

“THE EUROPEAN CULTURE IS SINKING LIKE VENICE”. ITALY IN MEMORIES OF LATE JAROSŁAW IWASZKIEWICZ

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Travels to Italy occupy a unique place in the works of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (1894-1980), which is not insignificant, as this collection of reportages was published in 1977, shortly before the author's death. The Polish writer commemorated therein his peregrinations on the Italian land, which he visited repeatedly over the course of half a century, for diplomatic, artistic and simply tourist purposes. In the homeland of Virgil and Petrarch, he admired beautiful sights, ancient monuments and works of art, met talented artists and participated in cultural events. At times, he also looked there for inspiration for his own works.¹

A first glance at this volume reveals numerous references to the tradition of Italian travels and the manners of their description.² Firstly, the title of the book itself is reminiscent of the expeditions through Italy that were

¹ See H. Kalinowska, *Sztuka włoska w liryce Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza* [en. Italian Art in the Lyric of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz], “Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej w Bydgoszczy” [en. Scientific Papers of the University of Education in Bydgoszcz] 1985, v. 24/9, p. 111; M. Peroń, *Sztuka włoska w twórczości Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza* [en. Italian Art in the Works of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz], in: *Polak we Włoszech, Włoch w Polsce. Sztuka i historia* [en. Poles in Italy, Italians in Poland. Art and History], ed. M. Wrześniak, A. Bender, Warsaw 2015, p. 197; *Ibid.*, „Gdzie doczesność przecina się z wiecznością”. *Sztuka włoska w twórczości Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza* [en. ‘Where temporality intersects with eternity’. Italian Art in the Works of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz], „Studia Teologiczne: Białystok-Drohiczyń-Łomża” [en. Theological Studies: Białystok-Drohiczyń-Łomża] 2023, v. 41, pp. 237-238.

² Iwaszkiewicz's confrontation with the descriptive convention present in travel literature is mentioned, e.g. Olga Płaszczewska. See O. Płaszczewska, *Podróż włoska jako dialog z literaturą* [en. The Italian Journey as a Dialogue with Literature], in: *Archipelag porównań*.

undertaken in past centuries to supplement education and to learn about cultural treasures and develop aesthetic taste. The book consists of eight sections devoted to Italian cities (Venice, Rome, Naples, Bari, Amalfi and Conegliano) and regions (Tuscany, Sicily). This form is associated with ancient itineraries with a calendar and geographical arrangement. Following a centuries-old tradition, Iwaszkiewicz described Italian landscapes, cultural centers and monuments. He mentioned castles, art galleries and churches, and also ancient ruins. The writer depicted artistic objects – paintings, sculptures and buildings (their architecture and decoration) and recalled various literary works (his own or those of other authors). He admired the artistry of famous artists, such as: Giorgione, Michelangelo, Raphael and Caravaggio. In addition, he confronted information taken from guidebooks and descriptions of the peregrinations of his predecessors (e.g. August Moszyński's diary) with his own experiences.³

In *Travels to Italy*, Iwaszkiewicz also devoted a substantial part to digressions on relations with family and friends, civilizational, cultural and artistic changes.⁴ Aleksandra Achtelik rightly states that “this (...) collection documents the writer's Italian journey in two dimensions, since, on the one hand, it constitutes somewhat of a journey of the author's memory, which recalls impressions and experiences from his numerous trips to the Apennine Peninsula and, at the same time, becomes a description of the phenomenon of travel and traveling”.⁵ In turn, the author himself saw his work as a kind

Szkie komparatystyczne [en. The Archipelago of Comparisons. Comparative Sketches], ed. M. Cieśla-Korytowska, Cracow 2007, pp. 118-120.

³ See A. Giełdoń-Paszek, *Obywatel Parnasu. Sztuki piękne w życiu i twórczości Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza* [en. Citizen of Parnassus. Fine Arts in the Life and Works of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz], Katowice 2014, p. 234; M. Peroń, *Sztuka włoska...* [en. Italian Art...] op. cit., pp. 201-204; *Ibid.*, „Gdzie doczesność przecina się z wiecznością”. *Sztuka włoska...* [en. ‘Where temporality intersects with eternity’. Italian Art...] op. cit., pp. 242, 245-246, 252.

