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**THE VENICE OF BIEŃKOWSKA, THE VENICE OF BOLEWSKI –  
ON TWO ESSAYS ABOUT THE CITY**

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The article analyses two essays about Venice: Ewa Bieńkowska's "What do the stones of Venice say" and Jacek Bolewski's "What after Venice... Following up artists and saints". The subjects of both essays are, above all, the art and architecture of the city, which leads to comparisons. E. Bieńkowska focuses on painting, whereas J. Bolewski refers to literary texts (I. Brodski, Casanova, H. James). However, both essays are a special "lesson in looking." In both of them, there are clear references to essays of Herbert, even in the way the "essayistic speaking voice" is formulated in the opposition to the tourist.

**Keywords:** essay, art, history, Venice, E. Bieńkowska, J. Bolewski.

**ВЕНЕЦИЯ БЕНЬКОВСКОЙ И БОЛЕВСКОГО:  
ДВА ЭССЕ О ГОРОДЕ**

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В статье представлен анализ двух эссе о Венеции: Евы Беньковской «О чем говорят камни Венеции» и Яцека Болевского «Что после Венеции... по следам художников и святых». Предметом исследования в обоих произведениях, прежде всего, служат искусство и архитектура города, которые являются предметом сравнения. Е. Беньковская концентрируется на картинах, в то время как Яцек Болевский обращается к художественной литературе (И. Бродский, Казанова, Г. Джеймс). Однако оба эссе – это «урок-наблюдение», где есть четкие ссылки на эссе Герберта, даже в том, как "говорящий голос эссеиста" противопоставляется туристу.

**Ключевые слова:** эссе, искусство, история, Венеция, Е. Беньковская, Я. Болевский.

The truth in literature rarely goes hand in hand with statistical data, however, it seems that one of the most popular cities, judged by its presence in our 20th-century texts, is still Venice, as seen in *e.g.* “Venetian lace” by Iwaszkiewicz, or his “Travels to Italy”, “The Venetian portrait” by Herling-Grudzinski and numerous comments in the Journals, but also Staff’s poems “Italian art Triptych: Venezia, Brandstaetter’s “Venice” and Julia Hartwig’s “There is Such a Square”. Sometimes these are just scattered hints, requiring knowledge of topography or of the historical context, such as in the poem of Ewa Lipska’s “The holy order of tourists”. Typically, Venice appears as a unique, separate city. The figurative character of Venice is manifested, for instance, in Herling-Grudzinski’s journal:

There is no city in the world that is as specific, charged with life and at the same time as illusory, entangled in the network of echoes, sounds, chiaroscuros, mirror reflections. In a sense, Venice is an image of our civilization. We will wake up from a daydream, when *città lagunare* – Venice not to be saved, slides to the bottom of the sea [6, s. 108].

Authors have been attracted by the uniqueness of the former Italian republic, but also by its tangible evident decline. It is at the same time impossible not to notice the intertextual similarities: among the referenced are works by Tomasz Mann, Henry James, and Paweł Muratow. Apart from the abovementioned Polish literary works, there are two twenty-first century essays on art: “What do the stones of Venice say” (“*Co mówią kamienie Wenecji*”) [1] by Ewa Bieńkowska (2002) and “What after Venice... Following up artists and saints” (“*Co po Wenecji... Śladem artystów i świętych*”) [2] by Jacek Bolewski (2010).

It is interesting to see how much these two essays are linked – both give a personal account of a pilgrimage, the meeting with Venice is at the same time the meeting with paintings, literature and architecture, and they were both published around the same time. And when we take into account that Bolewski clearly marks the year of his stay in the Italian city – the Great Jubilee in 2000 – the times of publication seem even closer. Their paths intersect and mirror in the common

readings. Not all of course, but the convergent passages encourage comparisons. The differences, on the other hand, seem deeper, but about them later.

