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# FROM TRASH TO TREASURE: RILKE AND VENICE REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

Rilke loved Venice and visited or passed through a dozen times between 1897 and 1920. He wrote extensively about the city in prose and verse between 1898 and 1908, including a cycle of poems in the *Neue Gedichte* and a polemical 'Aufzeichnung' in *Malte Laurids Brigge*. His letters from and about Venice have numerous lexical and imagistic echoes or prefigurations of his literary responses to the city. This article traces his interactions with Venice, his consistent hostility to tourism (and its reasons), and in particular the development of his poetic ways of seizing the city's fragile identity via a conviction that Venice's historical power, despite its precarious foundations, always underpins its surface glamour. Unlike most of his literary contemporaries, he did not regard Venice as the *locus classicus* of decadent decline; quite the reverse. Close readings both of canonical works and of much less familiar texts allow an elucidation of what might be called Rilke's 'Venetian poetics', which are closely associated with the technique of 'aussparen' (borrowed from painting). The failure of this technique in the context of his aborted biography of Admiral Carlo Zeno marks the end of his attempts to capture the city's essence in his creative writings.

Rilke liebte Venedig. Zwischen 1897 und 1920 besuchte er die Stadt zwölfmal, und zwischen 1898 und 1908 behandelte er die Lagunenstadt häufig sowohl in seiner Prosa als auch in seiner Lyrik – die bekanntesten Beispiele sind ein venezianischer Gedichtzyklus in den *Neuen Gedichten* und eine polemische „Aufzeichnung" in *Malte Laurids Brigge*. In seinen Briefen aus und über Venedig finden sich zahlreiche lexikalische und bildliche Anklänge an (oder Vorzeichen für) seine literarischen Auseinandersetzungen mit der Stadt. Dieser Artikel verfolgt seine ganze Venedig-Rezeption, seine konsequente Ablehnung des Tourismus (und deren Gründe), und insbesondere die Entwicklung seiner poetischen Mittel, die fragile Identität der Stadt durch die Überzeugung zu erfassen, dass Venedigs historische Macht, trotz ihrer prekären Grundlagen, hinter dem oberflächlichen Glanz der Stadt immer kraftvoll und präsent bleibt. Im Gegensatz zu den meisten seiner literarischen Zeitgenossen betrachtete er Venedig nicht als den Inbegriff des dekadenten Verfalls. Eine genaue Lektüre sowohl kanonischer Werke als auch weniger bekannter Texte ermöglicht es, etwas zu erhellen, was man als Rilkes „venezianische Poetik" bezeichnen könnte, die eng mit der (der Malerei entlehnten) Technik des „Aussparens" verbunden ist. Das Scheitern dieser Technik im Rahmen seiner geplanten aber nicht vollendeten Biographie des Admirals Carlo

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Zeno markiert das Ende seiner Versuche, das Wesen der Stadt dichterisch zu erfassen.

Rilke's first exposure to the city of Venice was via a theme park. At the age of twenty, in June 1896, he decided to travel to Vienna, 'Venedig besehen'.[2] He had spent a fortnight in Budapest for the National Millennium Exhibition and thereafter wanted to immerse himself in 'Venedig in Wien', the Disneyland of its age, which occupied some 50,000 square metres in the Englischer Garten, part of the Prater now known as the Kaiserwiese.[3] Established by the theatre director Gabor Steiner in 1895, this extravaganza consisted of multi-storey plasterboard mock-ups of famous Venetian buildings as well as a kilometre of canals on which twenty-five authentic gondoliers plied their oars in vessels slightly shorter than their Italian counterparts (because of the tightness of the bends in the restricted site). Visitors were mostly well-off and middle class; they were offered concerts, plays, revues, ballets and cabarets, and were bombarded by street music of dubious authenticity. They could sample Venetian-themed restaurants, although Austrian 'gutbürgerliche Küche' was available behind the Potemkin-village-like façades of the mock *trattorie*.

Its architect, Oskar Marmorek, described 'Venedig in Wien' as 'keine Copie […] sondern gleichsam eine Paraphrase von Venedig': St Mark's Square and the Basilica were too large to imitate, so they were 'als Diorama vorgeführt', and the overall aim was 'auf dem kleinen Raum den Charakter, die Stimmung der "Königin des Meeres" vorzuführen'.[4] Peter Altenberg's scepticism is laconically recorded in *Wie ich es sehe*.[5] Karl Kraus was more stridently critical of what he saw as a tawdry tourist trap for the culturally illiterate: 'Wer wäre des stillen Lagunenglücks mit Spülwasser und billigem Parfum nicht endlich überdrüssig geworden, […] dieser Athmosphäre von geheuchelter italienischer Glut?',[6] although it was obviously not all dross, for Alexander Zemlinsky had a season ticket for the concerts.[7] We know of Rilke's intention to visit, but – assuming he did in fact fulfil that intention – have no record of his impressions. One with an aesthetic sensibility as delicate as Rilke's can hardly have been entranced exactly, but the experience of the Prater's fake *Serenissima* may well have influenced his responses to the real city over the coming years.

[2] Rilke, *Briefe, Verse und Prosa aus dem Jahre 1896*, ed. by Richard von Mises (Verlag der Johannespresse, 1946), p. 28.
[3] See Ingrid Erb, *Venedig in Wien: Die Inszenierung des Ephemeren als Spielfeld der Moderne* (Böhlau, 2023).
[4] Oskar Marmorek, 'Tafel 61: Venedig in Wien', *Neubauten und Concurrenzen in Oesterreich und Ungarn*, 1.8 (1895), p. 84.
[5] Peter Altenberg, *Wie ich es sehe* (S. Fischer, 1904), pp. 79–83.
[6] Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*, 9 (1899), p. 18.
[7] Alexander Zemlinsky, *Briefwechsel mit Arnold Schönberg, Anton Webern, Alban Berg und Franz Schreker*, ed. by Horst Weber (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), p. 19 (24 June 1902).

Venice was to become very important to Rilke. He stayed there or passed through a dozen times between 1897 and 1920,[8] his longest visits being for four months in 1912 and just over a month in 1920. He wrote over 160 letters from Venice during the approximately 220 days he spent there, a figure that does not include the many dozens more that he wrote *about* Venice in advance of or recollecting those visits. They articulate frustration, fatigue and melancholy alongside the wonderment, enthusiasm and affection that are frequently associated with Rilke's reception of Venice. His poetry and literary prose also register fragility, brittleness, languor and a preoccupation with the difficulties of establishing a durable identity given the irresoluble tensions between the city's historically vigorous sense of purpose and the contemporary touristic velleity that so distressed him.

Rilke's first reference to Venice in print predates his visit to 'Venedig in Wien' by a few months and could not contrast more strikingly with that phenomenon. In a poem published on 1 March 1896, 'Park im Winter', he evokes the delicacy of frost patterns on a balcony: 'wie der Künstler fügt den blanken | Silberdraht zum elfenschlanken | Venetianer-Filigran'.[9] The image is taken from Venetian glassmaking: patented in Murano in 1527, *vetro a filigrana* embeds twisted threads or canes of coloured glass, often white, into colourless glass to 'create a mesh or lace-like effect'.[10] From this modest beginning, during visits and via intensive historical study, Rilke came to recognise in the city's architecture, its art, its public spaces, its history and its politics a vibrant but elusive and labile identity that resonated with and influenced his own literary projects for some years and in which the delicacy of this initial image maintains a role. He loved the city, missed it deeply when he was unable to visit, and ironically – given his vehement hostility to sightseers – prided himself on his detailed 'supra-touristic' knowledge of its topography. In 1920 he wrote of how he was 'stolz, den Weg: Sa Maria Formosa, S. S. Giovanni e Paolo bis zur Madonna dell'Orto ohne einen einzigen Fehlschritt, mit stillem Instinkt, gegangen zu sein'.[11] Replying in 1924 to an inquiry from a young academic, he singled out this city as 'mir vertraut […], bis zu dem Grade, daß Fremde mich in der Vielwendigkeit der "calli" mit Erfolg nach jedem Ziele fragen konnten,

[8] See Ingeborg Schnack, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Chronik seines Lebens und seines Werkes, 1875–1926*, 2nd edition extended by Renate Scharffenberg (Insel, 1996) (= *Chronik*).

[9] Rilke's works will be quoted from *Werke, Kommentierte Ausgabe*, ed. by Manfred Engel and others, 5 vols (Insel, 1996 and 2003) (= *KA*); or *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Ernst Zinn, 6 vols (Insel, 1955–66) (= *SW*): here *SW*, I, p. 435.

[10] W. Patrick McCray, *Glassmaking in Renaissance Venice: The Fragile Craft* (Routledge, 2016), p. 124. The phrase 'Venetianer Filigran' is used as an image of Rococo elegance in Act II of *Dämmerung* (1893) by Elsa Bernstein (pseud. Ernst Rosmer), whom Rilke knew when living in Munich and praised in 'Auch ein Münchner Brief' (1897, *SW*, V, pp. 331–32).

[11] Rilke, *Briefe an Schweizer Freunde*, ed. by Rätus Luck (Suhrkamp, 1990), p. 80 (22 June 1920; to Dory Von der Mühll), cf. also p. 59 (22 April 1920).

das ihnen erwünscht war'.[12] At every turn he claimed native knowledge; he was a 'traveller', not a 'tourist'.

Rilke's literary responses to the real Venice began with four poems composed during his first visit in March 1897, forming part of *Advent* under the heading *Fahrten*; three more were written at the same time but not published.[13] 'Venedig' is the title of the seventh of the eleven 'Christus-Visionen', written in Munich in April or May 1897 but not published in Rilke's lifetime. One of the three novellas in *Die Letzten* is set in Venice: 'Im Gespräch' was first published in April 1901 but was written in the winter of 1898–99. A sketch for a story entitled 'Der Kardinal' (September 1899) has a Venetian setting, and one of the thirteen *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* published in 1900 is set in the Ghetto. There is a reference to Venice in a list of memories in 'Und du erbst das Grün' from *Das Stunden-Buch* (September 1901, *KA*, I, p. 209), and then there is nothing until 'Fortgehn', probably written in June 1906 in Paris. This complex poem has thematic, motivic and lexical similarities with the works in the next group, which begins with the sonnet 'Die Kurtisane' from *Neue Gedichte* written on Capri in March 1907. Several more Venetian poems were written in Paris and published together in *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* in November 1908: 'Ein Doge' dates from late August or early September 1907; the sonnets 'Venezianischer Morgen', 'Spätherbst in Venedig' and 'San Marco' are from summer 1908; 'Die Laute' (about the Venetian courtesan Tullia d'Aragona) dates either from autumn 1907 in Paris or spring 1908 on Capri. There are thematic links between these five poems and those that frame them in that volume, 'Bildnis' (about Eleonora Duse, 1–2 August 1907), and 'Der Abenteuerer' (a two-part poem about Casanova, begun in August and September 1907 and completed in summer 1908), both also written in Paris.[14] The polemical sixty-ninth of the *Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, which focuses on Venice, was probably written in December 1909 in Paris. A decade and a half later, in 1924, Venice features as a nostalgic motif in a few of Rilke's French poems. This is probably a near-complete list of Rilke's writings focused on or directly inspired by *La Serenissima*, but hardly any were written 'on site'. A few works composed

[12] Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot 1921–1926*, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Insel, 1935), pp. 255–56 (26 February 1926; to Alfred Schaer).

[13] *SW*, I, pp. 116–18 and *SW*, III, pp. 563–64.

[14] On the unity of this sequence, see Anthony Phelan, *Rilke: Neue Gedichte* (Grant & Cutler, 1992), pp. 64–70. Interpretations of the whole cycle can be found in: Hans Berendt, *Rainer Maria Rilkes 'Neue Gedichte': Versuch einer Deutung* (Bouvier, 1957), pp. 293–300; Paul Requadt, *Die Bildersprache der deutschen Italiendichtung von Goethe bis Benn* (Francke, 1962), pp. 187–246 (esp. pp. 200–14); Brigitte Bradley, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (Francke, 1976), pp. 154–66 (= Bradley, *NGAT*) – see also Bradley, *R. M. Rilkes Neue Gedichte: Ihr zyklisches Gefüge* (Francke, 1967) (= Bradley, *NG*); and Volker Dürr, *Rainer Maria Rilke: The Poet's Trajectory* (Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 51–85. These mostly treat the poems in the order in which they appear in the 1908 collection (although Dürr is sceptical of their cyclic unity and groups them thematically); the interpretations below are in the order of composition (as far as this can be accurately dated) and thus yield different emphases.

in Venice were published posthumously, but they do not overtly or even implicitly reflect on the city, being connected with other areas of his poetic imagination.[15] Rilke's mature poetic 'processing' of Venice largely took place in Paris, and, unlike his impressions of Rome, which haunted him poetically long after his last visit there, very little seems to have found its way into poetry or prose (other than letters) after 1910.

In the fullest and subtlest analysis of Rilke's 'Venedigdichtung' to date, a long book chapter subtitled 'Schein und Wirklichkeit', Paul Requadt contrasts Rilke's reception of Rome with his response to Venice. I demur from his assessment that Rome in Rilke's writing lacks a 'Gesamtintuition'[16] and will indicate below how the 'Sein/Schein' dualism does not do justice to Rilke's response to Venice, but Requadt's claim that the Venetian writing represents 'ein Sinnganzes' is persuasive.[17] Using works, materials, comparisons and parallels not considered there, or by the many others who have been fascinated by Rilke and Venice and whose stimuli are recorded in the notes, this article attempts to trace the evolution of a complex but consistent view of a city that, like Rome, is linked to specific aspects of his poetics. Tracing the development of Rilke's understanding of Venice generates some new thoughts on canonical poems and fresh readings of less well-known related works. In demonstrating the essential coherence of that view, it also foregrounds the profound and widely ramifying interconnectedness and interdependence of Rilke's poetry across '[die] in der Rilke-Forschung üblicherweise unterschiedenen vier Werkphasen' (*KA*, I, p. 607). Words, phrases, syntax, images and gestures recur and are recombined kaleidoscopically across 'periods' and between texts – finished poems, sketches, drafts, letters and prose works, many of which are not related to Venice – such that the term 'Sinnganzes' has validity beyond the relatively narrow focus of works devoted to a single city.

## ROMANTIC TOURISM (1897–1903)

During his last visit to Venice in 1920, Rilke recalled that his first was 'als Gast eines Amerikaners!',[18] this short holiday being the most his pride had allowed him to accept of a more generous offer to fund a three-week tour

[15] Examples include poems and fragments from 1912 (*KA*, II, pp. 38–42), which are linked with the *Elegien* and perhaps the *Gedichte an die Nacht*. Also not considered here are poems inspired by artefacts in Venice but not about the city itself.

[16] See Robert Vilain, 'Rilke, Rome, and the Poetics of Fountains', *German Life and Letters*, 72.3 (2019), pp. 207–34.