⁴ Similar reflections by Iwaszkiewicz appear in his other works related to Italian travels, including short stories – See G. Ritz, *Podróż i wspomnienie. Opowiadania włoskie i ukraińskie* [en. Travel and Recollection. Italian and Ukrainian Short Stories], in: *Ibid.*, *Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. Pogranicza nowoczesności* [en. Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. Borderlands of Modernity], Cracow 1998, and also in the essay *Klucze* [en. Keys] – See T. Wójcik, *Pociecha mieszka w pięknie. Studia o twórczości Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza* [en. The Comfort Lives in Beauty. Studies on the works of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz], Warsaw 1998.

⁵ See A. Achtelik, *Reporterskie zmagania z obrazami pamięci: wokół „podróży do Włoch” Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza* [en. Reporters' Struggles with the Images of Memory: Around

of synthesis of his own oeuvre – “a synthesis of poems and prose, memories of Ukraine and Russia, surges of anger and delight, images of Denmark and France, images of the beloved Stawisko (...)” – also as a “tenuous fulfillment of an ambitious principal intention to leave some trace of himself on Polish soil”.⁶

There are to be found in *Travels to Italy* the certain phrases, typical of early travel writing (e.g. “beautiful Florence”⁷) or literary motifs (e.g. the depiction of Tuscany as the cradle of art⁸), however, the writer was selective and casual in their use. What’s more, Iwaszkiewicz declared that he wanted to “dwell on things usually overlooked by authors-travelers”,⁹ and, as promised, he mentioned lesser-known, but nevertheless significant sites (such as the chapel of St. Isidore in the Basilica of Venice or the chapel of St. Zeno in the Church of St. Praxedes in Rome). On other occasions, he would write about well-known works that he depicted in an unusual way (such as the sculptures from the New Sacristy in the Church of St. Lawrence in Florence). From Iwaszkiewicz’s notes, we learn that, while on Italian soil, he was sometimes sad, depressed and disappointed; he often felt loneliness and longing there. In places dedicated to the Muses (art galleries and theaters), the writer sought solace in goodness and beauty, but found decay and futility. Reading passages of this kind, one gets an impression that he was visiting not necessarily the “mythical” Italy, formerly regarded as a wonderland and treasure trove of art, but rather an entirely different world – one that evokes melancholy, anxiety and a sense of emptiness.¹⁰

Italian motifs appear in a number of Iwaszkiewicz’s literary works, even in his personal texts (*Dzienniki* [en. Diaries]), journalistic ones (*Książka o Sycylii* [en. The Book on Sicily]), prose (*Nowele włoskie* [en. Italian Novellas]) and poetic works (*Metopy z Selinuntu I i II* [en. Metopes of Selinunte I and II]),

the “Travels to Italy” by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz], in: *Wokół reportażu podróżniczego* [en. Around Travel Reportage], v. 2, ed. D. Rott, Katowice 2007, pp. 134-135.

⁶ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Podróże do Włoch* [en. Travels to Italy], Warsaw 2008, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰ See A. Giełdoń-Paszek, op. cit. p. 210; M. Peroń, *Sztuka włoska...* [en. Italian Art...] op. cit., pp. 204-205; *Ibid.*, „*Gdzie doczesność przecina się z wiecznością*”. *Sztuka włoska...* [en. ‘Where temporality intersects with eternity’. Italian Art...] op. cit., p. 246, 252.

Święta Teresa [en. Saint Teresa], *Sano di Pietro*, Benozzo Gozzoli, *Śpiewnik włoski* [en. Italian Songbook], *Sonety sycylijskie* [en. Sicilian Sonnets]). These works often contain descriptions of landscapes, cities and works of art admired and interpreted by the writer. Hanna Kalinowska draws attention that the artifacts seen on Italian soil became a stimulus for the writer to reflect on transience, life and death.¹¹ It should be underlined in this context that the category of ugliness plays a distinctive role in the aesthetic experiences recorded on the pages of the work. In the opinion of Aleksandra Giełdoń-Paszek, in his work, Iwaszkiewicz “redefined beauty, which was a combination of Platonic idealism and pure sensuality”.¹²

