stayed several months. Interestingly, although he immediately appreciated its charm he found the town boring. Then he changed his mind; here, he wrote the score of *Tristan und Isolde*. Regularly at 11 a.m. he drank coffee at Caffè Quadri. Wagner savoured Venice and breathed it. He received all the impulses produced by the town. This is the way in which he described in his autobiography one of his most intense Venetian experiences: *As I was returning home late one night on the gloomy canal, the moon appeared suddenly and illuminated marvellous palaces and the tall figure of my gondolier towering above the stern of the gondola, slowly moving his huge sweep. Suddenly he uttered a deep wail, not unlike the cry of an animal; the cry gradually gained in strength and formed itself after a long-drawn "Oh!" into the simple musical exclamation: Venezia! This was followed by other sounds of which I have no distinct recollection, as I was much moved at the time. Such were the impressions that to me appeared the most characteristic of Venice during my stay there, and they remained with me until the completion of the second act of Tristan, and possibly even suggested to me the long-drawn wail of the shepherd's horn at the beginning of the third act.* [48]

The composer lived in Venice twice in 1882 and then on his last journey ever. He was not a resident of Venice by birth but, so to speak, by death. Death in Venice: he died on 13 February 1883 at the Vendramin-Calergi Palace on Canal Grande. As John Norwich noticed with thinly concealed irony: For him death in Venice would be fitting. [49]

There are two reasons for the greatness of the *Wagner e Venezia* record and my delight with it. The first is an intelligent and original concept for a creative lesson about the music. The pianist Uri Caine rearranged fragments of Wagner scores, i.a. *Tristan*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, and *The Master-Singers of Nuremberg* for a string quartet and a piano with the addition of an accordion (sic!). In other words, for a café *ensemble*. Contrary to appearances, this decision is by no means frivolous nor is it brutally iconoclastic. It is, however, well aware of the provocative game played with tradition. [50] Caine admitted that he wanted to transpose the bombastic texture of Wagner's music into a lighter form so as to extract the qualities embedded in it: beauty and kitsch, harmonising so well with the popular image of Venice. [51] He achieved a brilliant de-construction (I firmly stress the creative momement) of Wagner's massive works. The modest sound texture, the chamber *instrumentarium* resound with intense lyricism, but also with the sentimental frosting of certain Wagnerian compositions. This is not an accusation – I am simply stating a fact. Here, the musicians oppose Nietzsche's oft-cited malicious opinions about the chronic decadence and morbidity of Wagner's music.

The effects? It suffices to listen to *Liebestod*, excellently rendered by Mark Feldman's violin, or the beautifully performed overture to *Lohengrin*. Just as overwhelming is the *Ride of the Valkyries* executed by violins chiefly in the *pizzicato* technique, thus altering those kilos of sound from the original score into delicate tulle. In turn, the unorthodox use of an accordion introduces a distinctly ironic distance.

The second reason concerns an ostensibly secondary issue, that of the site of the recording. In this case, it turned out not be minor. A small part of the record was made at the Metropol Hotel along Riva degli Schiavoni, but predominantly in the Wagnerian (naturally, shared with Byron, Balzac, Proust...) Gran Cafe Quadri! More important, this is a live recording, a circumstance that cannot be over-estimated. The project was clearly concerned not only with historical deconstruction, but also with taking into account the authentic emotions of the listeners and registering them on the recording together with the genuine sounds of the Venetian phonosphere. Already the very beginning of the record is excellent: unidentified murmurs, partly heard voices, individual instruments, the sound of a water glass or a wineglass; after a longer while, without any previous preparation, this magma produces the beguiling *Liebestod* cantilena. The closing fragment of the overture to *The Master-Singers of Nuremberg* is simply a miracle: the last echo of the string instruments is overlaid by an increasingly powerful chime of bells from a nearby *campanile!* Such effects cannot be planned – they are a blessed occurrence or a wonderful decision of fate.