[17] Requadt, 'Schein und Wirklichkeit', in *Die Bildersprache*, pp. 187–246 (p. 194). A version of that chapter is included in *Rilke in neuer Sicht*, ed. by Käte Hamburger (Kohlhammer, 1971), pp. 38–62. Requadt's consideration of the importance of Hofmannsthal to Rilke's conception of Venice is very persuasive; there has not been space to revisit that here.

[18] Rilke, *Briefe an Marietta Gräfin Mirbach-Geldern-Egmont 1914–1924*, ed. by Hildegard Heidelmann (Königshausen und Neumann, 2005), p. 69 (25 June 1920).

of Italy.[19] His host was a fellow student, Nathan Sulzberger, a New Yorker reading chemistry in Munich. They stayed on the Grand Canal opposite Santa Maria della Salute in the Grand Hotel Britannia (later the Europa & Regina, now the St Regis) from 28 to 31 March 1897. Rilke's thank-you letter expresses 'aus ganzem Herzen treue Worte der Freude': Rilke had already sent Sulzberger *Larenopfer* and *Traumgekrönt* in 1896, both with verse dedications, and in December 1897 he sent *Advent*, dedicating to him the poem 'Mein Ruder sang: Poppé, fahr zu!' and claiming a 'große Sehnsucht nach Venedig'.[20] He expressed gratitude for the introduction to such a special place: 'Venedig dank' ich Ihnen und was es heißt Jemandem Venedig danken, muß ich nicht erörtern'.[21] The friendship did not last, however – the snooty exclamation mark after 'Amerikaner!' may suggest why – and when *Advent* was republished in 1913, the names of all the dedicatees were removed.

Rilke's initial poetic responses to Venice are dominated by impressionistic or symbolist-inspired imagery, mood and tone. The first poem is representative:

> Fremdes Rufen. Und wir wählen
> eine Gondel, schwarz und schlank:
> leises Gleiten an den Pfählen
> einer Marmorstadt entlang.
>
> Still. Die Schiffer nur erzählen
> sich. Die Ruder rauschen sacht,
> und aus Kirchen und Kanälen
> winkt uns eine fremde Nacht.
>
> Und der schwarze Pfad wird leiser,
> fernes Ave weht die Luft, –
> traun: ich bin ein toter Kaiser,
> und sie lenken mich zur Gruft. (*SW*, I, p. 116)

Many features are derivative of French (or French-inspired) neo-Romantic verse, including phrases hovering in time without main verbs or with indeterminate present tenses, moody adjectives ('schwarz und schlank', 'leise', 'sacht', 'fremd'), sentences beginning with 'Und' and the archaism ('traun') in the penultimate line. The conglomerate of sensations produced by the mysterious voices, the black gondola and its soundless

[19] Joachim Storck, 'Rilkes frühestes Venedig-Erlebnis', in *Rilke und Venedig – Rilke in Schweden*, ed. by Hansgeorg Schmidt-Bergmann, Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft, 16/17 (Thorbecke, 1989/1990) (= Storck), pp. 19–32, here p. 21 (25 March 1897; to Mathilde Goudstikker).

[20] Poppé is a diminutive of Paolo used as a generic name for gondoliers: see George Schoolfield, *Young Rilke and his Time* (Camden House, 2009), p. 286, which also has a fuller analysis of the Sulzberger connection (pp. 281–82) and the *Advent* poems (pp. 283–90).

[21] Rilke, *Briefe, Verse und Prosa*, pp. 55–56 (letters of 2 April and 21 December 1897) and p. 107 (dedicatory poem in *Traumgekrönt*).

passage through canals and past churches generate a projection of the self as a dead emperor being borne to his crypt. Rilke's willingness to sink into atmospheric or sentimental clichés characterises both the letters and the poetry from this first visit. Of the same gondola ride Rilke wrote to Mathilde Goudstikker:

> ich winkte dem nächsten Poppé, sprang in die schwarze Schale und trieb begleitet von sachtem Ruderathmen weit aus Licht und Lärm in die runendunkle Lagunenstille hinaus. – Bis dorthin wo keine Gondel mir mehr begegnete, und ich hinter schüchternen Barkenlampen des stolzen Meeres unendliche Sehnsucht ahnte.[22]

These impressions are consciously gathered so as to counteract the vulgar spectacle – 'so ganz für Fremde gerechnet' (for tourists, therefore) – of 'a barque with a band on board playing folksongs and street ditties and hung with Chinese lanterns' that Rilke was attempting to escape.[23]

Rilke's letters to Goudstikker characterise Venice rather limply as 'diese Zauberstadt', 'wie ein Märchen'.[24] The clichés are the equivalent of the watered-down experience of tourists over-reliant on commercial guidebooks, as Rilke would later recognise, 'weil man […] das Auffällige und leicht Auffindbare von anderen Blicken und Händen übernehmen […] muß', with the result that these experiences lose 'viel an Intensität'.[25] The unpublished poems written alongside *Fahrten* display a fascination with light that Rilke would always retain: in the first, we read 'Die Marmorgnade | der Kuppelkirchen schimmert her, | Und Lichter gleiten leise Pfade', and in the second 'und leise beben | die Lichter am Lagunensaum'; the second and third allude to the calls of the gondoliers and the plashing of their oars (*SW*, III, p. 563). The third poem anticipates the *Neue Gedichte* with allusions to the city's naval power and the doges, although it sees all such authority religiously as 'ein Rufen | nach dem einzigen herrlichen Herrn' (*SW*, III, p. 564), which is not a view that will be sustained.

In these poems, Rilke hardly questions the city's identity or his own, except perhaps in connection with its architecture, which he perceives as monumental, rigid, haughty, even sclerotic, but also strangely engaging. In the second poem of *Fahrten*, he contrasts the poverty of the people of Venice with the city's nostalgia for grand events in the noble palaces, asserting implausibly 'das Volk will Kronen sehen', and the third poem

[22] Storck, p. 24 (28–29 March 1897; to Mathilde Goudstikker).

[23] Schoolfield, *Young Rilke*, p. 286. Schoolfield notes laconically (p. 287) that the 'fremdes Rufen' was in reality just traffic-management signalling between gondoliers, as a footnote to the thirty-first of Platen's *Sonette aus Venedig* attests: 'Die Gondoliere in Venedig bedienen sich […] eines herkömmlichen Rufes, um das Aneinanderstoßen zweier Gondeln zu verhindern' (August Graf von Platen, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Max Koch and Erich Petzet, 12 vols (Hesse, 1910), I, p. 189).

[24] Storck, p. 22 (25 March 1897).

[25] Rilke, *Die Briefe an Karl und Elisabeth von der Heydt 1905–1922*, ed. by Ingeborg Schnack and Renate Scharffenberg (Insel, 1986) (= *BwvdH*), p. 145 (24 March 1908; to Gisela von der Heydt).

asks after the whereabouts of the dead 'in köstlichen Kronen' and suggests that the palaces 'können nicht schlafen'. The elegant piazze 'erschauern', although they maintain an 'eisige Ruh | in Marmorgliedern | mit matten Lidern'. In the last poem, Rilke contrasts the churches, which the visitor can hear telling stories, with the taciturn palaces on silent canals, which 'verraten nichts mehr' (*SW*, I, pp. 116–18). Overall, the impression is of a ghostly Venice nostalgic for the glories of Renaissance society, with only the churches in any way communicative: the modern city is haunted by its past and the present is diminished in comparison.

Of the Grand Canal, Rilke writes in the letter quoted above, 'diese steinerne Ahnengalerie machte einen übermächtigen Eindruck auf mich', and the ancestral names of its former inhabitants came alive 'beim Anblick der toten Paläste, in deren stummen Räumen die Feste ihrer Macht schimmerten […]. Und die verschlossenen Fenster sind wie erloschene Augen, die moosigen Thorstufen wie Moderlippen und in allen Säulengelenken ist ein steinernes Erstarrtsein' (Storck, p. 24). At this stage he senses only dimly what by 1908 he will have recognised more clearly as a powerful hidden energy: 'und doch […] es liegt ein leises zages Hoffen über diesen Denkmalen, eine intime Auferstehungszuversicht …' (ibid.). It is already clear that Rilke was not inclined to succumb to the (post-)Romantic literary image of Venice 'as a theatre of decline and disorder, sensuality, sin, and death' that had been influential 'since at least Byron's "Ode to Venice" (1816)'.[26]

Another direct response to Rilke's first visit to Venice is to be found in the powerful *Christus-Visionen*, in a narrative poem headed simply 'Venedig' (written in April or May 1897, shortly after Rilke's return to Munich). The opening lines closely echo the image in *Fahrten* of the dead emperor conducted by the architecture of the city into his crypt. There is still some morbid sentimentality, exacerbated by prominent alliteration: listening to the calls of the gondoliers, 'der Fremde steht und trinkt den Klang voll Gier | in lauter Lauschen löst sich seine Seele: | *vorrei morir*' (*SW*, III, p. 153). The visitor stands at the foot of the Scala dei Giganti that leads to the Doge's apartments (the 'giants' are Mars and Neptune, signalling the military and nautical strength of the city) and looks up to a window 'dessen Flächen brannten' as the rays of the setting sun play over it, their reflections coursing 'wie ein Schwarm von wunden Flagellanten' – a striking image that introduces the main theme of suffering. The window is in the room where the romantic hero Silvio Pellico (1789–1854) was held prisoner in the Piombi prison, part of the Doge's Palace. Pellico is best known nowadays for his tragedy *Francesca da Rimini* (1818), but his memoir *Le mie prigioni* (1832) propelled him to European fame and inspired many who worked towards Italian unification and liberation from Austria. His was not technically 'ewig öde Haft' (*SW*, III, p. 154) – he spent (only) a decade in various

[26] Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei, *Exotic Spaces in German Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 82.

prisons – but the image of patience and tolerance that Rilke projects is consonant with his reputation: 'er lächelte das Lächeln einer zahmen | in Fesseln müd gewordenen Leidenschaft'.

Perhaps recalling that Pellico's memoir is also famous for an account of his conversion to Christianity,[27] Rilke evokes the figure of Christ himself, looking up at the window with a heavy heart before striding through the empty arcades of Venice, initially 'schweren Fußes', eventually at a run: 'Vor seiner eignen Lehre war ihm bang | vor jener Lehre der Vergänglichkeiten' – the teaching that salvation is not on earth and that earthly suffering is merely a preparation for divine acceptance – and his anxiety turns into anger until he stands 'wie gerettet' on a balcony and listens to the sound of the lagoon (*SW*, III, p. 155). Venice is empty, but Christ is joined, kneeling in prayer, by a venerable, white-bearded companion in a purple robe, doubtless the spirit of a doge.[28] Christ inquires after the old days, when Venice knew how to celebrate and when He was worshipped: 'wo sind sie | die mich verehrt[?]'. He is aware that 'die Nacht bewohnt in euren kalten | Palästen jetzt das beste Prunkgemach' and that the splendour of Renaissance Venice has given way to cold, empty streets where 'Trauer nur, in halbem Traum gesungen | langt oft den flüchtenden Erinnerungen nach' (*SW*, III, p. 155), and that the grand houses are deserted with only the churches surviving.

The Doge's reply is calm but devastating. He pointedly does not rise from his knees or change the prayerful clasp of his hands, thereby posturally asserting parity with his 'friendly adversar[y]',[29] and confirms that it is indeed only the churches that welcome in the people nowadays, summoning them with bells, offering 'große, reiche Feste' and a place to forget 'Elend und Gebreste', where the populace can be 'wie Kinder selig': 'Und jedes Volk, das gerne noch als Kind | sich fühlen mag, folgt in die Prachtpaläste | die du ihm aufgetan und betet blind' (*SW*, III, p. 156). However, the Doge predicts a time in which the people will no longer wish to be treated as children and play childish games, ironically echoing 1 Corinthians 13:11 ('When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things'): 'denn mögen alle deine Glocken grollen, | dann bleibt auch *dein* Palast für ewig leer' (my emphasis). The Doge remains on his knees, 'und dieses Knien schien weit hinauszuwachsen | vorbei an Christo und weit über ihn …': both state and church will see their period of influence wane, but

[27] See Antonio Pagliaro, 'Silvio Pellico's *Le mie prigioni*: Autobiography versus Religion', in *Rewriting and Rereading the XIX and XX-Century Canons*, ed. by Samuele Grassi and Brian Zuccala (Firenze University Press, 2022), pp. 163–72.

[28] An unpublished poem linked to *Advent* evokes 'Dogengeister' walking 'durch die schlafende Stadt' (*SW*, III, p. 564).

[29] Siegfried Mandel, 'Introduction', to Rilke, *Visions of Christ: A Posthumous Cycle of Poems*, trans. by Aaron Kramer (University of Colorado Press, 1967), p. 24.

it is the representative of state power, not the incarnation of God's love, whose humble gesture will endure.

The sequence as a whole sees Christ 'traverse the world that is his legacy in various manifestations (fool, beggar, wandering Jew) and in various locations familiar to Rilke […], remorseful about the ravages his teachings have worked on life'.[30] The city of Venice gives a somewhat ambivalent local message to the effect that, whilst the transcendental soteriology of Christianity is not an adequate response to human suffering, the more vital temporal contribution that Venice used to make has also faded fatally. The city imagery here and in *Fahrten* is bleak; buildings are empty husks for a life lacking energy (or faith) and serve merely to remind us of past splendour.

More cynically, one might suspect that these early reflections on Venice smack slightly of the tourist frustrated because he has to make do with a superabundance of dark churches instead of being granted access to the brilliance of noble festivities that characterise the image he brings to the city from its historical reputation. During his first visit to Venice, Rilke relied on the 1894 Baedeker guide to Northern Italy. He wrote to Mathilde Goudstikker that he was planning a trip down the Grand Canal past the Palazzi Vendramin and Papadopoli – not coincidentally, these are the two palaces listed in the *Christus-Visionen* poem (*SW*, III, p. 155). The destination was St Mark's Square, where he would climb the campanile, 'storm' the Doge's Palace and visit the church of Il Redentore because his other cicerone, Goethe, had praised it as a notably successful example of Palladio's attempt to exploit ancient temple styles for a Christian church.[31] Even so, he was already kicking over the traces, asserting boldly, 'dann werd' ich's aber genug sein lassen mit der Subordination gegen Baedecker [*sic*]'. He also relativised Goethe: 'Ich lese was Goethe in der Italienischen Reise von Venedig erzählt,' he wrote to Mathilde, 'Ich bereite mich würdig vor' – but he was disappointed with Goethe's too sober account, which 'dreht sich um die Schaubühnen und das Volksleben', and summarised, 'Goethe war damals noch recht unmodern'.[32] What Rilke understood by Goethe's lack of modernity was probably his lack of susceptibility to mood and nuance, which transgressed one of Rilke's then-dominant poetic principles: 'Alles ist Stimmung. Ich bin willenlos in den Banden der Stimmung.'[33] 'Später scheint [Goethe] mir viel mehr Empfinden für "die Stimmung an sich" gehabt zu haben' was his rather lordly concession in 1897. In the same letter, he expounds his own approach to Venice, a romantic one, tinged with religiosity:

[30] Charlie Louth, *Rilke: The Life of the Work* (Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 30.