The author perceived Italy as a beautiful and rich land, yet believed that it had partly lost its charm, sinking into darkness and decay.¹³ In *Travels to Italy*, the author recalled just one sunny day spent there in September of 1949, noting: “Then – maybe only once in my life – Venice was so golden, warm, there were not that many people and it was much like our life then, very warm and peaceful. Then the cold and clouds came again”.¹⁴ According to the notes, the writer did not enjoy the wonderfulness of the Italian land again. Also, a passage devoted to Tuscany seems to target the illusions of “those (...) who think that an azure sky is always smiling over Italy”.¹⁵

Iwaszkiewicz also described his observations and experiences evoked through contact with Italian monuments. For him, these objects were treasures of art through which he could experience sublimity and beauty through the contact with Italian monuments, however, while reading about his impressions, one can deduce that he often felt disappointed.¹⁶ For example, in his first reportage he wrote:

¹¹ See H. Kalinowska, op. cit., pp. 121-122.

¹² See A. Giełdoń-Paszek, op. cit. p. 218.

¹³ A break with the idealization of Italy also appears in the writer’s other works, at least in his Italian novellas. See J. Święch, „Voci di Roma” Jarosław Iwaszkiewicza, czyli o korzyściach podróży [en. “Voci di Roma” by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, or about the benefits of travel], in: *Nowela, opowiadanie, gawęda. Interpretacje* [en. Novella, short story, chat. Interpretation], ed. K. Bartoszyński, M. Jasińska-Wojtkowska, Warsaw 1974.

¹⁴ J. Iwaszkiewicz, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁶ This peculiar ambivalence in the perception, e.g. of Venice, appears in many of the writer’s works, See D. Prola, *Venezia nella Poesia di Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz*, “Italica Wratislaviensia” 2021, v. 12/1, p. 178.

Walking in Venice is always a sigh, rising and falling over countless bridges. But when one stands on the shores of a sea area, one does not sigh then, but breathes fully. And should I confess this? Sometimes there is a desire to liberate oneself. The houses of Venice run after us like chasing skeletons – and we would like to escape from death to life, from the city to the sea. This city is truly dead.¹⁷

Iwaszkiewicz wove his own observations about Italian culture and art into the narrative, and also shared feelings and emotions, such as: grief, fear, sadness, nostalgia. On the subject of Venice – for centuries hailed as the “city of myths”,¹⁸ formerly the jewel of the Adriatic sea – he noted: “It’s a pity I didn’t write a longer piece dedicated to Venice, maybe I would have gotten over the nightmare it has always been for me. ‘The city of pink skeletons’”.¹⁹ In turn, after a conversation with an Italian in Florence, he stated: “Then, for the first time, I encountered – not with a saying – but with the feeling that the world is so terrible. I felt it fully. And it was in Florence, beautiful Florence”.²⁰ Similarly, Pisa proved to be a source of disappointment: “The bizarre view of Pisa behind a clear net of rain has a particularly melancholic effect. Somehow I placed myself there (in the car, I think?) and looked at those memorabilia of a greatness that did not come, did not materialize. Pisa’s efforts to be “great” are efforts as dramatic as they are unsuccessful”.²¹

Similar information about the Polish poet’s experiences appears in passages associated with numerous art galleries. The traveler visited representative establishments of a given city, he was interested in their appearance and collections, including paintings or sculptures by eminent Italian masters. However, he often assessed these institutions negatively. This is how he recapitulated a visit to a famous gallery in Venice:

The Accademia delle Belle Arti in pouring rain loses all its charm. You simply can’t see anything, and Giorgione’s incredible *Tempesta* is hung in addition, where you can’t see anything and it is impossible to find a place from where it

¹⁷ J. Iwaszkiewicz, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁸ See P. Ackroyd, *Venice: Pure City*, New York 2011, p. 344.