All this is the reason why for several years I have regarded *Wagner e Venezia* - always as an entity together with its iconographic side -as the most incredible and, from another viewpoint, the most credible evocation of Venice. This is a time machine strongly affecting the senses, a poignantly intensive creation of the space in which one would like to reside. Listening to s u c h Wagner I allow myself to be seduced and transported in time already from the very first sounds. Nostalgia

is the child of memory and desire. Due to the melancholic hue and dominating sadness it has much in common with melancholy but is not tantamount to it. Melancholy is prone to enclosure within a chalk circle of depression and contemplation. Nostalgia, on the other hand, contains motion to the outside. Nostalgia is an emotional movement with a dual nature: it includes the initial sweetness of returning (*nóstos*) to the place of longing and the final bitterness of recognising (*álgos*) the situation in which we actually are. Yes, for a moment all is beautiful, but when the last sounds grow silent the dream comes to an end. Puddles outside the window are not Venetian canals.

4.

The more intensely I think about it the more often I experience a curious thought: perhaps Venice is present the most when it is not longer next to us. When it is not an object of direct perception, but emerges from *tempus praesens* and changes into the past tense. When it withdraws and becomes separated from us with an invisible windowpane. It settles down in dark niches of memory and waits, to return in a reminiscence, sometimes unexpected and puzzling, caused by a banal event such as an uneven pavement (the case of the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*) or a familiar sequence of sounds. It is then that memory becomes a magnifying glass enlarging our emotions and imbues the phantom image with the density of a real vision. We see, therefore, a strangely clear image, a *sui generis* distillate, a world devoid of accidental additions characteristic for the "here and now" perception. This is an astonishing paradox: the unreal begins to exist more intensely than the real. It is the present that becomes illusion.

Venice, just as Nietzsche wished it to be, is music. But he forgot to add that it is also another name for nostalgia. A perfect synonym. Venice, the adopted homeland of many, [52] is longing enclosed in stone. A longing for home, although

the latter is strange, stands on water, and everyone arranges it according to his wishes and expectations.

Here is a photograph taken probably in 1991. An October morning. A chill from the lagoon. The sky, all tattered shades of grey, resembles pigeon feathers. I sit at a table in Quadri, with my trousers rolled up, because the square is full of water. Venice is flooded, with water at knee level. Behind me, in blurred contours, a piano trio is playing. I keep hearing the same sounds, although indistinct. Something light, probably a café evergreen, some non-invasive waltz. The space next to the tables, which resemble moored boats, is almost empty. The music has totally dissolved itself in the humid air. This situation is somewhat absurd and inexpressibly beautiful. The musicians are playing for no one, or perhaps for the one who will evoke this insignificant event sometime in the future, but neither they nor he know this. Right now, I am distant from that particular moment and myself. When I gaze at the past perfect – a balding, forty-five year old man [53] – I feel strange. The moment was luminescent but I experienced a lump in my throat. Actually, this is an appropriate reaction. Pursuing his hermeneutic of tears, composed of aphorisms, Emil Cioran defined Venice as *a town of tears caught between doubts and dreams.* [54]

If I am not wrong, it is exactly such an ambivalent experience that Joseph Brodsky wrote about in the last passage of his *Watermark*, the most tender of all Venetian elegies on departure: *By rubbing water, this city improves time's looks, beautifies the future. That's what the role of this city in the universe is. Because the city is static while we are moving. The tear is proof of that. Because we go and beauty stays. Because we are headed for the future, while beauty is the eternal present. The tear is an attempt to remain, to stay behind, to merge with the city. But that's against the rules. The tear is a throwback, a tribute of the future to the past. Or else it is the result of subtracting the greater from the lesser: beauty from man. The same goes for love, because one's love, too, is greater than oneself.* [55]

Endnotes

1 H. James, *Venice. An Early Impression*, in: idem, *Italian Hours*, ed. with an introduction by J. Auchard, Pennsylvania State University, 1992, p. 53. A meticulous analysis of the image of Venice in texts by H. James in: T. Tanner, *Venice Desired*, Oxford 1992, pp.157-209.