[31] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italienische Reise*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Münchner Ausgabe, ed. by Karl Richter and others, III/i, *Italien und Weimar 1786–1790*, ed. by Norbert Miller and Hartmut Reinhardt (Hanser, 2006), p. 102 (entry for 3 October 1786).

[32] Storck, pp. 22–23 (25 and 27 March 1897).

[33] Rilke, *Briefe an Baronesse von Oe*, ed. by Richard von Mises (Duke University Press, 1945), pp. 23–24 (3 March 1896; to Láska van Oestéren).

> Wie ein Märchen ists mir: den Markusplatz soll ich sehen in seinem bunten Frühlingstreiben […]. Wie will ich Ihrer denken in dieser Zauberstadt. […] Ihr liebes Andenken will ich führen durch das kühle Dämmern müder Palazzi und Ihr Bild, wie ichs in der Seele trage, soll mir die Gondelnische auf dem nächtlichen Lido zur Kapelle weihen.[34]

The 'palazzi' are almost the only contribution to Rilke's 'Venedigbild' from the novella 'Im Gespräch' (*KA*, III, pp. 288–96), a discussion about art featuring an international group of unnamed figures, in which Venice is only specifically mentioned once (p. 290). Princess Helena Pawlowna (perhaps inspired by Lou Andreas-Salomé) is spending her first winter in Venice, but despite the novelty of the experience she cannot imagine that the city was 'jemals anders', to which 'der Herr aus Wien' (perhaps Hugo von Hofmannsthal) responds by saying 'Es ist seltsam. Diese alten Paläste sind so rührend in ihrem Anvertrauen. Sie haben viele Erinnerungen. Und da ist einem manchmal, als ob man alle mit ihnen teilte' (ibid.).[35] The Princess agrees, adding 'daß man nicht *hier* [Venice] Kind war, kann man gar nicht begreifen', and that she feels the urge sometimes to tell passers-by how she played in this or that space as a child – 'lauter, lauter Lügen'. Nothing more is learned of the city than that it has the power to instil itself fraudulently into one's memories in this manner, a testimony perhaps to its quasi-occult power over the imagination.[36]

Before writing this story, and about a year after his first visit, in the spring of 1898, Rilke contrasts his initial impressions of Venice with a new enthusiasm, the city of Florence. In the *Florenzer Tagebuch* there is a somewhat dismissive paragraph on *La Serenissima*:

> Florenz erschließt sich nicht wie Venedig dem Vorübergehenden. Dort sind die hellen, heiteren Paläste so vertrauensselig und beredt, und wie schöne Frauen verharren sie immerfort am Spiegel des Kanals und sorgen, ob man ihnen das Altern nicht anmerkt. Sie sind glücklich in ihrem Glanz und haben wohl nie andere Wünsche gehabt, als schön zu sein und alle Vorzüge dieses Besitzes zu zeigen und zu genießen. Deshalb geht der Flüchtigste beschenkt von ihnen, reicher wenigstens um dieses unvergleichliche goldene Lächeln der festlichen Fronten, das zu jeder Stunde des Tages in irgendeiner Nuance wach bleibt und nachts der etwas zu süßen, hingebenden Melancholie weicht, welche in den venezianischen Erinnerungen jedes hastigsten Italienfahrers Raum gewann. Anders in Florenz: Fast feindlich heben die Paläste dem Fremden ihre stummen Stirnen entgegen, und ein lauschender Trotz bleibt

[34] Storck, p. 22 (25 March 1897).

[35] Helmut Naumann, *Studien zu Rilkes frühem Werk* (Schäuble, 1991), p. 81. Naumann identifies Salomé and Hofmannsthal as models for the main figures, the other three of whom he suggests are Kasimir Termajer (Kasimir), Melchior de Vogüé (Graf Saint-Quentin), and Heinrich Vogeler ('der deutsche Maler').

[36] Rilke mentions it to his publisher, Anton Kippenberg, in a letter of 9 August 1912, recalling in particular the fireplace often mentioned in the text: Rilke, *Briefe an seinen Verleger 1906–1926*, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber, 2nd extended edn, 2 vols (Insel, 1949) (= *BV*), I, p. 177.

> lange um die dunklen Nischen und Tore, und selbst die klarste Sonne vermag nicht seine letzten Spuren zu löschen.[37]

The imagined enmity of the palaces echoes impressions from 1897; another motif anticipates the Venice sonnets of 1908 – the personification of the city as a woman checking her reflection in the canals. However, where those poems probe the city's complex identity, this paragraph assumes unquestioningly a degree of showy superficiality in a city that reveals itself quickly and fully, smiling at visitors, content merely to be beautiful. The sentimental nocturnal melancholy of *Fahrten* is here, too; so too is the fairy-tale imagery, for a little later in the same work, Rilke contrasts '[die] verheimlichten Mysterien, die in den Bildern Botticellis [a Florentine painter] die eigentlichen Motive darstellen' with 'diese, wenn auch nur dunkel, so doch immerhin ausgesprochene Märchenhaftigkeit der Venezianer' (*TadF*, p. 86). Where Florence sternly resists interpretation and plays hard to get, Venice sets out its stall for every passing tourist to gawp at.

A year later, as a prelude to a more considered appreciation of the city, a humorous critique of the discourse of tourism features in another of Rilke's early literary evocations of Venice, 'Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig' from the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*.[38] Here the narrator and his self-satisfied interlocutor Herr Baum – who is not unlike the 'Bankdirektor' in Altenberg's sketch about 'Venedig in Wien' – begin by trading romantic highlights from Baedeker as they recall their experiences of the city, allusively rather than in detail:

> 'ich erinnere mich besonders gern der Fahrt durch den Kanal, dieses leisen lautlosen Hingleitens am Rande von Vergangenheiten'. 'Der Palazzo Franchetti', fiel ihm ein. 'Die Cà Doro', – gab ich zurück. 'Der Fischmarkt' '– Der Palazzo Vendramin –' 'Wo Richard Wagner' – fügte er rasch, als ein gebildeter Deutscher, hinzu. Ich nickte: 'Den Ponte, wissen Sie?' Er lächelte mit Orientierung: 'Selbstverständlich, und das Museum, die Akademie, nicht zu vergessen, wo ein Tizian…' (*KA*, III, p. 385)

Immediately thereafter the narrator begins to display his mastery of just the kind of cabbies' 'Knowledge' of which Rilke boasts in the 1924 letter to Alfred Schaer quoted above:

> Wenn man unter dem Ponte di Rialto hindurchfährt, an dem Fondaco de' Turchi und an dem Fischmarkt vorbei, und dem Gondoliere sagt: 'rechts!', so sieht er etwas erstaunt aus und fragt wohl gar: 'Dove?' Aber man besteht darauf nach rechts zu fahren, und steigt in einem der kleinen schmutzigen

[37] Rilke, *Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit*, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Insel, 1973) (= *TadF*), pp. 23–24.
[38] *KA*, III, pp. 384–90, written mid-November 1899. Rilke read this to his friends in Worpswede on 21 September 1900 (*TadF*, p. 239).

> Kanäle aus, handelt mit ihm, schimpft und geht durch gedrängte Gassen und schwarze verqualmte Torgänge auf einen leeren freien Platz hinaus. (*KA*, III, p. 385)

That said, the evocation of the styles of Carpaccio, Titian and Tiepolo that follow is more characteristic of the connoisseur than of the day-tripper.

This paves the way for a very untouristical tale that Baum finds rather embarrassing. Rilke's story clearly distinguishes two aspects of Venice. The first is the cramped, gated and (between 1516 and 1797) legally circumscribed zone in the district of Cannaregio known as the Ghetto,[39] where the Jewish population was compelled to live. They had to build upwards because they were not permitted to encroach on other areas of the city. The wealthy goldsmith Melchisedech lives there, compulsively moving ever higher, changing lodgings two or three times a year as new rooms are added to the tops of the 'Babel-like towers', moving closer and closer to heaven.[40] The second Venice is what Rilke's narrator only semi-ironically calls 'das wirkliche Venedig' (*KA*, III, p. 386), the city of palaces, romantic nights on the lagoon and masked balls, a city of which Melchisedech and his family have no experience at all. The second city is the subject of tales within the tale, of festivals and battles and art, 'von Venedig, wie von einem Märchen, das es nirgendwo ganz so gegeben hat' (*KA*, III, p. 387), and they are told by their nocturnal visitor Marcantonio Priuli, son of a high Venetian official, who is surely the father of the 'blondes, zartes Kind' (*KA*, III, p. 389) eventually borne by Melchisedech's daughter Esther. The Jews, confined to the Ghetto, 'sont à Venise sans y être',[41] and 'ihre Stadt, die nicht am Meere lag, wuchs so langsam in den Himmel hinaus, wie in ein anderes Meer' (*KA*, III, pp. 387–88), but even the topmost rooms do not normally permit a view of the sea itself, which remains hidden from the inhabitants of the Ghetto behind a prison-like 'Gitter' of masts, joists and stanchions. When Esther's child is born, however, she takes it to the highest roof and finally glimpses 'ein stilles, silbernes Licht: das Meer'. Her father is there, praying ecstatically: 'hat er das Meer gesehen oder Gott, den Ewigen, in seiner Glorie?' (*KA*, III, p. 390). The two are the same; both are promises of something beyond the constrictions of repression and mortality. It is no coincidence that the vision is vouchsafed only after the birth of the blond child, a product of the union of the Ghetto and 'das wirkliche Venedig', and no coincidence that Rilke leaves open whether the vision is one of the

[39] Did Rilke know that the very word 'ghetto' is Venetian in origin? Attested from 1295, it means 'foundry', from the Latin 'iactus', or post-classically 'iectus' ('cast'), and was 'always pronounced with initial velar /ɡ-/ (a reflex of classical Latin initial /j-/ which is apparently paralleled in certain northern Venetian dialects)' (www.oed.com).

[40] Dana E. Katz, *The Jewish Ghetto and the Visual Imagination of Early Modern Venice* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 1–2; see also Margaret Plant, *Venice: Fragile City, 1797–1977* (Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 252–53.

[41] Karine Winkelvoss, 'Rilke et Venise', in *Villes et écrivains: Berlin, Munich, Venise*, ed. by Gilbert Krebs (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1999), doi:10.4000/books.psn.6551.

divine, the glory of God, or of the physical, the sea, the locus of Venice's historical glory. Neither Judaism (in this story) nor Christianity (in the *Christus-Visionen*) offers a transcendental solution for Rilke. But in both these early works there is a sense of Venice as an indomitable force that mitigates Rilke's anxieties about superficiality.

Rilke's choice to focus on the Ghetto was bold in 1899; most European writing at the time evoked the grand or romantic faces of the city, its canals and public buildings.[42] Rilke's adjective 'wirklich' is literal to the extent that it refers to churches, palaces and squares with a demonstrable concrete reality that contrasts with Melchisedech's visionary aspirations. It is ironic to the extent that Rilke sees the constantly repressed lives of the city's Jewish population as more 'real' than the picture-postcard city consumed by hordes of transient tourists. But the two are interdependent. When Rilke writes of 'wachsende Klagen', 'ein wallender Qualm', 'viel scheues Gesindel' and the impoverished children of the Ghetto playing 'mit den Scherben und Abfällen von buntem Glasfluß', he immediately reminds the reader that the glass is '[dasselbe] aus dem die Meister die ernsten Mosaiken von San Marco fügten' (*KA*, III, p. 386) – the contrasting aspects of the city are nonetheless interdependent.

Rilke was not able to return to Venice for six years, and his second stay only lasted three days (he arrived early on 30 August and left late on 1 September 1903); he was on his way to Rome with his wife. The weather was 'strahlend schön' and he arrived as a typical educated tourist once more, writing to his mother on 1 September that they were visiting 'alles was es giebt, und waren heute fast den ganzen Vormittag in San Marco und im Dogenpalast'.[43] By 1908, however, his understanding of the city was very different, and he explained at length to the daughter of friends who was about to honeymoon in Venice why a guidebook was 'völlig unbrauchbar' there: 'man kann diese Stadt nicht nach seiner Auswahl sehen, in der alles sehenswert ist oder nichts; in der, was man konstatiert, schon gewissermaßen aufhört zu sein: so empfindlich ist es in seiner unbeschreiblichen Existenz'.[44] Precarity is a constant theme – the dissolution of individual identity into the totality that is Venice as a form of potentiated being – but it is important to explore changes between the description of Venice as a fairy tale 'das es nirgendwo ganz so gegeben hat' (1900) and the city that 'sich

[42] A nuanced literary overview is given by Angelika Corbineau-Hoffmann, *Paradoxie der Fiktion: Literarische Venedig-Bilder 1797–1984* (De Gruyter, 1993), pp. 289–414. See also Bernhard Blume, 'Rilkes "Spätherbst in Venedig", *Wirkendes Wort*, 10 (1960), pp. 345–54 (pp. 346–47), for an evocative summary of the popular literary image of the city.

[43] Rilke, *Briefe an die Mutter, 1896–1926*, ed. by Hella Sieber-Rilke, 2 vols (Insel, 2009) (= *BadM*), I, p. 390.

[44] *BwvdH*, pp. 144–45 (24 March 1908).

bildet ohne irgendwann zu sein' or 'gewissermaßen aufhört zu sein' (1908).[45]

Venice also features prominently in a little-known sketch written on 8 November 1899, perhaps a week or so before 'Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig'. '*Der Kardinal*: Eine Biographie' is part of the *Schmargendorfer Tagebuch* (*TadF*, pp. 154–57). It outlines the career of the illegitimate son of the Princess of Ascoli and 'irgend ein Abenteurer'.[46] The child 'erinnert [seine Mutter] an einen Garten, an Venedig, und an einen Tag, da sie schöner war als sonst'; he is given a name, the Marchese von Villavenetia. After a wild period in his youth spent philandering and duelling, 'er kommt nach Venedig und muß an einen Garten denken'. He searches urgently for this garden – surely the location of his own conception – 'dann findet er Valenzia. Sie ist groß, golden und stolz.' She has a lover, who is mysteriously the subject of many maleficent works of art, some of which were painted over a century ago; the spectre of the lover drives Villavenetia to leap one night from Valenzia's window into the canal and escape his mental persecution (perhaps echoing in modified form Casanova's notorious escape from the Piombi prison: for him, the drop from the roof into the canal was too great, so he broke into a lower storey via a window). Ten years later, Villavenetia returns to Venice to look again at that very window (picking up a motif from the *Christus-Visionen*); he meets Valenzia at a party but does not then engage with her. Villavenetia is made Cardinal at a young age; he enjoys the pomp of the office but quickly withdraws to his estates and gardens. He misses the Easter rituals one year and hosts instead the first of a series of decadent festivities (orgies) at which eventually Valenzia is a guest. One evening he receives a mysterious letter and shows it to her, whereupon she leaves for Rome whence his mother quickly writes to congratulate him – the narrator specifically registers that this is 'der erste Brief von ihr'. The Cardinal has been elected Pope and rewards his mother for her politicking with a painting by Giorgione.