Both Bieńkowska (born 1943) and Bolewski (1946-2012) were primarily associated as seasoned essayists. Ewa Bieńkowska is known primarily as a historian of ideas but also as the author of essayistic books: “Two faces of fate. Nietzsche – Norwid”, “The writer and fate. On the oeuvre of Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski”, “In the Earthly Garden. A book about Miłosz”, but also books about art and architecture: “Walks around Rome”, “Florentine tales: art and politics”, “Michelangelo. An unhappy roman”. Jacek Bolewski, a Jesuit who died six years ago, combined in his essays a religious perspective with culture, mainly literature. His research has brought to life such books as “Shakespeare's revelation,” “Modernity of Ignacy Loyola: in the context of "vicious" “Don Quixote” or “Goethe's depth”. In both cases, their works are deeply embedded in the Polish essayist tradition. Roma Sendyka refers to Bieńkowska's essay as an “essayistic ekphrasis” (striving to prove the thesis that it is a separate genre). She also points out that the lesson in looking, taught in the essay, is transferred from the image to the reality given in direct experience:

The beginning of the essay arrival is filled with a description: aestheticized, expressed in a complicated hypotactic construction, rhythmized by the removal of longer pauses that could appear between clauses in parataxis were they closed with a full stop, and not a comma, it ends with aposiopesis. The artistic embellishment of the scene causes a fleeting illusion that some landscape painting is perhaps evoked: meanwhile, thanks to the sentence in which the speaking voice emerges as female, we realise that we are dealing with a common situation – an accidental meeting with someone who is reading (browsing through) a book in a public place [7, s. 49].

The aesthetised description of the observed space, as if of a work of art, must evoke model essays by Herbert, who employed a similar technique.

### **1. Herbert's silent patronage**

Aleksander Fiut, writing about Herbert's essays, noted: “Reading the first collection of Herbert's essays teaches the reader that the protagonist's knowledge of the visited countries is primarily drawn from communing with the works of art. The

residents, their current worries and problems were marginalised, giving way to the contemplation of architecture and paintings. [...] The essayist is apparently not interested in current affairs, economic, social or political issues. France and Italy are the great absent ones in his texts” [3, s. 135].

There is no denying that the spirit of Herbert – the essayist is clearly felt in both essays about Venice, although this presence is nowhere expressed explicitly. The patronage of the author of “Barbarian in the garden” is felt in the very idea of travelling, which could be expressed briefly as forgetting the beaten track and searching for own paths. The search opens the gate to independent learning. The denial of this attitude in Herbert’s as well as in Bieńkowska’s and Bolewski’s works is expressed by “the tourist.” To reject the tourist's pose is to free oneself from the dictatorship of the crowd. “In late autumn, off-season, it is easier to see the everyday Venice...” – observes (and recommends) Bieńkowska [1, s. 11].

And with Bolewski’s openly quoting from Herbert: “I chose a different strategy: instead of walking up and down the streets, even on the way to some worthwhile monuments, I went to one of the squares, Campo Santa Maria Formosa, just to sit there and be” [2, s. 9], there is no doubt then that this is but a strategy, a more extensive, purposeful project. He abandons his earlier, more typical practice: “I followed the traditional tourist! Routes; the same views, fragments and works of art kept coming back. The narrow streets dominated by shop windows, similar to those found anywhere else, tended to be more memorable, so the anger flared up: why would anyone like to push through the crowd, jostle...”. A few pages later, he declares directly: “I did not stop at the tourist's standpoint” [2, s. 8-9, 13].

Some passages from Bieńkowska's book also closely resemble Herbert's words. The chapter “Returns” begins with the words: “From what point do certain experiences become a constant source of psychic energy that warms all moments of reality and dreams? [...] In other words: can you fall in love without reciprocity with the city, image and music? Burn with desire and not receive an answer? Come to terms with the fact that the distance will never decrease and the aftertaste of exile in

the mouth will linger on? Contact with things immensely rich in their own light has a lot in common with the falling in love” [1, s. 69].

An attentive reader will immediately recognise the similarity with the opening fragment of “Emblematic still life with flagon, glass, jug and bridle” dedicated to the painting by Torrentius, which catches the attention of Herbert-the traveller as intensely as falling in love: “I immediately understood, though it would be difficult to explain rationally that something important has happened, something much more than an accidental meeting in a crowd of masterpieces” [5, s. 75]. A work of art can interact with the viewer in a way similar to an intimate male-female relationship, which involves a rapid internal transformation of the speaking voice, and to refer to the language of Karol Wojtyła, “the activation” is accomplished. The act of looking that transforms is no longer mere looking, it is a love look. Therefore, how are Bieńkowska and Bolewski looking?