¹⁹ J. Iwaszkiewicz, op. cit., p. 41.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

²¹ Ibid., p. 69.

wouldn't shine. I can't find also the paintings Cima da Conegliano, or maybe they just don't impress me as much as they used to.²²

The writer found the interior of the Venetian gallery to be neglected and cluttered, reminiscent of a labyrinth or catacombs, which was probably also related to a sense of his own transience. The masterpieces collected there appeared dead to him, giving only an illusory sense of beauty or a mere substitute for past allurements: "without any special admiration I stand before Giorgione's *Tempest*, hung, I repeat, like that nothing can be seen through the glass covering the painting, and formerly I would shiver at the sight of a steel-encrusted knight and a half-naked woman nursing a child, between whom there blossomed a silent, because distant, in endlessness closed lightning".²³ Iwaszkiewicz summed up his visit to the gallery with a critical opinion. At the end of his note, he mentioned only one room approvingly:

A visit in the Venetian gallery which calls itself the Academy of Fine Arts provokes various reflections nowadays. The Academy itself is cramped, badly lit and collects miles of canvases by Venetian painters whose coloring is much talked about, but whose paintings, gathered in such quantities, badly conserved, badly framed, badly presented, where the coloring has been preserved unevenly, give the impression of a storage of unnecessary junk. A rather depressing sensation. Naturally, there is a small room where Bellini's paintings are hanging, small and extraordinarily beautiful, excellently preserved and presumably skillfully restored; this room is the only consolation for a modern tourist who has stumbled in here.²⁴

It should be mentioned that Iwaszkiewicz frequently presented works of art related to the themes of suffering and death. In his description of the painting *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* by Vittore Carpaccio, he included a bitter reflection referring to the cataclysms of 20th-century history: "A terrifying painting. I had not seen a reproduction or photograph of it anywhere, and I had not known that Carpaccio had painted such a work. The painting is reminiscent of photographs of the concentration camps at the time of their liberation. For us, it is a renewal of humanity's most terrifying nightmares: times

²² Ibid., p. 20.

²³ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

of decline and degeneration".²⁵ However, in a passage dedicated to the trip to Pisa, the author mentioned works of art destroyed during the Second World War, whose reconstruction was attempted. He noted here: "The famous fresco *The Triumph of Death* survived. It is not known who painted it: Orcagna, Traini, Lorenzetti? None of these artists' character matches this powerful painting, which still speaks to us today with its inner truth. Even more so now, when next to it everything has become ruin and destruction".²⁶

Of particular interest is also the passage concerning the museum in Florence, where the traveler admired Michelangelo's sculptures, which prompted him to share his personal reflections on spirituality, suffering and transience. Here we find a moving confession of the bitter sense of irreversible loss of youth²⁷:

(...) I have never been more aware of the fact that the space of almost half-century separates my first visit to this place – from my visit today. How little I resemble this David today, who is so sure of himself, so triumphant over life, so *par excellence* young.

Life has treated me relatively kindly, it has not trampled me. But the thing is that old age is always a disaster. Always a tarnishing of all hopes and fulfilments too, because in old age one sees the nothingness and the little value of those things, even of those dreams that have come true in life.²⁸

There are also many descriptions of sacred interiors in these texts. Iwaszkiewicz enjoyed visiting famous temples. He supplemented the information about sacred buildings with his own observations and comments, and referred to his own creative and reading experiences. For example, in the context of St. Mark's Basilica, he noted: "The interior of St. Mark's is, for me, so full of literature, also from my own experiences and from reading, that I can no longer have an attitude to it as something new. It is obscured by Blok's poems as well as my own ones, by that Salome which I see above all and first, foremost of all the mosaics".²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁷ The opposition of youth and old age is one of the more significant in the writer's prose. See e.g. Z. Mokranowska, *Młodość i starość. Studia o twórczości Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza* [en. Youth and Old Age. Studies on the Works of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz], Katowice 2009.