The story outline is slight and confirms that at this point Rilke is still nostalgic for an image of Venice dominated by wealth, sophistication and power – the 'real' Venice of the Ghetto story. However, it includes a few Venetian motifs that will recur later in more considered works, including those of the adventurer, the courtesan, windows and mental pressure that

[45] The phrase 'hörte diese Stadt | auf zu sein' is also used of St Petersburg in 'Nächtliche Fahrt' (*KA*, I, p. 551).

[46] Rilke may not have intended any particular historical reference, but the most famous Prince of Ascoli – who served on the flagship of the Armada in 1588 – was notoriously reputed to be the illegitimate son of Doña Eufrasia de Guzmán and King Philip of Spain. Villavenetia's father '*nannte sich* damals Marquis Pemba' – the phrasing here suggests that Rilke knew that the title 'Marquis of Pemba' was not represented in the *Almanach de Gotha*, but was one conferred by the King of Portugal upon 'petty kings or chieftains' in Congo 'as a reward for their services' (Viscount of Sá da Bandeira, *Facts and Statements Concerning the Right of the Crown of Portugal to […] The West Coast of Africa* (Fitch, 1877), p. 4).

leads to crisis. Valenzia *is* in some sense the garden in which the Marchese was conceived; her sudden departure from Venice creates space for his mother to reappear; they are never present together and there is thus a hint that she is in fact his mother. Valenzia and her other mysterious lover (his father?) are sensual, even diabolical counterforces to the mission of the church that Villavenetia serves, creating a sense that he has signed some form of Faustian pact to secure his advancement. The centuries-old portraits of the unnamed lover overtly reach back into earlier generations and support the suggestions of an incestuous bond. Be that as it may, these are aspects of the city that are not pursued in later works, except perhaps in the sexual power of 'die Kurtisane' over the youth of the city.

## ANTICIPATING VENICE IN POETRY (SPRING AND SUMMER 1907)

Between Rilke's second and third visits to Venice, he wrote three poems about the city. The first was completed in March 1907:

DIE KURTISANE

Venedigs Sonne wird in meinem Haar
ein Gold bereiten: aller Alchemie
erlauchten Ausgang. Meine Brauen, die
den Brücken gleichen, siehst du sie

hinführen ob der lautlosen Gefahr
der Augen, die ein heimlicher Verkehr
an die Kanäle schließt, so dass das Meer
in ihnen steigt und fällt und wechselt. Wer

mich einmal sah, beneidet meinen Hund,
weil sich auf ihm oft in zerstreuter Pause
die Hand, die nie an keiner Glut verkohlt,

die unverwundbare, geschmückt, erholt –.
Und Knaben, Hoffnungen aus altem Hause,
gehn wie an Gift an meinem Mund zugrund. (*KA*, I, p. 487)

The tradition of the Renaissance sonnet is clearly visible here. The conceits of hair compared with the sun, of eyebrows likened to bridges, the *bella mano* motif, and the seductive mouth all recall the Petrarchist repertoire of evocations of female beauty. Eyebrows, for example, are mentioned three times in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* or *Canzoniere* ('hebeno i cigli' in 157, 'tranquille ciglia' in 160, and 'le stellanti ciglia' alongside 'li occhi sereni' in 200[47]), always emphasising serenity and composure.

[47] Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere: Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini, 2 vols (Giulio Einaudi, 2005), I, p. 749; I, p. 761; II, p. 928.

One of Petrarch's translators somewhat controversially suggests that these elements contribute to a 'strange pastiche' of physical features, including blond hair, that 'often give [Laura] the appearance of a courtesan'.[48] Rilke's courtesan is intimately linked with the city itself, and has been read as an allegory of Venice:[49] her hair is transmuted by the Venetian sunshine into gold (not just a colour here, but an allusion to wealth).[50] Furthermore, her eyebrows resemble the city's bridges,[51] leading the observer over the silently dangerous eyes that, via a mysterious conjunction with the canals themselves, reflect the rise and fall of the lagoon: it is hard not to hear the shadow of '*ver*führen' behind '*hin*führen', and Böschenstein sees in this motion 'une allégorie de l'orgasme féminin'.[52] It is perhaps more likely that the eroticism here is aimed at male excitement, given the suggestive downwards trajectory of imagery from hair, via eyebrows and eyes, to the dog in the courtesan's lap, with vocabulary such as 'Verkehr', 'Kanäle' and 'Glut' contributing none-too-subtle sexual overtones.

'Die Kurtisane' is thus a highly erotic poem, but it opens with a trope that might at first sight resemble a dispassionate delving into the standard repertoire of Italian Renaissance sonneteers (a woman's hair compared to the sun), which it then combines with an alchemical image. Rilke touched on alchemy elsewhere – in 'Der Alchimist' (*KA*, I, p. 530), for example, written on 22 August 1907 (in which the outcome of the process is also described as 'erlaucht'). He must also have learned something of Venice's historical association with alchemy and the occult via his extensive reading,[53] and perhaps he knew of the contribution made by the Jewish inhabitants of the Ghetto to alchemical mysticism. However, it may be that the term here has less to do with the occult than with the Venetian trade of cloth-dying.[54] In either case, there is something magical, sinister and dangerous about the power of this courtesan. The traditional 'volta' in the

[48] Petrarch, *Canzoniere*, trans. by Mark Musa (Indiana University Press, 1996), p. xviii.

[49] Bradley, *NGAT*, p. 154.

[50] Birgit Haustedt notes that the courtesans' famous blond hair was usually not natural, but the result of sitting outdoors for hours to allow the sun to bleach their hair: the sun is used 'to make gold – that is, money'; see Birgit Haustedt, *Rilke's Venice*, trans. by Stephen Brown (Haus Publishing, 2008), p. 36. See also Berendt, *Rainer Maria Rilkes 'Neue Gedichte'*, p. 298.

[51] About San Marco in a letter of 29 March 1897 to Goudstikker, Rilke had written of 'mächtige Mosaiken unter breitgewölbten Bogen wie bedeutende Augen unter ernsten Brauen' (Storck, p. 24), anticipating both 'Die Kurtisane' and 'San Marco' (in the use of 'wölben').

[52] Bernhard Böschenstein, 'Le cycle de poèmes vénitiens de 1907/1908', in *Rilke: Les Jours d'Italie / Die italienischen Tage*, ed. by Curdin Ebneter (Fondation Rainer Maria Rilke, 2009), pp. 229–43 (p. 232). Compare also the water imagery in 'Hetären-Gräber' (1904), especially ll. 38–42, where 'die Leiber vieler Jünglinge sich stürzten' anticipates the end of 'Die Kurtisane'.

[53] See for example Michael A. Ryan, 'Magic in Medieval Venice', *History Compass*, 17.8 (2019), doi:10.1111/hic3.12583.

[54] See Janet Sethre, *The Souls of Venice* (McFarland, 2003): 'the link between "colour" and "alchemy" might come most spontaneously to any Venetian's mind, from the Renaissance on, because "alchemy" was often mentioned in connection with the art of cloth-dying, fundamental to Venice's economy' (p. 180).

sonnet between octave and sestet is jarringly displaced by a single syllable, with the confrontational 'Wer' at the end of line 8 offering something like an erotic challenge to the reader (or the beholder of the beautiful courtesan) and suggesting that anyone who sees this woman carelessly caressing her lapdog will experience sexual envy. Like many of those in Renaissance love sonnets, this woman does not herself burn with love; 'nie' and 'keiner' emphasise how she is invulnerable to its fires, and they prepare powerfully for the image in the last two lines of the hapless aristocratic youths who fall for her charms but are callously discarded. The hand that might have caressed them is not tender but 'unverwundbar', is decorative ('geschmückt'), and does not suffer from the pangs of amatory emotion ('erholt'). What is perhaps specifically Venetian about this poem is its conjuration of willpower and steely invulnerability,[55] which is one component of a complex to which Rilke returns many times.

The woman whom Rilke may have had in mind is perhaps Veronica Franco (1546–91), a celebrated *cortigiana onesta* and a published poet noted for her championship of the rights of women. She was summoned by the Inquisition in 1580 after 'anonymous charges of performing heretical incantations in her house near San Giovanni Novo', and the epithet *Dangerous Beauty* (the title of a 1988 film about her, based on a scholarly biography) fits Rilke's portrayal.[56] There are several paintings of her that feature bright golden hair, and an engraving in a book on Venetian fashion by Giacomo Franco, entitled 'Cortigiana famosa' (and often said to be of Veronica), shows her with a dog.[57] Whether Rilke knew any of these images is impossible to establish, but it would be surprising if he knew nothing of Franco herself. Many other images might have been in Rilke's mind, especially (given the sensuous sexuality of the poem) Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1543), which Rilke must have seen in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence in 1898.[58] Titian's Venus is in the Venetian tradition of the reclining nude and is perhaps a portrait of the courtesan Angela Zaffetta; it features not only a small dog but a view through a window that might give onto the canals mentioned in the poem.[59] The position of the woman's beringed hand,

[55] I do not see any cynicism here, *pace* Dürr, *The Poet's Trajectory*, p. 68.

[56] Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 153; *Dangerous Beauty*, dir. by Marshall Herskovitz (USA, 1988), based on Rosenthal.

[57] Giacomo Franco, *Habiti delle donne venetiane intagliate in rame nuouamente*, Venice c. 1591–1610, image opposite page 11 (reprinted with translations into French, German and English, F. Ongania, 1877). See https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/350079, which has the images but not the text. The image opposite page 5 is of a woman with a lute (which may conceivably have influenced 'Die Laute'), and that opposite page 5 is of a 'Giovane innamorato' (which may relate to ll. 13–14 of the present poem).

[58] It has been displayed prominently in that gallery since 1736. See https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/venus-urbino-titian.

[59] The identification of Titian's subject as a courtesan may be more persuasive for a modern viewer who sees her as the model for Manet's reinterpretation in *Olympia* (1863) than for a contemporary:

covering (or potentially stimulating) her genitals, is not incompatible with the suggestions of Rilke's eleventh line, with its intense double negative: 'die Hand, die nie an keiner Glut verkohlt'. Rilke may characteristically have had multiple cultural stimuli in mind when writing.[60]

Whether written before or after Rilke's third visit to Venice, 'Die Laute' is linked to 'Die Kurtisane' by the mention of Tullia, usually taken to imply Tullia d'Aragona, another celebrated sixteenth-century Venetian courtesan, also a musician, an intellectual, a published poet, and the author of a philosophical *Dialogo della Infinita di Amore* (published in Venice in 1547). One of the characteristics attributed to her in the poem is 'Dunkelheit', and she is thus a component in a complex tension between light and dark that ties the poem to others in the Venice sequence. Another is her 'Schwäche', which establishes a dramatic contrast to the other courtesan poem.

DIE LAUTE

Ich bin die Laute. Willst du meinen Leib
beschreiben, seine schön gewölbten Streifen:
sprich so, als sprächest du von einer reifen
gewölbten Feige. Übertreib

das Dunkel, das du in mir siehst. Es war
Tullias Dunkelheit. In ihrer Scham
war nicht so viel, und ihr erhelltes Haar
war wie ein heller Saal. Zuweilen nahm

sie etwas Klang von meiner Oberfläche
in ihr Gesicht und sang zu mir.
Dann spannte ich mich gegen ihre Schwäche,
und endlich war mein Inneres in ihr. (*KA*, I, p. 559)

As in 'Die Kurtisane', there is a first-person 'speaker' in this poem, here the lute itself, and although one might read 'Ich bin die Laute' as an assertion by the courtesan of identity with the instrument, the poem maintains a

the original may in fact be a celebration of marriage, the dog being a traditional symbol of fidelity, the golden hair braided as for a bride, the jewellery and the richly decorated dress representing bridal gifts or dowry goods.

[60] The suggestion of Carpaccio's *Two Venetian Ladies* as a source is unconvincing, even though it was displayed in the Museo Civico Correr (see Corbineau-Hoffmann, *Paradoxie der Fiktion*, p. 408, and Haustedt, *Rilke's Venice*, pp. 35–37). Thomas Borgstedt's detailed analysis of the reception history of this painting also concludes that 'die Exclusivität dieses Bildbezugs [erscheint] zumindest unsicher': 'Liebesklage und Dingpoetik: Die Venedig-Sonette von Platen und Rilke zwischen Subjektausdruck und Entsubjektivierung', in Thomas Borgstedt, *August Graf von Platen im Horizont seiner Wirkungsgeschichte*, ed. by Gunnar Och and Klaus Kempf (De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 99–119 (p. 106). Borgstedt instead makes a case for including amongst possible stimuli a woman (possibly a courtesan) with a dog on the balcony in Veronese's *Apotheosis of Venice*, to which Rilke's attention may have been drawn by lines in Platen's eighth Venetian sonnet (pp. 107–09).

distinction between them so as then to explore a relationship. Using two imperatives, the lute enjoins an observer to speak of her as if of 'eine reife gewölbte Feige' – a fruit that often connotes sexuality[61] – and to *exaggerate* the darkness perceived in her, so as to intensify it. Tullia's darkness is asserted as an element she shares with the lute, but she also has 'erhelltes Haar', which is compared to the light in 'ein heller Saal', creating a tension between privacy, 'ein personales Zentrum', and 'ihre Unkonturiertheit, ihre wahllose Offenheit'.[62] It is the tension between dark and light that generates the power, rather than either characteristic on its own (which is also true of 'San Marco'). Tullia alone struggles to maintain or project the depth implied by 'Dunkelheit' – the lute notes that 'in ihrer Scham war nicht so viel' and speaks of 'ihre Schwäche', although for a courtesan one might expect that sex (as implied by 'Scham', both 'shame' and 'pudenda') is in fact strength – and only in conjunction with music is this fully realised. Casually, almost diffidently, Tullia is said periodically to have 'taken a little sound' from the surface of the lute 'into her face' and sung to its tune: the carefully placed internal rhyme of 'Klang' and 'sang' intensifies the already rich phonetic patterning of the poem (in which the vowel sounds in the four lines are the same within the first two stanzas, even though the consonants mean that there are two distinct rhymes in each). More striking is the counter-intuitive attribution of an aural phenomenon to the face rather than the ear, as if to link the woman's physical beauty with the beauty of the music. The tension of the strings and the resonance that derives from the lute's arched shape ('gewölbt') release the power of musical interiority and strengthen the woman, inserting 'mein Inneres in ihr', ceding the lute's inwardness to the woman, an image that also unmistakably has a sexual dimension, almost suggesting fertilisation.