## **2. Looking as a challenge**

What strikes in both essays is the constant effort to look for a new, surprising, original perspective. Not just skimming the familiar but attempting to delve into the essence, to penetrate the boundary of things. Bolewski writes about the need to free oneself from the dictatorship of stereotypes that come from habitual perception: “As a guide, you should take – the eyes, preferably, of course, your own. [...] Faced with circulating opinions, you must purge your way of looking, restore the freshness of the eye – and your own” [2, s. 51]. Bieńkowska, on the other hand: “When we come to Italian cities, we practise the art of recognition, we make the first discoveries: by sight, smell, and hearing” [1, s. 96]. Both authors emphasize the immediacy of feeling, the primacy of unmediated knowledge, first acquired by the senses. Both texts employ school rhetoric: “you should learn,” “studying,” “cognition.” An essayist becomes someone who recognises the need to be apprenticed at the school of masters. Simultaneously, for a moment they return to “the tourist” – the recovery of sight begins at the moment of breaking with the tourist’s perspective of watching: “Tourists who come here *en masse*, generally do not see the figure” [2, s. 14].

In both essays there is also the “art of looking” which is understood as the effort to free oneself from the overwhelming influence of what is visible in the foreground and to make the sight sensitive to details, which we would otherwise be inclined to ignore; these beyond our cognitive *aporia*. In the chapter “The secret of the seducer. Following Casanova”, Bolewski explores the subject further, describing his journey by train from Venice: “Last views of the city from the train window: never mind the station and buildings nearby, disorderly carriages... You have to look beyond them – towards the layer of pink roofs” [2, s. 89]. This passage already brings to mind, with its imperative phrases, the lesson in looking by Herbert: “You must free yourself, purify yourself, forget all the photographs you have seen [...]. [Y]ou can study Dorians dispassionately and without exaltation. Just as this most masculine of all styles of architecture should be approached” [4, s. 26].

Bolewski also draws attention to the dialectics of the visible and the hidden: what is imposed on the viewer is the disorder, what requires perceiving are “pink layers,” and therefore – order after all. In the next part, the “essayistic speaking voice” chooses which things to see: “but for now I leave it and see: another tower is emerging...” to arrive at a synthesis: “all of this appears as a whole” and to devote to internalisation, to spiritual processing of the image recorded with a look: “I fix the image – with my eyes closed for a while, until it becomes clear: only after seeing the full picture may I find the enlightenment that will explain the experience of Venice” [2, s. 89]. Wise looking, but only accompanied with experiencing and sorting of the stream of sensations, becomes the source of deep understanding. What is more, this practice must also find its limit: “this multitude of experiences caused satiation, daze, from which it is time I woke up” [2, s. 90]. Reading becomes the culmination of the cognitive process: “since the sight has freed itself from the charm of the magic place, it is possible to reinforce, perpetuate the impressions thanks to the readings and notes to which the proximity of Venice would not allow” [2, s. 90]. However, it is worth paying attention to the specific function of reading: it is revealed as the antithesis of the visual “proximity,” so it represents the necessary, yet secondary, distance that the visitor must achieve.

It is much more difficult to write about “a lesson in looking” in Bieńkowska's work, not because of its absence, but rather the opposite – the entire essay is not even a “lesson”, but a “lecture” on how works of art should and can be viewed. Perhaps its fullest meaning can be found in the final sentences of the essay: “Venice taught us how to look, helped to see. Each of her times of the day and seasons, each of the whims of the weather was a lesson how the theatre of visibility unfolds, how plans and depths are built up. How things stop in front of us and how they escape us” [1, s. 238]. It is noteworthy that the authors differ by a certain detail: in Bolewski's, internal decision-making is clearly indicated (not only in the quoted fragment), while in Bieńkowska's case it is the rhythm of the city that leads her, Venice itself becomes a teacher, which was already mentioned directly. In the same chapter, a little earlier, she uses words that we can treat as a guiding thought: “Venice's art assists us in the development of seeing, in the discovery of the equivalence between seeing and existence” [1, s. 237]. Seeing, watching, but also learning to look, we experience with all the power of existence our own and the world's, our existence in the world. We give in to reality.