2 J. Brodsky, *Znak wodny*, transl. S. Barańczak, Kraków 1993, p. 61, 64-64.

3 E. Bieńkowska, *Co mówią kamienie Wenecji?*, Gdańsk 1999 (further as: CMKW).

4 The rhetoric of the descriptions of painting in this book is a topic for a separate sketch.

5 In order to become convinced it suffices to compare *Co mowia kamienie Wenecji?* with Joanna Pollakówna's *Weneckie tęsknoty*, whose major part also deals with Venetian painting. The difference is fundamental: Bieńkowska wrote about Venetian painting, but never neglected a wider perspective: intensive enrootment in an incomparable cultural-civilizational-aesthetic project that she considers Venice to have been. Pollakówna, on the other hand, is much closer to the standard narration of an historian of art following the biographical entanglements of painters and the aesthetic quality of described canvases. Cf. J. Pollakówna, *Weneckie tęsknoty. O malarstwie i malarzach Renesansu*, Warszawa 2003.

6 M. Merlau-Ponty, *Oko i umysł*, selected, prep. and introduction by S. Cichowicz, Gdańsk 1996, p. 27.

7 On such aspects of some of Giorgione's canvases – evading rational analysis – see: George Steiner: *I have already referred to the enigmas of silence in Giorgione, to Giorgione's ability to „paint silence". I suspect that this particular gift relates closely to his renditions of duration, of suspended narrative. Where Giorgione's song and musical instruments are involved, the play of duration against time lies obviously to hand. But how can one account for the wonderfully translucid presence, vibrato of distinct, though related, gradations or planes of time in the painting known as*

The Three Philosophers? *By what spiritual-technical means does Giorgione initimate the muted menace of worldly time, of time charged with incipient silence* so different from the pastoral-mythological irreversibility of time and the domination of the continuum in the background of *The Tempest?*, G. Steiner, *Gramatyki tworzenia*, transl. J. Łoziński, Poznań 2004, pp. 215-216.

8 On the still insufficiently recognised beginnings of Venice cf. G. Benzoni, *The Art of Venice and Its 'Forma Urbis'*, in: *Venice. Art & Architecture*, ed. G. Romanelli, Koln 1997, pp. 12-13; J. Morris, *The World of Venice*, New York 1988, pp. 17-20; W. Szyszkowski, *Wenecja. Dzieje Republiki 726-1797*, Toruń 1994, pp. 6-9.

9 G. Steiner, op. cit., p. 31.

10 H. G. Gadamer, *Aktualność piękna. Sztuka jako gra, symbol i święto*, transl. K.Krzemień, Warszawa 1993, p. 43.

11 At this stage I apply the concept introduced by Vladimir Toporov, who in his dazzling reconstruction of the image of St. Petersburg in Russian literature applied the term: "the St. Petersburg text" to designate all statements pertaining to the town. *"The Petersburg Text" is not an ordinary mirror of the town, enhancing the effect. It is a construction with whose assistance one achieves a transition* a realibus ad realiora, *a transformation of material reality into spiritual values*, cf. V. Toporov, *Idea petersburska w historii Rosji. Petersburg-Moskwa*, in: idem, *Miasto i mit*, selected, transl. and introduction by B. Żyłko, Gdańsk 2000, pp. 49-50. In the footnotes Toporov also mentioned the St. Petersburg-Venice paralell known in Russian literature.

12 *The Autobiographies of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. Murray, London 1896, p. 268.

13 M. Mc Carthy, *The Stones of Florence and Venice Observed*, London 1972, pp. 174-175.

14 R. Debray, *Contre Venise*, Paris 1995, p. 22.

15 Ibid., p. 23.

16 S. Bayley, *Whose Venice do we want to preserve? And why, when*, "Independent", 14 April 2004.

17 Cf. F. T. Marinetti, *Against Past-Loving Venice*, in: idem, *Selected Writings*, London 1972.

18 S. Bayley, op. cit.

19 The original appeared in a periodical issued in Munich: *Der Kunstwart, Halbmonatsschau über Dichtung, Theater, Musik, bildende und angewandte Kunst*. Translation into the Polish in: G. Simmel, *Most i drzwi. Wybór esejów*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, Warszawa 2006, pp. 177-183. Further as: MiD, with the page number.

20 Cf. French edition: G. Simmel, *Rome, Florence, Venise*, transl. Ch. David, Paris 1998.

21 Lukacs described Simmel's miniatures of cities as excellent examples of "Impressionistic philosophy", i.e. a method in accordance with which the author attained the intended effect with several rapid movements of the pen; cf. Ch. David, *Notes sur l'impressionnisme philosophique de Georg Simmel*, in: Simmel, *Rome, Florence Venise*, p. 57.