The uncertainty as to whether 'Die Kurtisane' was inspired by a work of art applies also to 'Ein Doge' (August–September 1907), whose possible stimuli have variously been identified as the grey-bearded Marino Grimani in *The Reception of the Persian Ambassador* (1600) in the Doge's Palace (attributed to the heirs of Veronese), a portrait of Andrea Gritti by Titian (in Vienna during Rilke's lifetime), or perhaps Tintoretto's painting of Enrico Dandolo (c. 1107–1205) in the Chamber of the Great Council.[63] Again, it is likely that Rilke has been influenced by a variety of sources, all

[61] This is perhaps in part because of its association with female genitalia (the Greek for fig, σῦκον, also means 'vulva', and French, Italian and Spanish slang make the same equation), and comparisons are often made between it and the shape of the womb, linking the fruit with fertility. Rilke is almost insistent here, repeating 'wölben' twice in three lines, and it is difficult not to hear the same sexual associations when the image is repeated in 'San Marco' (l. 2) and 'Der Abenteuerer II' (l. 5).

[62] Requadt, *Die Bildersprache*, p. 212.

[63] Hellmut Rosenfeld, *Das deutsche Bildgedicht* (Mayer & Müller, 1935), p. 253; Böschenstein, 'Le cycle de poèmes vénitiens', p. 241; Berendt, *Rainer Maria Rilkes 'Neue Gedichte'*, pp. 296–97. See *KA*, I, p. 987. Dürr suggests a sarcophagus or a death mask, *The Poet's Trajectory*, pp. 71–72, assuming the influence of the 'Dogengräber' in the fifth of Platen's Venetian sonnets (Platen, *Sämtliche Werke*, I, p. 179).

of which are transformed in the creation of the poem. There is nonetheless little doubt that the composition of this poem was prompted by Rilke's extensive preparation for his visit to Venice later in 1907. At its heart is control, both the attempts of the Signoria to control the Doge – perhaps Rilke had in mind the establishment of the State Inquisitors (the 'Späher' in l. 5) after Marino Faliero's attempted coup d'état of 1355 – and the Doge's *self*-control. The Republic's 'governing body' is wary of too much power in a single individual, and whilst it spurs on the Doge to greatness ('zu seiner Größe reizten'), at the same time it constricts and constrains 'das goldene Dogat'. Rilke likens the Doge to a lion (the symbol of the Venetian state), caged and fed just enough to nourish its powerful presence. And not fully self-conscious, just like the beast, the leader of the Republic 'ward dessen nicht gewahr und hielt nicht inne | größer zu werden'. Rilke conveys the reciprocity of power in a neat chiasmic figure: 'Was die Signorie | in seinem Innern zu bezwingen glaubte, | bezwang er selbst'. The victory over ambition is achieved internally and with it his continued exercise of power. The reciprocity of individual and collective power evoked here is echoed in a long letter to Gisela von der Heydt written some seven months later:

> Und dieser gleichmäßige Gesammtwille, zu welcher Spannung ist er in einzelnen Gestalten angewachsen: in jenen Seefahrern, in den gewaltigen Generalen des Meeres, in den Dogen, deren Macht so groß geworden war, daß sie zu Zeiten den ganzen Staat, der sich zurückhaltend an sie hängte, mithinaufhoben, bis er plötzlich über entfernten Städtern wie ein Sternbild stand, voller Gesetz, unabwendbar und deutsam.[64]

## FRAMING THE CYCLE: DUSE, CASANOVA AND SIMMEL (AUTUMN 1907)

To what extent is 'Bildnis', the poem about Eleonora Duse in *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, a Venetian poem? It was written in Paris on 1 and 2 August 1907, more than three months before his visit to Venice in November 1907, a year before the three famous Venetian sonnets (late summer 1908), and long before Rilke first encountered Duse in person (July 1912). Rilke sent the poem to his wife, Clara, on 6 September 1907.[65] With 'Der Abenteuerer' it encloses a series of poems more overtly Venetian in theme, and although it shares with 'Venezianischer Morgen' and 'Der Abenteuerer' the motifs of the smile and nonchalant serenity, with

[64] *BwvdH*, p. 146 (24 March 1908).

[65] Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1906 bis 1907*, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber, Leipzig 1930 (= *B06–07*), here p. 321. The fullest analysis is by Walther Rehm, 'Rilke und die Duse', *Symposion*, 1 (1948), pp. 339–406 (pp. 339–46). Rilke repeatedly linked Duse with Anna de Noailles, Gaspara Stampa and Mariana Alcoforado in letters from this period: see for example Rilke and Auguste Rodin, *Correspondance 1902–1913*, ed. by Hugo Hengl (Gallimard, 2018), p. 779 (11 November 1907) and Rilke, *Lettres à une amie vénitienne* (Gallimard, 1985) (= *LAV*), p. 38 (29 August 1908).

'Spätherbst in Venedig' that of fatigue, and with 'San Marco' the 'Wehmut' and a lofty 'Gang', there is no obvious Venetian theme in 'Bildnis'.

However, both the framing poems are concerned with show, display and the authenticity of identity, which are central to the whole cycle. Requadt shows how the imperative of 'sich fassen' is at the heart of this poem.[66] Duse, the actress, wears a professional mask: she holds her features together as if in a loosely tied bunch, attempting not to let one of the 'große Schmerzen' slip out from her 'verzichtendes Gesicht'. Yet, once in a while, a smile slips wearily out like a potently fragrant flower from a bouquet: 'manchmal fällt, wie eine Tuberose, | ein verlornes Lächeln müd heraus' (*KA*, I, p. 556), but her 'blind' hands know that they will never retrieve it (l. 10), indicating a failure here of the 'Wille' that is so prominent in other poems in this sequence.[67] The key element of the 'bouquet' image – artistic self-formation in order to compose a temporary identity in an unstable relationship to any 'core' or 'true' identity ('sich fassen') – is found in other 'new poems', such as 'Der Balkon' in which a family is 'angeordnet wie von einem Maler | und gebunden wie zu einem Strauß' (*KA*, I, p. 547) and 'Die Gruppe' in which '[der Zufall] ordnet die Gesichter, | lockert sie auf und drückt sie wieder dichter' (*KA*, I, p. 544). Identity is an unstable artistic creation.

As an actress, Duse pours 'ihrer Seele Sinn' into 'Erdichtetes', a version of reality made up by someone else, but one that precariously contains 'Schicksal […], gewolltes, irgendeines', and that obscure destiny breaks out of the words she recites unnaturally, almost monstrously,

> wie das Schreien eines Steines –
>
> und sie läßt, mit hochgehobenem Kinn,
> alle diese Worte wieder fallen,
> *ohne* bleibend; denn nicht eins von allen
> ist der wehen Wirklichkeit gemäß
> ihrem einzigen Eigentum,
> das sie, wie ein fußloses Gefäß,
> halten muß, hoch über ihren Ruhm
> und den Gang der Abende hinaus. (*KA*, I, p. 556)

Acting is by its nature an inauthentic art, inimical to true self-possession; none of the words that Duse speaks expresses her own reality – the

[66] Requadt, *Die Bildersprache*, pp. 204–05, which also makes connections with *Malte*.

[67] One is reminded of the last tercet of Rilke's panther sonnet, although the trajectory is the opposite: there, 'Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille | sich lautlos auf –' (*KA*, I, p. 469) in order to receive an isolated image (exactly like a camera shutter opening to let in light for a fraction of a second); here, the façade slips for a second and an emotion escapes into the outside world. The smile here is reminiscent, too, of the 'Subrisio saltat[orum]', the smile of the acrobats in the fifth *Elegy* that Rilke phrases as if it were a chemical essence in a pharmacy, and it also emerges 'despite' their best efforts at artistic (self-)control – 'Und dennoch, blindlings, | das Lächeln …' (*KA*, II, pp. 215–16, ll. 61 and 56–57).

objectless status of the preposition '*ohne*' here is a painful expression of the *décalage* between role and truth – and her fame similarly fails to dovetail with her true self. And yet that self is also defined by the scripts she performs and the acclaim she receives.[68] In the first version of this poem, Rilke's diagnosis was even more bleak: the second verse ends 'Sie hat *kein* Eigentum' (my emphasis) and the final lines present the spectacle of the actress as an evanescent victim of, almost a sacrifice to, her own reputation and those appraising her performance: 'So vergeht sie, immer vor Gesichtern. | Und die Menge drängt sich mit den Richtern | wie ums Blutgerüst um ihren Ruhm' (*SW*, II, p. 345). But in the final version quoted above, there is an image of precarious hope, balanced momentarily like the 'nur an einander | lehnende Leitern' of the fifth *Elegy* on the 'Platz, den wir nicht wissen' (*KA*, I, p. 217; ll. 100–01 and 95). It is of a vessel that cannot stand up on its own and that Duse must hold high above what people think of her, over many performances ('Abende') and beyond time itself. This precarity is delicately reinforced by the last word, '[das] vergeblich auf das Reimwort wartet',[69] as Requadt observes. He also suggests, 'will die Duse in Rilkes Sinne "wirklich" bleiben, muß sie sich diesem Ruhme und der Zeitlichkeit überhaupt entziehen', but that perhaps understates the degree to which Duse's personal 'Wirklichkeit' is dependent on the roles she incarnates.[70] The theme of the precarity of identity and the earnestness of its execution here form strong links with the poems more obviously about Venice – a city that initially 'sich bildet ohne irgendwann zu sein' – so Duse's coincidental biographical association with the city overlays a more profound affinity in Rilke's imagination.

'Der Abenteuerer' is in some respects simpler than 'Bildnis', with which it is mostly contemporary (ll. 1–4 of the first poem date from 5 September 1907, the rest from early summer 1908, along with the three famous Venice sonnets; the second poem was written between 22 August and 4 September 1907). The opening lines posit directly the 'Sein/Schein' antinomy that Requadt sets at the heart of Rilke's 'Venedigdichtung': 'Wenn er unter jene welche *waren* | trat: der Plötzliche, der *schien*, | war ein Glanz wie von Gefahren | in dem ausgesparten Raum um ihn' (*KA*, I, p. 560; Rilke's emphasis). The subject of the poems is usually assumed to be Casanova, although in Philippe Monnier's book on Venice – which Rilke sent to Rodin

[68] See Phelan, *Rilke: Neue Gedichte*, p. 65.

[69] Rehm, 'Rilke und die Duse', p. 340, although it echoes 'Strauß' and 'heraus' in the first stanza. The first line is the only one in the poem without an end rhyme, although internally 'Gesichte' and 'verzichtend' are phonetically so densely similar as virtually to rhyme.

[70] Requadt, *Die Bildersprache*, p. 205. Despite Rilke's hostility to organised religion, it is tempting to see in the 'Gefäß' and its solemn elevation echoes of the chalice and the 'real presence' ('Sein') in the Christian communion service. The gesture of elevation is repeated in 'Venezianischer Morgen', connected with a suggestion that the jewel/church is a mirror, which in turn recalls Malte Laurids Brigge's description of the mirror in one of the tapestries of 'La Dame à la licorne' as 'eine Monstranz'. It also appears in 'Ausblick von Capri' (1–4 October 1907) as the Temple of Athene is raised 'in den Götterhimmel Griechenlands' (*KA*, I, p. 406).

in 1908 with a warm recommendation – there is a section on the Venetian Adventurer as a genre: 'cet être singulier du XVIIIe siècle; ce Protée aux metamorphoses soudaines et aux facultés rapides; […] ce personnage souple et fuyant, à part et en marge, sans lieu comme sans milieu'.[71] Monnier's list of notable examples culminates, of course, in Casanova.

Rilke's Casanova shares some tropes with the other Venice poems; he smiles, is 'lässig', and plays a series of parts. During his imprisonment, the poem suggests, in the days in which 'die Flut sein unterstes Verlies | ihm bestritt, als wär es nicht das seine, | und ihn, steigend, an die Steine | der daran gewöhnten Wölbung stieß' (*KA*, I, p. 360),[72] he remembers the fictional names he used to 'wear' like costumes. Like the actor he also is, he has the power to conjure others' lives – revitalise those of the dead ('noch warme Leben Toter') – to elevate them and give them meaning. But this capacity contains an existential threat:

> Oft war keine Stelle an ihm sicher,
> und er zitterte: Ich bin – – –
> doch im nächsten Augenblick glich er
> dem Geliebten einer Königin.
>
> Immer wieder war ein Sein zu haben[.] (*KA*, I, p. 561)

Pretend lives, vicarious lives, are ten-a-penny: 'old aliases and the unfinished lives of the young dead [are] drawn irresistibly to the vacuum of his absent character'[73] – Rilke does not use the term 'ausgespart' here, but he might well have (see below for an exploration of this term) – and the absence of complement to the verb 'ich bin' is eloquent (this phrase is opposite in effect to the same words at the end of the *Sonette an Orpheus*, which are followed by a full stop; *KA*, II, p. 272). Unlike Duse, Casanova cannot transcend the roles he adopts.

The affinities of both poems with Hofmannsthal's homages to actors have already been noted.[74] There are clear echoes in the lines quoted above

[71] Philippe Monnier, *Venise au XVIIIe siècle* (Perrin et C[ie], 1908), p. 286 (see Rilke/Rodin, *Correspondance*, p. 98; 12 September 1908).

[72] *KA* links this to Casanova's imprisonment in the 'Bleikammern' in Venice (*KA*, I, p. 989), whence he escaped on 31 October 1756, and it would be satisfying to be able to associate 'Der Abenteuerer' in this way with the figure of Pellico from the *Christus-Visionen*. However, as Casanova's *Memoirs* make clear in Chapters XLIX–L, the Piombi prison takes its name (which means 'The Leads') from its situation directly under the lead-covered roof of the palace; it is not in the cellars and at risk of flooding. There are other cells in the Doge's Palace, the Pozzi ('Wells'), described in Casanova's next Chapter (and although he and others, including William Beckford, imply that they are below sea level, this is not the case), but Casanova was not imprisoned there, although Admiral Zeno was. See Casanova, *Mémoires*, ed. by Robert Abirached and Elio Zorzi, 3 vols (Gallimard, 1958–60), here I, pp. 961–1013, esp. pp. 979–80 and pp. 1012–13.

[73] Phelan, *Rilke: Neue Gedichte*, p. 66.