²⁸ J. Iwaszkiewicz, op. cit., pp. 76-78.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

In contrast, he found the Basilica of the Assumption of Mary (*Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari*) abandoned and neglected. It reminded him more of a museum rather than a sacred building. One can infer from the note that the Polish poet wandered around the church as if it were a gallery with lots of exhibits, but those objects were mainly grave monuments. The traveler was particularly interested in the tomb of Paolo Savelli, where a statue of the *condottiero* had been placed. He also admired the *Assumption of the Virgin* painting by Titian. Finally, he shared an ambivalent impression about the interior of the church, which he considered a place that in a bizarre way “defects” art with an earthly disorder:

In the Frari church – enormous, powerful, dusty and appearing as if forgotten by the priests – there is always disorder. (...) All those huge and heavily dusted monuments are set up temporarily, it seems, as if painterly ladders attached to the walls for renovation purposes. (...) And this magnificent, mature woman, (...) those apostles who stand below and see the magnificent, purple robe rising, losing nothing in the heavens of its purple shadow, also bear some resemblance to the untidy trowels, shovels, lime, sand and mortar abandoned on the ground. All of this together is phenomenal.³⁰

In a similar way Iwaszkiewicz described the cathedral complex in Pisa.³¹ He also left an extensive description of the Medici tombstones in the New Sacristy in the Church of St Lawrence in Florence, particularly impressed by the remarkable sculptures by Michelangelo. Notes on his encounter with famous works of sepulchral art attest to the fact that they became a source of deep metaphysical and existential experiences for the writer:³²

Fear of nothingness, anxiety is felt in the sacristy of the St Lawrence, where two pensive giants also wish to speak to us. We would have spoken to them eagerly, carried on a courteous and fragrant *sacra conversazione* [en. sacred conversation], if there were no superhuman masks that spread out beside these giants. The Night that falls asleep and asks “not to be awakened”, and the Day that rises. The gaze of that Day, rising out of nothingness, is like a glimpse

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 24-26.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 68-69.

³² Iwaszkiewicz's experiences with regard to Michelangelo's sculptures are mentioned, e.g. in Małgorzata Peroń. See M. Peroń, *Sztuka włoska...* [en. Italian Art...] op. cit., pp. 216-217.

of outer space that suddenly makes its appearance to the lying man. A gaze over the horizon that pierces us with a tremble and under whose radiance we feel a sacred tremor take over us, this gaze stopped at the point where temporality intersects with eternity.³³

It should be mentioned that the Polish poet commemorated many temples during his stay in Rome, such as the Basilica of St. Augustine. The author said that he enjoyed coming to this temple to admire the exquisite treasures; he considered that the "paintings, frescoes, and canvases gathered here are seemingly a reflection of the radiation of two painters: Raphael and Caravaggio".³⁴ Iwaszkiewicz also described the Chapel of St. Zeno in the Church of St. Praxedes, which is the tomb of Theodora, the mother of Pope Paschalis. He considered this chapel to be "the most beautiful jewel of Rome".³⁵

It is also worth recalling the passage devoted to the temples in Bari. Iwaszkiewicz first mentioned the church of St. Nicholas, where the relics of the saint were deposited and the tomb of Queen Bona was built. The writer also commemorated the Cathedral of St. Sabinus. In the note, he presented the architecture and decor of these buildings, but paid most attention to the resting place of the Polish ruler. He focused on the appearance of the sepulchral monument, which he saw as inappropriate and incongruous for this particular shrine. This work of sepulchral art evoked feelings of sadness, regret and nostalgia in him: "The black and ugly statue of her, erected by "Queen Anne Jagiellon, daughter, sister and wife of the king", is entirely suitable for the Wawel Castle. The idea of moving Queen Bona's ashes to Cracow has been bothering me for a long time. This lonely, alien monument here seems to have strayed from another planet".³⁶

There is a similar atmosphere in the descriptions of cemeteries which Iwaszkiewicz visited during his Italian explorations. The writer found these places to be romantic and full of peculiar charm. He was enticed by the peace and quiet that reigned among the graves. He looked there for monuments of famous people, and also Polish memorabilia. It is worth recalling at this point a note on the cemetery island of St. Michael, located in the Venetian

³³ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

lagoon. Iwaszkiewicz described his search for the grave of the eminent composer, Igor Stravinsky, and even shared his observations on the atmosphere around the tombstone, his own experience of sadness and his reverie about the form of commemoration of the artist: “Stravinsky’s grave is simple. A large slab of white marble, surrounded by a red marble border. It’s pretty. Only the inscription in somewhat pretentious letters. Inscribed: Igor Strawinsky (he never spelled it like that), and nothing more, not even dates”.³⁷