22 The outlines of this dispute were skillfully reconstructed by, e.g. M. Rzepińska, *Historia koloru w dziejach malarstwa europejskiego*, Kraków 1983, second edition, pp. 272-289.

23 M. McCarthy, op. cit., p. 174.

24 P. van der Meer de Walcheren, *Dziennik nawróconego*, transl. Z. Starowieyska-Morstinowa, Kraków 1982, p. 61.

25 G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą 1973-1979*, Warszawa 1990, pp. 217-218.

26 Y. Andrukhovych, *Perwersja*, transl. O. Hnatiuk and R. Rusnak, Wołowiec 2003, p. 59, 61(here: transl. and introduction by Michael M. Naydan, Northwestern UP 2005, p. 52, 54). Further as: P together with page number.

27 Mentioning the origin of the novel and difficulties with finding a suitable language Andrukhovych particularly *underlined the enormity of Venetian logorrhoea: During my first stay in Venice - in 1992, when I spent only 16 hours there – I promised myself that one day I shall write a Venetian novel. For many years I grappled, rejecting successive ideas and was terrified by the awareness that Venice has been the topic of quite a few novels. Who needs another one? Finally, I discovered a suitable form*; *Srebrny sygnet. Z Jurijem Andruchowyczem rozmawia Jan Strzałka*, "Tygodnik Powszechny", no. 32:2003.

28 The words uttered by Perfetsky in the interview can be recognised as an expression of the convictions harboured by Andrukhovych: *Will there be a book about Venice? - That would really be a crazy idea! To write about Venice? Can you write anything else about Venice? After thousands upon thousands and thousands of the pages already written? No, I'm nobody's fool. Sorry.* [P, 244]

29 The semantics of personal names in the novel as well as the extraordinary invention of Andrukhovych's terminology are material for a separate essay.

30 Much seems to indicate that this concept, at first glance purely literary, was preceded by an original model. An opera by Harrison Birtwistle: *The Masks of Orpheus*, premiered in 1986. It took ten years to write and the author of the extremely bombastic, and pretentious libretto, convoluted to the limits of the absurd, was one Peter Zinovieff! It does not take much to see his reflection in Kulikoff and the paranoiac libretto of *Orpheus in Venice* as a parody of the irritating grandiloquence of *The Masks of Orpheus*. Competent commentaries by musicologists on the opera by Birtwistle-Zinovieff additionally confirm the above supposition: *This work represents the conception of the twentieth-century total theatre.* (...) *Zinovieff's libretto alone totals almost seventy pages and contains, alongside the main text of the three acts, a copious commentary by the author, a detailed description of the structure of the work, an explanation of the nature of the rites, a description of the stage design together with drawings, numerous tables showing the construction of the acts and scenes as well as an appendix containing the principles of the "Orphic language"*, cf. Z. Helman, *Metamorfozy mitu Orfeusza w muzyce scenicznej XX wieku*, in: *Mit Orfeusza. Inspiracje i reinterpretacje w europejskiej tradycji artystycznej*, ed. S. Żerańska-Kominek, Gdańsk 2003, pp. 292-293. This is a rather neutral description but already the author of a monograph about the musical transformations of the myth of Orpheus was less kind and wrote outright that Zinovieff's libretto read as a dramatic work *may seem pretentious as well as confused*, W. Mellers, *The Masks of Orpheus. Seven Stages in the Story of European Music*, Manchester 1987, p. 168.

31 This was the name granted to Venice by the historian W. H. McNeill, depicting the town on the lagoon as a centre in which Western culture met the Eastern element and a place where thoughts, ideas, commodities, etc. flowed in two directions across the centuries Cf. W. H. McNeill, *The Hinge of Europe, 1081-1797*, Chicago and London 1974.

32 A. Malczewski, *Pieśń masek*, in: *Maski*, selection, prep.

and ed. M. Janion and S. Rosiek, Gdańsk 1986, vol. 1, p. 7.