### **3. The point of view. Who is speaking?**

The construction of the “essayist speaking voice” in both texts also seems to owe much to Herbert – “the barbarian in the garden.” This is particularly visible in the deletion of autobiographical traces. The speaker voice does not refer to its private history; it does not weave its own experiences into the narrative. It rather reflects what is being seen, but it does indicate its own central location. In Herbert's works, this is the main philosophy, deliberately manifested:

It is a speaking voice that deliberately renounces autobiography. This construction, announcing the figure of Mr Cogito, will become obligatory for all poet's essays, and its justification and systemic character is brought by the poem “Why the classics” and the essay “The acropolis and the little soul” [...]. We are therefore in the domain of “the power of taste,” the cultural obviousness, forgotten because fought against, that include evoking intelligence and a good upbringing, which do not allow for self-pity [8, s. 213].

This is especially evident in Bieńkowska's work. She rarely uses the first person singular verb forms, and when she does, she does it mainly to express the act of looking, moving or reflection ("I approached and looked over my shoulder", "I realised" [1, s. 13, 249]). One sentence only is an open admission about her profession: "I never felt so close to Bach as when I was studying the structure of the choirs from his *Passion*, during which the memory of their primary objective dissolved in the admission of necessity for the use of these particular means" [1, s. 178].

The essay's art, however, is based on the fact that the essayist, without exposing themselves to the reader, makes the mark so clearly that we are under a great influence of their personality. When Bieńkowska writes about Titian and Tintoretto: "as far as the former is concerned, one feels certain aristocratism in the way he painted and lived: extensive intellectual contacts, communing with the big world, travelling, striving for universalism in the subject of images and their balanced style". But we know that the impersonal form "one feels," though impersonal, it does express the opinion of the essayist herself, who draws us into her orbit of perceiving and valuing the world of art. This is reinforced by the use of numerous phrases containing the first-person plural verbs – they create the illusion of our presence in the described place: "moving away from the centre by boat, we continue to go through Venice, which takes a deep breath..." [1, s. 141].

We have no doubt that this is an art historian that speaks to us, the historian that not only exhibits extensive knowledge but also does not hesitate to make decisive judgments, sometimes violating common opinions. The second important characteristic of the speaking voice in Bieńkowska is its ability to move smoothly from observations, often intensely focused on detail to expressing views of a broadly general nature, concerning history, tradition and identity. In this aspect, she is also close to what the core of the narrowly understood "essayism" is the subject of interest becomes at some point a pretext for deeper reflection.

It is highly similar in Bolewski's work, but in this case, the author reveals a little more, we also more often witness situations in which he participates in the

events, rather than being a mere observer. Not only does he not hide his position as a priest, but he repeatedly emphasises his religious point of view. The introduction links his presence in Venice with a strictly religious event, the Great Jubilee in 2000. The mindset of the believer can also be clearly seen when he quotes from John XIII, or recalls the figure of Saint Mark. The subtitle of the book itself highlights the double-track search: “Following the artists and saints”.

However, it is worth emphasising that even when reaching for papal texts, the authorial speaking voice concentrates on the essence of art, not around the search related strictly to faith. “We are not on earth as museum keepers, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life and to prepare a glorious future” [2, s. 28], – a thought by John XXIII taken from the “Diary of the Soul” perfectly echoes the superior idea of the essay: seeking what is hidden beyond the beauty of visible forms.

Notably, on numerous occasions Bolewski's phrasing confirms the fact that he is a priest: “Only when I asked the nuns, with whom I prayed each day during the Eucharist, to check. [...] Also from the Catholic perspective it is not enough, let us add, to contrast Christmas with Passover, as if the former was connected only with the joy of the beginning and the latter – with a lamentable death of the end” [2, s. 41, 71]. However, if the voice of the essayist becomes at one point the voice of a Catholic clergyman, then it is certainly not the dominant tone, but only an accompanying chord. What is more, there are fragments – a few, hence the more important – where the “priestly” standpoint is consciously and intentionally suspended! While visiting churches, he says: “It may be easy for me to say this as a priest ...” [2, s. 242].

