From Darkness to Light

Writers in Museums 1798-1898

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The desolation of Venice in the 1830s was something immediately perceptible; the result of decades of decline seemed palpable, particularly for visitors accustomed to the modernity of Paris, where gas lighting had been installed from 1820.

In 1831 Antoine Valery (1789–1847), a French writer specialized in the publication of travel guides, described Venice without pity as a succession of abandoned palaces, a ‘cadaver of a city’ whose famous gondolas became, by metaphorical association, floating coffins. Valery evokes also a recent view painted by Richard Parkes Bonington (1802–1828) — an English artist who had studied at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris — as the felicitous testimony of the situation in which the city found itself, compared it, in a truly romantic sense, to a beautiful woman faded by age and adversity.

Three years later, Louis-Léopold-Amédée de Beaufort, a cultivated writer and the director of the Bruxelles Museum of Fine Arts, visited Venice in the first days of June 1834. The ruins of the Venetian buildings must have made an impression on the French nobleman as, a good four
years later, he was concerned about their conservation. In the same year Alfred De Musset (1810–1857) was also dismayed by the desolation of the city: the poet recalled that in the evenings, on his way to the Fenice, he met no-one and only a few palaces on the Grand Canal showed signs of life.

It is also important to underline that travellers in the 1830s were more concentrated on and struck by the breath-taking natural light of the town rather than by its artificial illumination: the charm of Venice’s natural light and its thousands of reflections created by the water, along with the light depicted in its sixteenth-century masterpieces impressed the foreign visitors. Indeed, it was the light portrayed in Titian’s *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* (1567) that fascinated Caroline de Beaufort (1793–1865) when she visited ‘La somptueuse église des Jésuites’ in 1836, and then the basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, whose darkness played a key role in her enjoyment of the enfilade of the doges’ tombs. So the Comtesse de la Grandville also appreciated that aesthetic of darkness that accentuated the romantic element of Venice and that to some nineteenth-century observers, Ruskin in primis, was more or less indispensable, as Rosella Mamoli Zorzi explains in her essay in this volume.

Another indefatigable traveller, Marie Constance Albertine de Montaran (1796–1870), left in a passage of the same year an image of ‘impénétrable obscurité’ in a Venice that she felt as ‘[…] plongée dans un sommeil de mort’.

In March 1837 Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) stayed at the Hotel Danieli when visiting Venice for the first time, leaving two letters in which he expressed quite contentious opinions about the place. Balzac

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5 Ibid., p. 335: ‘J’arrive à Santi Giovanni e Paolo; la sombre obscurité de cette basilique convient admirablement à la multitude de tombes qu’elle protège; cette longue série de sépultures semble en vérité le livre des fastes de la République’ [I arrive at Santi Giovanni e Paolo; the sombre darkness of this basilica is wonderfully suited to the multitude of tombs it protects; this long series of graves actually seems like the book of the splendours of the Republic].
7 Ibid.
was not in the habit of writing travel memoirs, but his impressions often appeared in the settings of his novels. Massimilla Doni, the protagonist of the eponymous novella, moves between the Fenice and a palace on the ‘Canalazzo’ (Grand Canal) by boat, and this act marks her immediately as Venetian. Balzac describes this Palazzo Memmi — that could be identified with Palazzo Memmo, a gorgeous noble building in the quarter of Cannaregio — in which the clear light of the day reveals a collection of objects from all over the world, including Chinese vases and ‘[…] candelabra with a thousand candles’. And it will be always in Palazzo Memmi that the libertine Clarina Tinti, a singer at the Fenice, disrobes by candle-light, seated at her dressing-table. About twenty pages later the scene moves to the first night of the opera season at the Fenice, as crowded as in every other big city in Italy. Balzac dwells on the description of the boxes, which are not illuminated, as they were in Milan, but where ‘The light penetrates from the stage or from timid chandeliers’. The light from the stage illuminates the head of the duchess who occupies a box in the first tier, highlighting her noble features and her resemblance to a portrait by Andrea del Sarto.

There is an undoubted thrill of romance in the description of a shabby Venice, the Republic fallen after centuries of supremacy and political and cultural independence. It is also significant that these authors are French, intent on describing an Austrian Venice, and the memory of the French defeat was still a sore point for some of them. In 1843 Jules-Léonard Belin, an impassioned writer on art, arrived in St Mark’s Square and referred regretfully to a time when the horses of the Basilica decorated the Place du Carrousel in Paris and, without jingoism, described the city’s history from Attila to Napoleon.