[74] See Rehm, 'Rilke und die Duse', pp. 357–63, and Requadt, *Die Bildersprache*, p. 242. If there is influence, it is reciprocal.

of the poem written on the death of Friedrich Mitterwurzer in 1897, for example: 'Wer aber war er, und wer war er nicht? || Er kroch von einer Larve in die andre, | Sprang aus des Vaters in des Sohnes Leib | Und tauschte wie Gewänder die Gestalten'.[75] Hofmannsthal's memorial poem for Josef Kainz (written after Rilke's *Neue Gedichte* were published, in 1910) engages with the same issues, with a series of five questions beginning 'wer…?' conjuring up the roles behind which the poet seeks an identity. They end thus, the bold isolation of 'Wer' at the end of a line recalling Rilke's 'Kurtisane':

> Wer?
> Ein Unverwandelter in viel Verwandlungen,
> Ein niebezauberter Bezauberer,
> Ein Ungerührter, der uns rührte, einer,
> Der fern war, da wir meinten, er sei nah,
> Ein Fremdling über allen Fremdlingen,
> Einsamer über allen Einsamen[.] (Ibid., p. 79)

There is perhaps another intertext here, an essay by Georg Simmel whom Rilke knew personally and whose lectures he attended periodically, although letters suggest that he was wary of Simmel's influence. The two met several times between 1897 and 1899, and again in July 1905, when it is surmised that they discussed Rodin's conceptions of nature and naturalism.[76] The June 1907 issue of the Munich-based journal *Der Kunstwart* included Simmel's critical essay on Venice,[77] which opens with a thematically related complaint:

> Jenseits alles Naturalismus, der der Kunst das Gesetz der ihr äußeren Dinge auferlegt, steht eine Wahrheitsforderung über ihr: ein Anspruch, den das Kunstwerk zu erfüllen hat, obgleich er nur aus ihm selbst quillt. Ruht ein mächtiges Gebälk auf Säulen, denen wir solche Leistung nicht zutrauen, geben uns die pathetischen Worte eines Gedichts Anweisung auf

[75] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden*, ed. by Bernd Schoeller (Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1979–80), here *Gedichte, Dramen I: 1891–1898* (= *GDI*), p. 71.

[76] Details of their acquaintance are given in Georg Simmel, *Essays on Art and Aesthetics*, ed. by Austin Harrington (University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 90 (n. 330). The connections are significant; Simmel also knew and wrote on Rodin, for example, and there are affinities between his essays on the sculptor and Rilke's (ibid., pp. 65–66). See also Neil H. Donahue, 'Fear and Fascination in the Big City: Rilke's Use of Georg Simmel in the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*', *Studies in 20th-Century Literature*, 16.2 (1992), article 2, doi:10.4148/2334-4415.1299. Simmel's Florence and Venice essays are compared by Andreina Lavagetto, 'Rilkes Venedig: Eine Stadt ohne Dekadenz', *Studi Germanici*, 10 (2016), pp. 159–71 (pp. 159–63), but whilst Rilke is positioned there as a similar 'Gegenstimme' to popular neo-Romantic readings of the city, his writings are not compared with Simmel's.

[77] Georg Simmel, 'Venedig', *Der Kunstwart. Halbmonatsschau über Dichtung, Theater, Musik, bildende und angewandte Künste*, 20.2 (1907), pp. 299–303. Rilke was sent the essay by Simmel in 1915 and a reference to 'die Gestalt des Venezianers' in his reply suggests that he had read it; it cannot be shown unambiguously that he had already seen it in 1907, although the analysis below will suggest that he may well have. See Georg Simmel, *Briefe 1912–1918*, ed. by Otthein Rammstedt and Angela Rammstedt, *Gesamtausgabe*, XXIII (Suhrkamp, 2008), pp. 477 and 495.

> eine Leidenschaft und Tiefe, von denen uns dennoch das Ganze nicht überzeugt, so fühlen wir den Mangel einer *Wahrheit*, einer Übereinstimmung des Kunstwerkes mit seiner eigenen Idee.[78]

Simmel seems irritated by the uniform pace of life in Venice, a city without horses and carriages, where even gondolas travel at a walking tempo. He attributes its 'dreamy' reputation to just this 'monotonous' feature, and when reflecting on the pedestrian rhythms of the city, wonders whether it is only 'die obersten, bloß *spiegelnden*, bloß genießenden Schichten der Seele' that breathe properly, 'während ihre volle Wirklichkeit wie in einem *lässigen* Traum abseits steht' (Simmel, p. 261). He contrasts the artificiality (not to say duplicity) of Venice unfavourably with the authenticity of Florence, where nature and culture are, or at least were, organically unified. He uses the word 'Lüge' more than once to indicate what he perceives as a discrepancy in Venice between a deep, true, rooted reality, an inner metaphysical world, and a surface that consistently fails to express that world. Its architecture fails to correspond to the 'innere Wahrheit: dass die tragenden Kräfte den Lasten genügen' (ibid., p. 258), a reference to the wood pilings on which the city is built, which for him are indices of precarity and inauthenticity. Furthermore, the buildings of Venice fall foul of the need to express the 'seelische Bedeutung oder den Lebenssinn […], der mit [einem Bauwerk] verbunden ist' (ibid., p. 259), whereas in Florence, the exterior is a faithful expression of inner meaning:

> Die venezianischen Paläste […] sind ein preziöses Spiel, schon durch ihre Gleichmäßigkeit die individuellen Charaktere ihrer Menschen *maskierend*, ein *Schleier*, dessen Falten nur den Gesetzen seiner eignen Schönheit folgen und das Leben hinter ihm nur dadurch verraten, dass sie es *verhüllen*. (Ibid.)

Simmel sees Venice as a mere stage: 'Alle Menschen in Venedig gehen wie über die Bühne […] haben dabei immer etwas wie Schauspieler', real only in the moment that they appear before the public but nugatory when 'off-stage', two-dimensional, merely stickers that hide 'das Wirkliche und Definitive ihres Wesens' – 'alles Tun [ist] ein Davor, das kein Dahinter hat' (ibid., p. 260). Rilke's 'Bildnis' uses the same trope but takes the business of acting infinitely more seriously; there is a 'Dahinter'.

Just as Rilke frames his Venice cycle with an actress and an adventurer, Simmel links the two and ends his essay with a reflection on 'adventure', although Simmel's essay 'Das Abenteuer', which develops these views, was not published until 1910.

> Venedig aber hat die zweideutige Schönheit des Abenteuers, das wurzellos im Leben schwimmt, wie eine losgerissene Blüte im Meere, und dass es die

[78] Quoted from Georg Simmel, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901–1908*, ed. by Alessandro Cavallo and Volkhard Krech, *Gesamtausgabe*, VIII/ii (Suhrkamp, 1993) (= Simmel), pp. 258–63 (p. 258). Here the emphasis is Simmel's; in the following paragraphs all emphases are mine.

> klassische Stadt der Aventure war und blieb, ist nur die Versinnlichung vom letzten Schicksal seines Gesamtbildes, unsrer Seele keine Heimat, sondern nur ein Abenteuer sein zu dürfen. (Ibid., p. 263)

'Zweideutigkeit' is a source of concern for him: it is a city neither properly land nor sea, whose little canals are constantly in motion but never with any destination, so cramped that people are forced into the 'Schein einer Vertrautheit und "Gemütlichkeit"' but whose life lacks 'jede Spur von Gemüt' (ibid., p. 262). In 1905 Rilke wrote of Simmel 'als das sehr Fremde, mir überaus Entgegengesetzte',[79] and as will become clear below, almost all the central issues of Rilke's Venetian poems are prefigured in Simmel's essay, although the poems reject most of his views and almost systematically demonstrate much more complex relationships between 'Sein' and 'Schein' than the sociologist is able to identify.

## LOVE: MIMÌ ROMANELLI AND GASPARA STAMPA (NOVEMBER 1907)

On 24 September 1907, shortly before his third visit to Venice, Rilke wrote to the Princesse de Broglie of 'une nostalgie étrange et presque insupportable qui m'attire vers Venise' (*Chronik*, p. 280); he told his mother that he had wished 'seit Monaten fast sehnsüchtig' to be back there, which is striking after only two very short previous visits, and he confessed to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin on 19 November 1907 that he had undertaken his overnight journey 'dem monatelangen innern Zurathen nachgebend'.[80] And when he arrived, he still clung to his earlier sentimental apprehension of the city, imagining a fairy tale in which the hero does not actually dream his dreams but saves them up undreamed: 'dann würde eines Tages aus den nichtgeträumten Träumen unter unendlicher Spannung eine […] mit nichts zu vergleichende Wirklichkeit [entstehen], die sich nicht verheimlichen ließe: diese Stadt würde entstehen' (*BwNvB*, p. 29). He did some homework for the 1907 trip, looking at Venetian paintings in the Louvre, for example (*Chronik*, p. 282), and began to reflect on the resonances of the names of the city in different languages:

> Venise: dieser wunderbare verblichene Name, durch den ein Sprung zu gehen scheint und der sich nur wie durch ein Wunder noch hält – dem heutigen Dasein jenes Reiches ebenso seltsam entsprechend, wie einst Venezia dem starken Staate entsprach, seiner Aktion, seiner Pracht: den Galeeren, den Gläsern, den Spitzen und den verschwenderischen Bildern von alledem. Während 'Venedig' umständlich und pedantisch schien und nur gültig für die kurze unselige Zeit österreichischer Herrschaft, ein Aktenname,

[79] Rilke, *Briefwechsel mit Ellen Key*, ed. by Theodore Fiedler (Insel, 1993), p. 149 (30 March 1905).
[80] *BadM*, I, p. 572 (20 November 1907); Rilke and Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin, *Briefwechsel 1906–1926*, ed. by Joachim W. Storck (Wallstein, 2007), p. 29 (= *BwNvB*).

> von Bürokraten boshaft auf unzählige Konvolute geschrieben, trist und tinten, so liest sich das: Venedig. (Und man sagte auch noch Venediger seinerzeit, statt Venezianer!).[81]

Rejecting the atmosphere associated with Austria's pettifogging interrupted rule over 'Venedig' between the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1797 and 1866 when the city became part of the Kingdom of Italy – incidentally the period in which Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis was born, in Venice – Rilke prefers to recall a combination of the city's military and political might as symbolised by the Italian name 'Venezia' and the powerful if impressionistic mood conjured by 'Venise'.[82] These aspects were to feature in his poems about the city.

Historical study was a major factor in Rilke's perceptual shift: 'je mehr [Venedigs] Historie mich angeht', he wrote in 1912, 'desto größer berührt mich seine Erscheinung, wenn ichs überlege, doch wohl die einzigste, die alle meine Reisen mir gezeigt haben'.[83] Richard Beer-Hofmann had lent Rilke precious books on Venice in preparation for the 1907 visit ('Venezianischer Morgen' is gratefully dedicated to him). They included Giovanni Battista Albrizzi's *Forestiere illuminato*, a popular guidebook to Venice reprinted frequently between 1740 and 1806 for those enjoying the Grand Tour; the 700-page volume by Pompeo Gherardo Molmenti, *La Storia di Venezia nella vita privata dalle origini alia caduta della repubblica* (perhaps in the Turin 1880 edition); and a version of what was originally a seven-volume work by Pierre Daru, *Histoire de la république de Venise* (originally 1819 but often reprinted; translated into German in 1824).[84] Thus prepared, during ten days in November 1907, Rilke visited a number of the 'sights' of Venice, including the Gallerie dell'Accademia and the private palace of Count Donà dalle Rose (*Chronik*, p. 291), while staying in lodgings run by two sisters, Adelmina and Anna Romanelli (known as Mimì and Nana).

The Romanellis' *pension* had been recommended by the critic Julius Meier-Graefe, who knew their brother Pietro, an art dealer in Paris.[85] On 12 October, Rilke was able to write to Clara that an agreement had

[81] *B06–07*, p. 372 (11 October 1907; to Clara Rilke).

[82] The implications of the French name here are unconnected with Venice's 'Napoleonic period', 1805–14. See Erich Unglaub, 'Liebesbriefe in fremder Sprache. Rainer Maria Rilkes Briefe an Adelmina Romanelli', in *Der Liebesbrief. Schriftkultur und Medienwechsel vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Renate Stauf, Annette Simonis and Jörg Paulus (De Gruyter, 2008), pp. 181–204 (p. 194).

[83] Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1907 bis 1914* (Insel, 1933) (= *B07–14*), p. 228 (9 April 1912; to Julie Freifrau von Nordeck zu Rabenau).

[84] See Klaus W. Jonas, 'Richard Beer-Hofmann and Rainer Maria Rilke', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 8.3/4 (1975), pp. 43–73, esp. pp. 70–71, www.jstor.org/stable/24646864.

[85] See *Chronik*, p. 282. Rilke evidently chose not to take up the letter of recommendation sent by Hofmannsthal to Prince Friedrich zu Hohenlohe-Waldenburg-Schillingsfürst, brother of Marie von Thurn und Taxis, who lived in 'ein entzückendes kleines Haus' on the Grand Canal: see Marie von Thurn-und-Taxis-Hohenlohe, *Erinnerungen an Rainer Maria Rilke* (R. Oldenbourg, 1933), p. 35.

been made for 'ein sehr schönes Zimmer, gegen Süden, für 6 bis 7 Frcs. Pension (noch dazu vegetarischer!)',[86] and between 19 and 30 November he stayed at the 'Casa Rosa', Fondamenta Zattere al Ponte Lungo 1471,[87] facing across to the Giudecca. Unexpectedly, he discovered in the sisters' establishment 'un tel discours, un intérêt si fin et si développé et même un soutien si profond pour mes idées et mes travaux que je n'oublierai jamais'.[88] His liaison with the thirty-year-old Mimì began quickly: he asked for a photograph of her within minutes of his arrival; his first love letter was written only a week later; Mimì recounted later that Rilke confessed to having knelt before an image of the Madonna immediately after their first meeting, saying 'C'est elle, c'est Mimì che [*sic*] je devais rencontrer un jour'.[89] A pianist and would-be actress, she became a prominent member of cultural society, counting Reynaldo Hahn, the Princesse de Polignac, Isadora Duncan and the actress Gabrielle Réjane amongst her acquaintances.[90]

Rilke continued to correspond with Mimì until 1912, but once back in Paris and at work again, and despite continued professions of affection and the reprise of the rhetoric and imagery of the earlier letters, he seems to have been at pains to consign the affair to the past. Erich Unglaub notes that when Mimì was visiting her brother in Paris, Rilke wrote ostensibly begging her to call in to see him, although 'so ganz aufrichtig kann das nicht gemeint sein, denn danach zählt er seine Verpflichtungen und Termine auf, die einen solchen Besuch […] ganz ungelegen erscheinen lassen'.[91] Later meetings are scheduled and timed with almost clinical precision, Rilke's 'travail' taking precedence. Even when he writes of plans to come to Venice again to work, he envisages Mimì's role as being to ensure peace and quiet for him: 'Vous me donnerez une chambre et vous garderez ma tranquillité et mes labeurs. Mais d'abord je dois finir ici mon livre prochain [= *Malte*]'. In a letter sent on 11 May 1910, he declared that mutual attachment is 'un seul tort mortel' and that she has done violence to him by failing to 'protéger ma solitude' (*LAV*, pp. 63–64). Reservations were not one-sided, however, and there is evidence that Ms Romanelli was not quite as starstruck as legend suggests: in an interview broadcast by Rai Uno in 1961, she responded to a question about whether Rilke was affectionate