33 Debray, op. cit., p. 11.

34 By way of example: an almost bottomless treasury of secondary words, banalities, and obvious statements about Venice is Erika Jong's *Serenissima* (transl. E. Horodyska, Wrocław 1992). This book, supposedly admired by enthusiasts (although it is hard to believe this) looks like it was appears to be constructed according to a "do-it-yourself" kit supplied to the author; all the elements used to portray the town are ready-made. Here is a brief fragment from the very opening: *City of plagues and brief liaisons, city of lingering deaths and incendiary loves, city of chimeras, nightmares, pigeons, bells*. And so on, to the very end. Reading this book prior to becoming familiar with *Perverzion* is highly instructive and cognitively enriching. I guarantee that the fun will be even greater.

35 A. Tarkowski, *Scenariusze*, vol. II, Warszawa 1998, pp.103-104.

36 Tarkovsky's notes in his *Diaries*, dating from the time he was working on the film, make it possible to propose a rather trivial but probable reason: money. A considerable part of the notes, apart from remarks about the progress made on the screenplay, also describes the struggle waged by both authors – Tarkovsky and Tonino Guerra – to obtain funds, the necessity of eliminating certain scenes from the film or their reduction, etc. Cf. A. Tarkowski, *Dzienniki*, transl. and prep. S. Kuśmierczyk, Warszawa 1998, pp. 190-276.

37 A. Tarkowski, *Scenariusze*, p. 104.

38 Ibid., p. 103.

39 L. Batkin, *Czym jest nostalgia?*, "Kwartalnik Filmowy" no. 9-10:1995, p. 212.

40 Z. Benedyktowicz, *Powrót do domu. Tarkowski i Kantor*, "Konteksty" no. 2:2008, pp.14-27.

41 Listen to this quartet in a unique performance by the Belcea Quartet (B. Britten, *String Quartets 1,2&3, 3 Divertimenti*, EMI 7243 5 59768 2, 2005)

42 F. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo. Jak się stajemy tym, czym jesteśmy*, Kraków 2002, p. 59.

43 Ibid.

44 Ph. Sollers, *Dictionnaire amoureux de Venise*, Paris 2004, p. 460.

45 The intuitions of Bohdan Pociej about the *Adagietto* contain an even more apt reflection on the merge of the introduction from *Death in Venice* and the accompanying sound: *In this scene the entire epic-dramatic symphonic quality is supplanted by the pure expression of beauty suffused with love. Here music and its melodic speech are governed (…) by the fluid rhythm of emotion, a delicately swaying movement ceased by a sigh and swelling with intense longing for completeness. This is an expressive mirage of happiness, painful due to its elusiveness*, B. Pociej, *Szkice z późnego romantyzmu*, Kraków 1978, pp. 121-122.

46 Uri Caine Ensemble, *Wagner e Venezia* (Winter&Winter 910 013-2, 1997).

47 Since in *The Venice Text* everything is connected, it seems suitable to mention upon this occasion that the book: *Co mówią kamienie Wenecji* (see: chapter I) begins with a comparison of the view of the town with reality, and the gaze of the tourist is focused on San Giorgio; in turn, the conference about the post-carnival nonsense of the world (see: chapter III) takes place on the same island…

48 R. Wagner, *Mein leben*, Munchen 1911, vol. II, p. 684.

49 J. J. Norwich, *Paradise of Cities. Venice and Its Nineteenth-century Visitors*, London 2003, p. 141.

50 Caine treated in a similar way - and with an equally excellent outcome - music by Mahler, cf. Gustaw Mahler/Uri Caine, *Primal light* (Winter&Winter, 910 004-2, 1997). Admittedly, the method applied in both recordings did not always pass the test, for instance, in Bach's *The Goldberg Variations* (Winter&Winter, 910 054-2, 2000); here, Caine's reconstructions proved totally unconvincing.

51 Cf. M. Zwerin, *An 'interpretive musicologist' takes on Mahler. Uri Caine, the classical jazzman*, "International Herald Tribune", 13 February 2002.

52 Simmel was so wrong to write with distaste: *although our soul can thus find in Venice an adventure, it cannot build a home*, Simmel, *Most i drzwi*, p. 183.

53 Actually, 47 years old, but as we know one should never interfere with quotations!

54 E. Cioran, *Święci i łzy*, transl. and preface by I. Kania, Warszawa 2003, p. 140.

55 J. Brodski, *Znak wodny*, transl. S. Barańczak, Kraków 1993, p. 105.