The context is also trivial, as it is about using the privileged position when entering the church admission-free while ordinary tourists must pay. Elsewhere, however, the same act of unmasking has a different meaning: “And here again the theologian gives way to the poet ...” [2, s. 268]. That poet is Wisława Szymborska, mentioned as the author of the poem “Heaven”. When the theologian gives ground to the poet – the theological discourse gives ground to pure poetry, ergo: at that moment, it acknowledges its superiority. Following that reasoning: when quoting

Brodsky, the essayist confirms: “I felt it: I received a vision, maybe a vision for the next journey – to the end of earthly life” [2, s. 275]. The poetic text is the source of transcendent experience; the poet becomes a guide for the theologian. When we read a little further: “painstaking theological work awaited me,” involuntarily (perhaps even without the author's intention), Szymborska and her “hard shelleying for life” come to mind.

Taking into account all the differences, it is impossible not to notice the clearly convergent attitude; both of them wish to separate themselves from the crowd and find the rhythm of the city, the rhythm of Venice. Some of the statements are virtually identical:

The explanation comes slowly, it requires patience. Gradually I am getting closer to the light, following the Testimony of St John [2, s. 16].

One must be content with the places available (and there are plenty of them) and discover slowly that the splendorous glow of what is exposed in part stems from what is un-exposed – from what hides behind and will never come to light. Conspicuous wonders are fed by what is invisible and inaccessible, like the tip of the iceberg by its submerged base [1, s. 102].

Being an essayist in the world is being slow; it is associated with the virtue of patience. To get to know something is to slowly reach the concealed. Bolewski speaks of a “gradual” approaching; both of them also reach for the *topos* of light representing hidden wisdom, and in Bieńkowska's work “the glow” appears. It becomes clear that in both works the resignation from rushing while visiting the city goes hand in hand with the negation of the tourist attitude, which was mentioned earlier.

#### **4. The ending. Where the similarities end**

Although the subject itself is the material that would be suitable for a longer research, there is need to point out the similarities and discrepancies of both essays on Venice. What is important is that even if their authors somehow borrowed from Herbert, it is not a slavish adherence, and that the touch of individualism is evident in both cases. Perhaps it is seen even more clearly in Bieńkowska, who repeatedly

emphasises the spontaneity of looking and often employs phrases related to the impressionistic feeling of the world.

A clearly visible difference is with respect to the past of Venice, while in Bieńkowska it is expressed explicitly, and in several instances, in Bolewski's work, it can rather be only inferred, especially in comparative juxtaposition with the former. Bieńkowska, for that matter, writes: "Venice fell without a hint of greatness. At the beginning of the century, it declared neutrality and practically dissolved its army" [1, s. 152]. According to the essayist, what was crucial took place in Venice by the end of the seventeenth century and this turning point is marked here with the relentless sharpness and without exception. There is the age of greatness and the age of the demise. She writes about the irretrievability of the past time: "There are some remaining traces, the more poignant when encountered in the environment that has been wasted through the centuries of the havoc that followed" [1, s. 144].

The eighteenth century marks the end of greatness, since then, the city will live in the past: "It is not glorious fame: in the eighteenth century, the city will be hailed the funfair of Europe" [1, s. 148]. It is hard to find a counterpoint in Bolewski's work, and yet his essay is certainly not a study of the fall, but rather a record of the heartbeat of a living city. These are usually minor observations, but they indicate extremely keen senses: "When I stood here and prayed, the moving lizards were the signs of life, they were escaping – running on the grave, from one place to another. [...] The trees rustled, the pneumatic signs of the wind-spirit (*pneuma* in Greek), which "blows where it pleases, and you hear its noise, but you do not know where it is coming from and where it is going"" [2, s. 57]. In Bolewski's work, we can clearly see the hope that is leaning forward but fulfilling itself in the look at the present, in this particular case – the Venetian present.

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