[86] *B06–07*, p. 376 (12 October 1907; to Clara Rilke).
[87] Rilke sometimes confused the digits, heading his letters to Mathilde Vollmoeller of 22 November 1907 and to Lily Schalk of 23 November 'Zattere al Ponte lungo 1741'.
[88] *LAV*, p. 82 (22 November 1907; to Pietro Romanelli). Detailed studies of the relationship include Ilsedore B. Jonas, 'Rilke und Adelmina Romanelli. Ein Beitrag zur Biographie des Dichters', *Philobiblon*, 42.2 (1998), pp. 89–121, doi:10.1515/9783110209365.2.181; Unglaub, 'Liebesbriefe'; and Joachim W. Storck, 'Venedig, Mimi Romanelli und Rilkes Liebestheorie', in Rilke, *Les jours d'Italie*, pp. 299–318.
[89] Pietro Casellato, *La veneziana 'misteriosa' di Rainer Maria Rilke* (Edizioni Helvetia, 1977), p. 41.
[90] See Unglaub, 'Liebesbriefe', p. 186.
[91] Unglaub, 'Liebesbriefe', p. 192, referring to *LAV*, pp. 24–25, n.d.

somewhat wearily with 'Gewiss, aber es zog sich über Stunden, wissen Sie. Das hätten Sie selbst erleben müssen', noting also that no one was ever permitted to get really close to him.[92]

One of Mimì's most durable contributions to Rilke's 'travail' was her stimulation of his interest in Gaspara Stampa, the Venetian poet and courtesan of whom we are asked whether we have been sufficiently mindful in the first of the *Duineser Elegien*,[93] and who features in Rilke's catalogue of women whose love is unrequited or thwarted alongside Mariana Alcoforado, Bettina von Arnim, Byblis, Héloise, and Louise Labé. Romanelli possessed a 1738 edition of Stampa's *Rime*,[94] and may have been responsible for bringing Rilke's attention to her for the first time; certainly, all mention of her post-dates his affair with Mimì. He suggested that studying Gaspara Stampa would be 'un travail prochain à nous deux' when he mooted a book on these women, whose hearts were 'trop resplendissants pour qu'un amant ait pu les supporter' (*LAV*, p. 38). Not long after this epistolary conversation, Rilke added the name of the poet at the head of the list of 'Liebende' in the manuscript of *Malte*.[95]

One of the chief advantages of Rilke's room on the Zattere in 1907 was that it was very quiet at night. On his first evening there he wrote to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin, 'Draußen ist, nächtlich jetzt, der breite Steinquai der Zattere, an dem entlang große Segelschiffe liegen. Es ist so still, dass man an einem entfernteren die Taue knarren hört. Dann und wann kommt einzeln ein Schritt.'[96] He wrote to his mother on 20 November of 'die venezianische Stille, die sich mit nichts vergleichen läßt, die tiefer in einen hineinreicht und höher über einen hinaus'.[97] To Clara he noted the cold and the contrast or tension between fire and ash; he was obviously struggling with complex, bordering on overwhelming impressions:

[92] Quoted from *Erinnerungen an Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. by Curdin Ebneter and Erich Unglaub, 3 vols (Nimbus, 2022), I, p. 305 (trans. by Curdin Ebneter).

[93] *KA*, II, p. 202; ll. 45–46.

[94] *Rime di Madonna Gaspara Stampa; con alcune altre de Collaltino, et di Vinciguerra conti di Collalto e di Baldassare Stampa; giuntovi diversi componimenti di varj autori in lode della medesima* (Francesco Piacentini, 1738), published in Venice: see Casellato, *La veneziana 'misteriosa'*, p. 99. Rilke probably used it when transcribing for Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin a letter from Stampa to Collaltino and the first of Stampa's sonnets: the letter appears on pp. xliii–xliv, and the sonnet on the following page, p. 1 (published with the same punctuation and orthography except that in the 1738 volume all the lines of the poem begin with a capital letter). See *BwNvB*, pp. 63–65 (7 October 1908).

[95] It is a late addition in the *Berner Taschenbuch* (1908/1909): Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge: Das Manuskript des 'Berner Taschenbuchs'*, ed. by Thomas Richter and Franziska Kolp, 2 vols (Wallstein, 2012), I, p. 139 and II, p. 139 (= *BT*); cf. *KA*, III, p. 619. See Unglaub, 'Liebesbriefe', p. 197, n. 50. Unglaub also suggests that Italian vocabulary notes in Rilke's *Nachlaß* made between November 1907 and October 1908 derive from reading Stampa with Romanelli's help (pp. 197–98).

[96] *BwNvB*, p. 29 (19 November 1907). Similar phrases were used in his letter to Clara (*B07–14*, p. 26; 20 November 1907).

[97] *BadM*, I, p. 573 (20 November 1907).

> Fast scheint mir *dieses* Venedig schwer zu bewundern; um zu lernen, ist es von Anfang an. Aschen steht sein Marmor, grau im Grauen, licht wie der veraschte Rand eines Scheites, der eben noch Glut war. Und von welcher unerklärlichen Auswahl ist das Rot an Mauern, das Grün an Fensterläden; maßvoll und doch nicht zu übertreffen; blaß, aber wie jemand blaß wird in der Erregung.[98]

A letter to Beer-Hofmann written on the same day also registers the cold and the same paradox of disconcerting strangeness and wonderment. It too speaks of '*dieses* Venedig', as if to distinguish 1907 from another time:

> Gern schriebe ich Ihnen ein wenig von diesem Venedig, das sich sehr kalt anfühlt und gar nicht so verwöhnend ist wie sonst. Es hält einen in Bewegung, und statt es von einer Gondel aus im Schweben zu erhalten, hat man es unter und neben sich, still und steinern und mühsam. Aber nicht weniger wunderbar; im Gegentheil, ich habe es noch nie so bewundert. Man lernt alle die merkwürdigen Gassen kennen und die Campi, die einem wie große Zimmer scheinen, wenn man sie plötzlich vor sich hat. Und man bleibt innerlich voller Aktion, ohne zu einem Gefühl verführt zu werden, in dem man die Thatsache dieser Stadt mit sich selbst verwechselt.[99]

The last two sentences are especially striking: they are reminiscent of (but not quite the same as) the famous definition of 'Anschauen' from a letter written to his wife earlier that year that is often adduced to explain the poetics of the *Neue Gedichte*:

> Das Anschauen ist eine so wunderbare Sache, von der wir so wenig wissen; wir sind mit ihm ganz nach außen gekehrt, aber gerade wenn wirs am meisten sind, scheinen in uns Dinge vor sich zu gehen, die auf das Unbeobachtetsein sehnsüchtig gewartet haben, und während sie sich, intakt und seltsam anonym, in uns vollziehen, ohne uns, – wächst in dem Gegenstand draußen ihre Bedeutung heran, ein überzeugender, starker, – ihr einzig möglicher Name, in dem wir das Geschehnis in unserem Innern selig und ehrerbietig erkennen, ohne selbst daran heranzureichen, es nur ganz leise, ganz von fern, unter den Zeichen eines eben noch fremden und schon im nächsten Augenblick aufs neue entfremdeten Dinges begreifend.[100]

The two sensations share a sense of sudden 'directedness to the outside': it is as if what Rilke describes to Beer-Hofmann is the apprehension of a moment in which the 'strange otherness' of the external world might be overcome but is not.[101] The instant in which self and object might touch or coincide meaningfully does not transpire, and there is no 'temptation' to yield the integrity of the self to the city. Unlike in the *Neue*

[98] *B07–14*, pp. 25–26 (to Clara; 20 November 1907). 'Schwer zu bewundern' and the fire/ash imagery feature in a letter to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin (*BwNvB*, p. 29; 19 November 1907).
[99] Published in Jonas, 'Richard Beer-Hofmann', p. 57 (27 November 1907).
[100] *B06–07*, p. 214 (8 March 1907).
[101] Louth, *Rilke*, pp. 110–11.

*Gedichte*, 'exact perception and discovery of things' does not also mark 'self-discovery' and Venice remains at an important level un-apprehended or even inapprehensible.

In sum, there is a sense of 'unfinished business' in this third visit. Writing from Venice on 25 November 1907, Rilke confessed to Sidonie his difficulties in communicating the city: 'so wenig kenne ich es, so *neu* ist es mir noch während ich es *umlerne*' (*BwNvB*, p. 31; my emphasis) – again there is an acknowledgement of a sea-change in his perception that echoes the distinction made in other letters between 'dieses Venedig' and one from the past:

> Einzelheiten weiß ich zu wenig, und das Ganze, davon ich immer meinte, daß es einem erwartungsvollen Gefühl in einer einzigen Stunde ergreifbar sei, ist nun mit einem Mal so weit über mich hinausgestellt und so sehr vor mich hin, daß ich meine, es kann nur langsam verdient und angeeignet sein. (Ibid.)

This marks the definitive shift between Rilke's earlier touristic appreciation of the city (focusing on details and the impressions offered by a guidebook) and a profounder appreciation that he realises is only to be achieved over time, and perhaps (although he does not say so to Sidonie) with the help of a native *vénitienne*. It could only be achieved retrospectively, and in poetry: it was Rilke's work between 1903 and 1908 on the *Neue Gedichte* that transformed his view of Venice.

## THREE SONNETS ABOUT VENICE (1908)

Rilke wrote his three best-known Venice poems in Paris in the summer of 1908.[102] He 'processed' his visit after the fact rather than in situ, needing time and distance to understand how he had this time penetrated further into the essence and identity of the city, having made some progress in this respect via the framing poems before departure. Again, he stressed 'this' Venice in contrast with what he had previously encountered:

> Und in Venedig kam *diesmal* soviel merkwürdige Fügung hinzu, so unerwartete Wege führten in das Innerste seiner verwunschenen Welt und gingen darin in eigenem Glück, in unbeschreiblichem Staunen und in so seltsam wirklichem Erleiden aus, daß die wenigen raschen Tage zu der Einheit einer Existenz sich zusammenschlossen, zu etwas unsäglich Ganzem. (*BwNvB*, p. 34; 7 December 1907; my emphasis)

Rilke therefore embraced the solitude of his Paris room where it would be so quiet, 'daß das verlorene Venedig wird wiederkommen müssen, um in dem ungewissen Dunkel meines Herzens noch einmal gegründet zu sein' (*BwNvB*, p. 35; 15 December). Interestingly he made no mention of

[102] 'Die Gedichte sind in konzentrierten Arbeitstagen bis zum 17. August 1908 entstanden' (Unglaub, 'Liebesbriefe', p. 189).

these poems in his letters to Mimì Romanelli from the same period. This perhaps reflects the contrasts in the letter above between 'Glück' and the emphatic adjective 'verwunschen' and between 'Staunen' and 'Erleiden': sentimentality has given way to complexity because Venice has begun to mean something intimate for Rilke, over and above a romantic fling. The shift in perception between 1903 and 1908 corresponds to the development of the aesthetic of the *Neue Gedichte* and finds expression in a network of images of, and ideas about, the city that enable Rilke to turn it, its spaces and buildings and the lagoon, in all their richly historical and cultural determinedness, into a 'thing' in the sense of the things of the new poems, things that mirror the self in subtle ways.

The sequence opens with 'Venezianischer Morgen', a 'deconstructed' sonnet with a sestet sandwiched between the two quatrains of what would normally be an octave, generating a symmetrical version (4+6+4) of what is essentially an asymmetrical form (8+6). The symmetry is appropriate to the 'Reihn von Spiegelbildern' that occupy the very centre of the poem. The important semantic turning points do not coincide exactly with this visual pattern: they occur at the end of lines 5 and 9, giving a 5+4+5 structure, also symmetrical and again with the mirrors in the middle. Rilke describes the performance of the city's morning toilette, as if Venice were a woman, maybe a courtesan ('Nymphe' might suggest this), perhaps an actress, viewed through a kind of proscenium arch or frame. The windows are both a frame for what is being seen and, because they resemble eyes, at the same time they are also spectators of the city's 'constantly re-enacted […] process of creation which never attains permanence'.[103]

VENEZIANISCHER MORGEN

Fürstlich verwöhnte Fenster sehen immer,
was manchesmal uns zu bemühn geruht:
die Stadt, die immer wieder, wo ein Schimmer
von Himmel trifft auf ein Gefühl von Flut,

sich bildet ohne irgendwann zu sein.
Ein jeder Morgen muß ihr die Opale
erst zeigen, die sie gestern trug, und Reihn
von Spiegelbildern ziehn aus dem Kanale,
und sie erinnern an die andern Male:
dann giebt sie sich erst zu und fällt sich ein

wie eine Nymphe, die den Zeus empfing.
Das Ohrgehäng erklingt an ihrem Ohre;
sie aber hebt San Giorgio Maggiore
und lächelt lässig in das schöne Ding. (*KA*, I, p. 557)

[103] Helen Bridge, 'Place into Poetry; Time and Space in Rilke's *Neue Gedichte*', *Orbis Litterarum*, 61.4 (2006), pp. 263–90 (p. 279), doi:10.1111/j.1600-0730.2006.00828.x.

The chiastic placement of temporal adverbs in the first two lines articulates an important tension. Whilst the noble windows always have a view on the city's temporary re-constitution of its identity ('immer'), human observers only register it 'manchesmal', and then only when we 'condescend' to 'make an effort' to do so. Other adverbs in the next sentence encapsulate a similar tension between the eternal and the evanescent: Venice forms its 'self' time and again ('immer wieder') but its identity is never ('irgendwann') fixed or stable. The sense of perpetual deferral here is underlined by the exquisite evocation of the 'shimmer of sky' touching the 'sensation of tide' in line 4. The city is 'dressed' or 're-dressed' *by* (rather than *during*) each new morning – time is here personified – and is shown yesterday's adornments for her approval: she will be the same but not the same; continuity is a component of renewal. The reflections and play of light from the canals on her opalescent jewels and in the background (echoing the interaction of sky and sea in l. 4) recall previous avatars of her identity. Only after the renewal process has taken place does any coherent sense of 'presence' emerge: 'dann giebt sie sich erst zu und fällt sich ein'. These idiosyncratically used verbs are almost impossible to translate, but they must mean respectively something like 'the city concedes/confesses/declares its "self"' and 'comes up with/imagines, its "self"' (and 'einfallen' might also be read in its musical sense, 'chime in with its "self"'). The moment is obviously one of intense self-realisation, a Rilkean 'epiphany' akin to those of Lord Chandos in Hofmannsthal's 'Ein Brief', and like those and the Joycean versions in *Stephen Hero*, 'etwas nicht durch den eigenen Willen Bewirktes',[104] for it is dependent on the action of memory, on the integration of the past into the present. The mythical comparison with a nymph seduced by Zeus suggests a similar transformative moment when the human encounters the divine. Space and time now partially give way to sound – the dangling opal earrings that the city/woman wore yesterday now fuse with the bells hanging in their towers, 'erklingt *an*' suggesting that the ear both hears the sound and bears the ringing jewel. The semicolon in line 12 announces a shift from passive (hearing) to active (raising), as the figure lifts up the church of San Giorgio Maggiore as if it were a mirror and smiles languidly 'into' it.