In 1843 the four horses, stolen from the Istanbul hippodrome, have been back on the façade of the Basilica for a long time, and they

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8 Massimilla Doni was published in Italian in 1921 as part of the series Racconti d’Italia — L’Italia vista dagli scrittori stranieri (Milan: Il primato editoriale, 1921).
9 Ibid., p. 21.
11 Ibid., p. 43.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 45.
reverberate the gas lighting of the square. The same artificial light that allowed a social nightlife in St Mark’s Square, described also by Jules Lecomte.\textsuperscript{15} Even more impressive is his description of the solemn ceremony of the \textit{Corpus Domini} and the extraordinary use of gilt lanterns:

\begin{quote}
On place des torches, des verres de couleurs sur toutes les lignes des frises, balcons, impostes, entablements et corniches des Procuraties. La basilique voit tous les caprices de son architecture dessinés par des lignes de feu, ses coupoles, ses clochetons sont profilés par la lumière, toutes ses sculptures se bordent de cette magique irisation. C’est alors une sorte de gigantesque squelette flamboyant.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Gas lighting turned St Mark’s into a big nocturnal drawing room, in which ‘[…] les lumières brillent de tous côtés’\textsuperscript{17} — as Alphonse Royer (1803–1875) recalled in 1845 — until midnight when the gas supply was shut off, when the glow of the moon reinforced the myth of a romantic Venice that Paul Valéry expressed when he wrote ‘[…] la lune, appelée par les artistes le soleil des ruines, convient particulièrement à la grande ruine de Venise’.\textsuperscript{18}

On the contrary the artificial light is so weak in Venice that according to Théophile Gautier (1811–1872), his own shadow could hardly follow him and his companions in their lascivious nights described in \textit{Voyage en Italie} (1850).\textsuperscript{19}

In this mid-50s also the Goncourt brothers left their own version of the Venetian night, in which ‘Les fenêtres des palais étaient mortes. Le

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 66 [They put torches, coloured glass on all the lines of the friezes, balconies, shutters, entablatures and cornices of the Procuratie. All the caprices of the basilica’s architecture are drawn by lines of fire, its domes, its pinnacles are silhouetted by light, all its sculptures are lined by this magnificent iridescence. It is thus a kind of gigantic flaming skeleton].
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 398 [the moon, called by artists the sun of ruins, is particularly suited to the great ruin of Venice].
This idea of a secret city conceals in reality the aesthetics pursued in these writers’ Parisian apartments, too. The decadent French literature found in Venice the embodiment of an inexhaustible source of attraction and inspiration.

About twenty years later, Henry Havard (1838–1921) wrote a guide of two cities, geographically far but comparable for the presence of canals and masterpieces of art: if, in Amsterdam, Havard complained about the scarce lighting of paintings displayed in the former home of the merchant Tripp, in Venice he was besotted by Tintoretto’s canvases capable of emanating their own light. In particular he lingered on the *Marriage at Cana* (1561) in the Sacristy of the Basilica della Salute, with its coffered ceiling from which hangs a ‘lustre garni de bougies’.

Havard’s trip continued in the countryside around Venice; he visited the Villa Contarini at Piazzola sul Brenta, near Padua: apart from the grandiosity of the residence, he described the shows in the theatre belonging to the villa, where opera libretti were read by candlelight.

At the end of the century, Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893) undertook a long journey in Italy that he described in *La vie errante* (1890), a publishing success that was reprinted more than twenty-five times in France alone. He claimed that only three religious buildings in the world were able to excite him because they were ‘[…] inattendue et foudroyante’, one being St Mark’s basilica, but he does not otherwise dwell on the lagoon city except to report that it is in the hands of the ‘populace [rabble]’.

This moment, starting from 1899, coincides also with the arrival at Ca’ Dario, the gorgeous palace on the Grand Canal, of a group of French eclectic intellectuals led by Augustine Bulteau (1860–1922). Henri de
Régnier (1864–1936) a symbolist poet and novelist, stayed in Venice at least ten times, at the beginning as guest of Madame Bulteau in Ca’ Dario, where he remembered a fine cage lantern, all carved and gilded. In this charming frame they recreated the cosmopolitan circle of Avenue Wagram in Paris: Marie Isabelle Victorine-Ghislaine Crombez, Countess de La Baume Plumivel (1858–1911), Jean-Paul Toulet (1867–1920), Jean-Louis Vaudoyer (1883–1963), Eugène Marsan (1882–1936) recalled in the Portraits et souvenirs by Henri de Régnier as Laurent Evrard, literary pseudonym of Baume-Plumivel, were constant presences on the Grand Canal.

It is Ca’ Dario that had the jardin bizarre described by Régnier in his Esquisses vénitiennes in 1906: the magnificent desero of Venetian glass, attributed, at least in part, to Giuseppe Briati (1686–1772), on the model of the Mocenigo centrepiece now in the Murano Glass Museum, was the protagonist of complex and poetic lines.

Esquisses vénitiennes was a collection of stories to read as a tribute to the city, to its monuments and of course to its extraordinary brilliance. The writer rejects the idea of a modern Venice, remaining anchored to a decadent image, as in the episode of L’encrier rouge, in which a servant accompanies the protagonist to his room by candlelight, because at night the gas supply is shut off.