Also worth mentioning is the description of the Polish war cemetery at Casamassima, near Bari, where Polish soldiers from the Second Corps and those who fought at Monte Cassino were buried. In this context, Iwaszkiewicz expressed many difficult experiences and reflections about Polish history.³⁸ He wrote the following note: “The cemetery is larger than the cemetery on Monte Cassino; nearly a thousand soldiers are buried there. And they are looked after by a mosaic of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn. And this romantic inscription, and the cemetery itself, the Polish mournful words seen so close to the grave of the last queen of the Polish empire, made a big impression on me (...)”.³⁹

In turn, in the section dedicated to Tuscany (mainly in the note on San Gimignano) – where the author recalled his own novella *Anna Grazzi* – the theme of loneliness, longing for people who have passed away, and being overwhelmed by the passing of time, resonates strongly. Here, the opposition between the past and the present, which brings destruction, is also sharpened:

San Gimignano from forty years ago pops up in my mind. All such excursions into the past are now just ‘feasts of the dead’. Of the people of that era, of those I was with in San Gimignano, there is no one or almost no one left. And such fear grips me for those who are still there, whom I can love, whom I can see, who can at least faintly conceal my loneliness.⁴⁰

It is also impossible to omit a fragment of a reportage about travels to Rome. Here, Iwaszkiewicz included an account of a concert he attended in 1971 at the Auditorium Conciliazione in the Eternal City. After this cultural event, he described an evening walk during which he reflected on transience, death

³⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 163-164.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 164.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

and solitude. In turn, he compared the finial of the Vatican basilica to a bird of the night – an owl – which he identified with the goddess of wisdom, Athena:

I was returning from this concert on a warm night, along the banks of the Tiber, the plane trees were still leafy, although it was autumn, the leaves were still green and some were already rustling underfoot, it was after midnight, the dome of St. Peter stood in the shadows concealed "like the great owl of Pallas", I thought of all those who are no longer with us. (...)

And I thought to myself that in the midst of that huge crowd, gathered in the della Conciliazione hall, only the three of us, Artur [Rubinstein], Nela and I, knew it all, three remnants from a world which had been long drowned, sunk. I can no longer belong to that world, however, as I walked along the shores of the Roman massacre, I thought about the transformation and survival of culture, and about how things that are fragile and seem faint always endure, while strong and powerful things obliterate.⁴¹

Speaking of elements of fantasy, it is worth referring to the description of Frederick II's castle in Bari. The Polish poet presented that building as a huge and atmospheric fortress, noting: "since the first moment one sees Castel del Monte, it makes a powerful impression and it draws one into some kind of game, into some type of sacred or theatrical action. The encounter with this castle is very peculiar and mysterious".⁴² He went on to characterize the historic building in detail. He also evoked characters known from ancient legends, writing: "It is not in vain that the Knights of the Round Table return here and in Sicily time and again in paintings, in legends, in songs, in marionette performances".⁴³ He even drew attention to the peculiar syncretism of the local culture, in which themes of different beliefs are combined and interwoven ("it is a mixture of the legends of the North, Celtic tales and mysterious stories of the Holy Grail, (...) with the fervor of the South, with the fragrant wind of the East (...), that constitutes the extraordinary charm of this land").⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 113.

⁴² Ibid., p. 163.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

In the context of the motifs in question, it would furthermore be appropriate to look at the records of ancient ruins, which have become synonymous with transience and decline. A description of this kind of buildings can be found in a report of a visit to the sanctuary of Paestum, located in southern Italy. The author described the ancient Greek temples, confronting the appearance of the buildings with information taken from the diary of the 18th-century traveler and architect, August Moszyński. At the end of the note, he included an extended digression regarding the monuments, which he considered to be majestic and remarkable. He concluded that “They all always look as if they were set up in anticipation of an Aeschylus tragedy”.⁴⁵

There are some bitter notes in which Iwaszkiewicz writes about art and contemporary culture. According to his opinion, the 20th century saw the disappearance of moral values and norms, and today’s societies are sinking into nihilism and mindless consumption. In the section dedicated to Venice, the author noted:

I was struck by the increasing discrepancy between the beauty and comfort, so carefully accumulated by our civilization, and such phenomena as the terrible filth of the canals, the stench and this jostling of everyone, literally everyone, who is in a hurry to get somewhere and does not stop even for a moment, neither in front of the Frari church nor in front of a dogcatcher dragging a dog to the place of its execution.