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26 H. de Régnier, often in the company of his wife, Marie, also stayed at the Palazzo Vendramin ai Carmini, then in the more modest Casa Zuliani and finally at the Hotel Regina. On the relationship between the French writer and Venice, see the Italian essay by Loredana Bolzan, ‘Una lunga (in)fedeltà. Vite veneziane e non di Henri e Marie de Régnier’, in Personaggi stravaganti a Venezia (Crocetta del Montello: Antiga, 2010), pp. 43–60.


28 In keeping with the custom of the time, both Baume-Plumivel and Madame Bulteau published their writings under a male pseudonym; Laurent Evrard for the former and Jacques Vontade or Foemina for the latter.

29 Ibid., pp. 50–51: ‘Il se compose de parterres symétriques, d’allées qui les divisent, de balustres qui le bordent, de portiques qui les terminent et d’innombrables petits vases d’où jaillissent des fleurs minuscules. […] enfantin et éternel et il n’a point de saisons, parce qu’il est tout entier fait en verre, en verre de toutes les couleurs’. [It is made up of symmetrical gardens, of avenues that divide them, of balusters that border them, of porticoes that end them and of numerous small vases from which tiny flowers spring. […] childish and eternal, it is quite without seasons, because it is made entirely of glass, of glass in all colours].

In the episode titled *La clé*, the protagonist is attracted to St Mark’s by the electric lighting that allows the square to remain lively at night:

‘[…] la brillante illumination des galeries où l’électricité fait étinceler et valoir à l’envi les devantures des boutiques de bijoux, de verreries et de dentelles, dans lesquels se vendent les produits, encore charmants’.\(^{31}\)

In *La tasse* the scene moves to the hall of *l’ancien Ridotto*, lit on the occasion of the carnival by ‘des lustres et des girandoles’.\(^{32}\)

‘Girandoles’ also illuminated a Vicenza evening in the Palais Vallarciero, where the protagonist of *L’Illusion héroïque de Tito Bassi* (1916) moves and which, as the evening proceeds, goes up in flames.\(^{33}\)

The hall of the Teatro Olimpico is lit by ‘Des centaines de bougies allumées à des appliques ou à des lustres épandaient la lumière avec une éclatante profusion’.\(^{34}\)

With the advent of gas, candles were often used to emphasise the elegance of a situation, a kind of status symbol on a par with the considerable use of wax in Chatsworth Castle, as described in the essay by Marina Coslovi and the testimony of Baron Jacques d’Adelswärd-Fersen (1880–1923), who, in Venice, attended a party for which the costumes were inspired by the frescoes on the walls and the evening was lit by the ‘flamme rose des lustres et des bougies de Vérone’.\(^{35}\)

Régnier’s wife Marie, also known by a male pseudonym — Gérard d’Houville — published a precious little guide to the main cities in the

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31 H. de Régnier, ‘La clé’, in *Esquisses vénetiennes*, p. 73 [‘The brilliant lighting of the galleries where electricity makes the windows of the jewellery, glass and lace shops, where objects full of charm are sold, glimmering and incessantly attractive’].

32 H. de Régnier, ibid., p. 62 [‘chandeliers and girandoles’].

33 H. de Régnier, *L’Illusion héroïque de Tito Bassi* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1916), p. 53, https://archive.org/details/lillationho00rguoft: ‘[…] girandoles et de lampions et on avait placé dans des anneaux de fer de grosses torches de résine qui jetaient une vive lumière, de sorte qu’on y voyait aussi clair qu’en plein midi et que je ne perdais aucun détail du spectacle. Il était magnifique’ [‘girandoles and street-lamps were placed in rings of iron, big resin torches that gave off a bright light, so that one saw clearly as in full daylight and I did not miss any detail of the show. It was magnificent’].

34 Ibid., p. 153 [Hundreds of lit candles on sconces or chandeliers emitting light with an astonishing profusion].

Veneto, which was later given space in *Le visage de l’Italie.*36 Capable of visionary prose, Marie Régnier crafted literary images in which the city merges with the very objects that belong to it. In the short poem titled *Verrerie,* she speaks of a Venice that is light, fragile and iridescent like its glass.37 The reference is obviously to the production of Murano glass, which underwent an extraordinary formal change with the move to gas and subsequently to electricity: prosaically the arms of the chandeliers could now also face downwards, enormously increasing the creative possibilities open to the master glassmakers.

So we have started from the idea of decadent and shady Venice, populated by gondolas floating as coffins; a Venice that was sleeping on its own beauty, feeding the international decadent imagination. A Venice capable to seduce with its natural romantic light and its hidden treasures, but also dark enough to keep the nights of its visitors secret. While the Futurists engaged a battle against the romantic myth of the Venetian moonlight, the arrival of electricity changed habits of life, the shapes of chandeliers and of course the perception of the town and its masterpieces, always under the attentive eyes of writers and painters.

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36 See Bolzani, *Una lunga (in)fedeltà,* p. 53.
37 Ibid., p. 54.