The disappearance of all values. And this in the face of these crowds of obnoxious *teen-agers*, who also no longer care about nothing but cars.⁴⁶

Iwaszkiewicz confessed that he looked in vain for salvation in art, which he poetically compared to “the Garden of Epicurus”.⁴⁷ In his opinion, the museums, where outstanding works of art were collected, have also ceased to play the role of an oasis. This pessimistic view caused him great sadness and anxiety. The author stated: “Now this place from which to launch an offensive, this foothold is not there. It does not exist. The situation is terrible, terrible for us. European culture is sinking just like Venice is”.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 182.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The sense of impending doom is also linked to the next passage, in which the author tried to summarize his Venice explorations. He explained that all the monuments he saw blended in his memory, but that Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* painting is the one that stood out to him the most. Iwazskiewicz again described this representation and compared it to a luminous vision. However, this work too seems to await destruction.

The memory of the purple *Assunta* follows me constantly; if I return to Venice, I always return to this painting, the greatness of which moved such people as Delacroix, Matejko, Wyspiański, Kraszewski, Norwid and Wyka. And each of us has seen our own *Assunta*. Shall I say "one's own ascension"? (...)

I don't know whether Słowacki had seen this painting, but it reminded me at this moment of his vision, half bloody and half blessed. In a red cloud, in a flame of ascension, in red, purple robes a beautiful, mature woman, a mother, was flying into the sky. The *Assunta* burned in front of me for a moment more. I gazed at this magnificent, eternal and everlasting work of art. When will it too crumble into ashes?⁴⁹

Somewhat later, we come across a very personal confession about a visit to Venice. According to the note, the writer felt the joy of admiring the famous city, but was also aware of the inevitability of time passing. He noted: "It's a good thing that I was there with my daughter, that I showed her this most secluded city in the world before we disappear from the face of the Earth. Because for me it's all the same in the end, whether it's me that disappears or Venice".⁵⁰

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Iwazskiewicz's *Travels to Italy* – contrary to traditional depictions of "sunny Italy" – are saturated with an atmosphere of melancholy and a sense of decline. Significantly, the writer devoted a lot of his attention to places and objects neglected or abandoned. He was interested in art galleries, churches and chapels with tombstones, cemeteries, old castles and ancient ruins. He also focused particularly on artworks related to the themes of suffering, death and transience. Through his memoirs, Iwazskiewicz has expressed a pessimistic

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

diagnosis of the collapse of values, especially beauty and goodness. The recipient of these notes may feel surprised, because in contexts where (according to the humanist descriptive tradition) one expects admiration, pathos and harmony, one encounters visions of decay, nihilism and ugliness, and is left with difficult emotions after having read the notes. *Travels to Italy* can even be seen as a nostalgic record of the wandering of a traveler who carries with him a sense of the twilight of culture, the burden of old age and the approaching end of his own life.

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“The European Culture is Sinking like Venice”. Italy in Memories of late Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz

The main purpose of this article was to present specific motifs, which occur in the travel reports by an outstanding Polish writer and poet, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. As the study showed, Iwaszkiewicz usually mentioned neglected or abandoned places and objects. He was interested in art galleries, churches and chapels with tombstones, cemeteries, old castles and ancient ruins. Moreover, the author of those texts presented famous works of art associated with subjects such as ugliness, suffering and death. He would also write down his own opinions about art and culture. *Travels to Italy* contain pessimistic images of the decline of all values, especially of the beauty and goodness. Reading the discussed work, one may get the impression that the writer was visiting not so much the “mythical” Italy, formerly considered a land of wonders and a treasure trove of art, but an entirely different world – one that evokes melancholy, anxiety and a sense of emptiness.

Keywords: Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, travel reports, voyages in memories, Italian art, decline of values, vision of Venice

Słowa kluczowe: Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, relacje z podróży, podróże we wspomnieniach, sztuka włoska, upadek wartości, wizja Wenecji

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