A card sent to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin on 29 November 1907 is not often quoted in this context, perhaps because it lacks lexical overlaps, but it has many features that clearly relate to this poem:

> Denken Sie, daß draußen Venedig ist, noch einen Tag lang [he was due to leave the next day]; heute noch. Fühlen Sie, daß es noch vor einer Weile im Morgen schwankte, und daß plötzlich derselbe Nebel, der es verbarg, nur

[104] Requadt, *Die Bildersprache*, p. 207. See also Theodore Ziolkowski, 'James Joyces Epiphanie und die Überwindung der empirischen Welt in der modernen deutschen Prosa', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 35.2 (1961), pp. 594–616, doi:10.1007/BF03375301.

> dazu da scheint, es mit Licht zu durchdringen, seit die rothe Sonnenkugel im Steigen zersprungen ist in Millionen winziger Splitter. Diesem Aufwand gegenüber fängt jeder Tag wie ein Jahrhundert an: man weiß nicht, was alles das werden soll; es überdauert einen mit jeder Sekunde. Dieses Venedig grüßt Sie, und aus meiner Erinnerung heraus grüßen Sie seine Bilder. Die kleine steigende Gestalt der Maria | der verhalten glühende Zusammenhang der Gestalten in der Landschaft des Giorgione | und noch ein Mal Sankt-Georg unter dem Fruchtgewind. (*BwNvB*, p. 33)

Here Rilke sketches an early version of the daily self-renewing city, every new day as momentous as a new century, the force of the new greeting conveyed by the explosion of light that is the dawn, the 'Aufwand' anticipating the luxurious business of the morning toilette. The card and the poem both end with an offertory gesture by the city of Venice. In the poem, the church of San Giorgio Maggiore is lifted as a jewel or a mirror or a monstrance. In the card, three works of art are offered up: Tintoretto's *Presentation of the Virgin* (1551–56) in the church of Madonna dell'Orto, which shows Mary as a child climbing a steep staircase outlined against a lambent sky; Giorgione's *La Tempesta* (1506–08), enigmatic in part because of the relationship between its two main figures and which during Rilke's visit hung in the Palazzo Giovanelli; and Mantegna's *San Giorgio* (c. 1460) standing under a garland of fruit, which is in the Gallerie dell'Accademia.[105]

There is a strong performative dimension to this poem as well as to the card. The windows in line 1 are like boxes in a theatre, with an excellent view of the 'stage'; the city's daily ritual before the mirror is reminiscent of a theatrical dresser assisting an actress in her regular preparation for her role. Venice here is simultaneously the actor, the audience, and even the props or the costumes (the opal earrings, for example, and San Giorgio Maggiore lifted like the 'einziges Eigentum' that Duse holds up high at the end of 'Bildnis'). This is much like what Rilke believes Venetian art teaches us: 'Denn wenn Venedig in jedem Dinge, in jedem Prospekt, in jeder Spiegelung *ist*, in den Bildern *ist* es tausendmal'.[106] The civic portraits, the images of the saints, the countless depictions of the Madonna by Titian, Carpaccio, Tintoretto and Tiepolo

> *sind* nichts als dies: *sind* das innerliche, durch und durch festliche Venedig, oder *sind* Venedig, wie es sich giebt, wie es auftritt im Drama seiner Größe […]. Individuell-werden, das hieß einem dieser Maler: Venedig-werden. Venedig-*sein* bedeutete ihm: *sich* gefunden haben. (Ibid.)

[105] Four days previously Rilke had written that he had seen 'Ihren schönen ritterichen Wächter' already and planned to visit both the church and the palace shortly (*BwNvB*, p. 32; 25 November 1907). 'Die Darstellung Mariae im Tempel' from *Das Marienleben* (1912; *KA*, II, pp. 23–4) was inspired by the Tintoretto painting and by Titian's earlier version of the same theme in the Gallerie dell'Accademia.

[106] *BwvdH*, p. 147 (24 March 1908; to Gisela von der Heydt; my emphasis).

The dramatic nature of the city – Venice as it performs the drama of its own greatness, 'giving' itself here perhaps in the performative sense (common to German and English) in which one might say of an actress 'she *gave* her Desdemona' – locates the authenticity of its identity in the reciprocity of role and actor, individual and whole. The paradox is that the *same* drama is 'given' night after night, but that every performance is unique.

A recurrent topos in Rilke's poetry and correspondence at this period is willpower. The long letter to Gisela von der Heydt of 24 March 1908 quoted above suggests that Venice is 'ganz durchblutet von Willen', and Rilke frequently returns to the idea of a Venetian 'gleichmäßiger Gesammtwille' that found individual expression in mighty naval commanders or powerful doges (*BwvdH*, p. 146). This idea is quite distinct from Schopenhauer's 'Wille zum Leben' and Nietzsche's 'Wille zur Macht'; it is defined by a network of tensions between apparent opposites (light/dark, fragile/strong, growth/decay) often symbolised, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, by Venetian glass. Rilke contrasts what is often felt to be characteristically attractive about Venice – the dignified precariousness of its ageing palaces, the unique but unsettling combination of the grandeur of marble, the turbulence of the sea and the fragmented collection of little islands – with its *true* distinctiveness, 'daß das alte, Tag und Nacht arbeitende Arsenal wie ein Herz das Blut eines ununterbrochenen Muthes in alle diese Organe trieb und in das Antlitz der Paläste' (*BwvdH*, p. 145). Contrary to superficial ('touristical') opinion, it is not decline, decay and dreaminess that constitute the most fascinating aspect of *La Serenissima* but their opposite, the energy with which Venice came to exist in the first place: 'Der starke Geruch des Vergehens zieht uns nicht hin: sondern das langsam verbleichende Wunder eines unerhörten Gewordenseins, dessen latent Energieen in fürstlichen Dingen verklingen.'[107] He writes of the *rise* of the city, not its decline, of 'die Entschlossenheit der Ansiedler' and of 'deren Willen[, von dem] frühzeitig schon eine solche Suggestion ausging, daß ihre Armut: ihr Salz und ihr Glas nur mit den Reichtümern märchenhafter Völker aufzuwiegen schien'. At the core of this vision of Venice is the notion that what was once miraculous, unimaginable, 'phantastisch' – a city of stone perched on wooden piles in the sea – has become '[das] Notwendige und Unentbehrliche' (*BwvdH*, p. 146).

These tensions very obviously inhabit the Venice sonnets. 'Spätherbst in Venedig' contrasts the city in late autumn with its previous seasonal incarnations. Rilke would not have accepted Simmel's suggestion that 'die Jahreszeiten [gleiten] durch diese Stadt, ohne dass der Wandel vom Winter

[107] *BwvdH*, p. 146: 'fürstlich' and 'verklingen' echo 'Venezianischer Morgen'. See also *BwNvB*, p. 30: 'es scheint mir seltsam, daß man auf den Einfall kam, diese Stadt zu träumerischen Stimmungen auszunützen' (24 November 1907) – which is what he had himself done in 1897.

zum Frühling, vom Sommer zum Herbst ihr Bild merklich änderten' (Simmel, p. 260).

SPÄTHERBST IN VENEDIG

Nun treibt die Stadt schon nicht mehr wie ein Köder,
der alle aufgetauchten Tage fängt.
Die gläsernen Paläste klingen spröder
an deinen Blick. Und aus den Gärten hängt

der Sommer wie ein Haufen Marionetten
kopfüber, müde, umgebracht.
Aber vom Grund aus alten Waldskeletten
steigt Willen auf: als sollte über Nacht

der General des Meeres die Galeeren
verdoppeln in dem wachen Arsenal,
um schon die nächste Morgenluft zu teeren

mit einer Flotte, welche ruderschlagend
sich drängt und jäh, mit allen Flaggen tagend,
den großen Wind hat, strahlend und fatal. (*KA*, I, pp. 557–58)

Where in 'Venezianischer Morgen' it is time (the morning itself) that acts upon the city, here it is the city that acts as bait to catch time in the form of 'alle aufgetauchten Tage', and the outgoing summer is now as limp as puppets with their strings cut, as good as dead. The bait and the puppets are images of existential emptiness,[108] but in the right (recurring) season, Venice is taut in form and purpose – glassily brittle. From the very foundations of the city, which of course does not have traditional foundations, being perched on pilings of petrified wood, there rises its 'will'. Now that the summer is over, the city reinvigorates itself, the power of its will expressed both in the dramatic metaphor of the suddenly redoubled fleet ready to do battle – flags flying, oars plying, the wind in its sails – and in the pace of the interwoven temporal images ('über Nacht … nächste Morgenluft … tagend'). Rilke would have disagreed with Simmel's interpretation of the city's foundations quoted above, but if he had read Simmel's Venice essay, he would undoubtedly have sympathised with the assertion that 'Hier, am Markusplatz […], empfindet man einen eisernen Machtwillen, eine finstre Leidenschaft, die wie das Ding an sich hinter dieser heitern Erscheinung stehen' (Simmel, p. 259). Where Simmel *complains* that 'wo all das Heitere und Helle, das Leichte und Freie,

[108] Rilke is not wholly hostile to stylisations of Venice, however. He evokes eighteenth-century men and women masked in the *bautta* and performing a delicate dance of meeting and parting, suggesting that 'Von da aus, von dieser letzten Pantomime, in der es [das Dix-Huitième] ausging, erfaßt man […] am sichersten dieses wunderliche Venedig' (*BwNvB*, p. 32) – although this is authentic stylisation, based on echoes of the past, not modern touristic imitation.

nur einem finstern, gewalttätigen, unerbittlich zweckmäßigen Leben zur Fassade diente', Rilke sees in the darkness of history an authentic source of strength. Simmel sees 'das Tragische an Venedig' defined by how 'die Oberfläche, die ihr Grund verlassen hat, der Schein, in dem kein Sein mehr lebt, sich dennoch als ein Vollständiges und Substantielles gibt, als der Inhalt eines wirklich zu erlebenden Lebens' (ibid., pp. 261–62). Rilke has a much more sophisticated understanding of the mutually defining relationship of 'Sein' and 'Schein'. Simmel claims of Florence that '[die] Kräfte, die seinen Boden geformt […] haben' gave rise directly to the façade of San Miniato al Monte and Giotto's campanile, that even if the organic link 'zwischen jenem dunklen Urgrund und diesen Kristallformen' has been lost, there is still a meaningful presence of the past in the present, 'weil in ihm [dem ästhetischen Schein] das Sein mitschwebt' (ibid., p. 262). To judge by 'Spätherbst', Rilke would say that this is equally true of Venice.

This sense of deep-rooted inner power reaches back to the city's foundations in the sense of its wooden pilings but in another sense, too, to its naval power and in particular to the district of the Arsenal, the state shipyard fuelling that power. In another letter to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin written from Venice, Rilke uses imagery that would find its way into the poems, describing how the city '[steht] *spröde* wie unter einer *gläsernen* Glocke unter dem kalten *Winde*' and evokes its '*klingende* Stille […] wie die Stille in einem *Glas*schrank, so vibrierend still ist es hier. Und zu dieser innerlich *klingende* Stille kommt noch ein anderes Stillsein hinzu: irgend eine Ehrfurcht, etwas Stolzes, das kniet, wie die Dogen in den Bildern.'[109] The first use of the adjective 'spröde' that I can trace in the context of Venice was to describe a specific sensation at a particular moment – the brittleness of the ice on the first morning of his 1907 visit. Rilke wrote to Lili Schalk:

> Zwar erschrak ich am ersten Morgen, ein hartes *sprödes* Venedig aus kältestem *Glas* zu finden: herrlich, aber schwer, nicht für Anfänger. Aber nun begreif ich dankbar und gern, daß es viel ist, an dieser so leichthin *zugegebenen* und ohne Vorbehalt anerkannten Stadt ein neues mühsameres Bewundern lernen zu dürfen.[110]

The most interesting aspect of this overlap between poetry and correspondence – yet another of very many – is the journey 'spröde' and 'Glas' have made between their near-literal use to describe a frosty November morning and their application to the late-autumn *palazzi*, which is no longer seasonal but almost ontological.

[109] *BwNvB*, p. 30 (24 November 1907). Here and in the next quotations from letters, emphases are mine. The kneeling doges recall the *Christus-Visionen*.

[110] Unpublished letter to Lili Schalk, 23 November 1907, quoted from https://www.e-manuscripta.ch/snl/content/zoom/1670353 (my transcription).

In the letter to Sidonie just quoted, Rilke writes of walking through the city:

> Wenn man *aber* in diesem harten *Meerwind* durch ihre *klingenden* Gassen geht, wenn man das Wasser mit scharfen Rändern die *Paläste* berühren sieht, die ganz aus *Willen* sind, aus Widerstand, aus Erfolg, und wenn man über der Pracht des Platzes das *Arsenal* nicht übersieht, das *Wälder* in *Flotten* verwandelt hat und die Last der *Flotten* in die Flügel eines Siegs; wenn man bedenkt, daß aus dem Mangel an Blumen Spitzen entstanden sind und aus dem Fehlen von Bergwerken Dinge aus edelsteingleichem Glas […] und daß zur Verwirklichung von alledem nicht einmal die Stelle vorhanden war, daß der Kontinent für diesen Staat erst gezimmert werden mußte: dann erschrickt man vor der Fülle von Aktion, die hier zusammengekommen ist. (*BwNvB*, pp. 30–31; 24 November 1907).

'Aktion' is central to this understanding.[111] Where there was no land, a city was built; the absence of flowers gave rise to lace; from the lack of mines grew the glass industry. Rilke knew well that at the height of the state's powers, the Arsenal employed some 16,000 people and represented about one seventh of the city's whole area. His Venice poems are fully grounded in the historical and material reality of their subject.

The same letter to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin promises an account of 'die große goldene Höhle, die San Marco ist', and the third of the 1908 sonnets picks up that very image in its first two lines:

SAN MARCO

In diesem Innern, das wie ausgehöhlt
sich wölbt und wendet in den goldnen Smalten,
rundkantig, glatt, mit Köstlichkeit geölt,
ward dieses Staates Dunkelheit gehalten

und heimlich aufgehäuft, als Gleichgewicht
des Lichtes, das in allen seinen Dingen
sich so vermehrte, daß sie fast vergingen –.
Und plötzlich zweifelst du: vergehn sie nicht?

und drängst zurück die harte Galerie,
die, wie ein Gang im Bergwerk, nah am Glanz
der Wölbung hängt; und du erkennst die heile

Helle des Ausblicks: aber irgendwie
wehmütig messend ihre müde Weile
am nahen Überstehn des Viergespanns. (*KA*, I, p. 558)

[111] See also the references to 'Aktion' in the letters to Clara and Beer-Hofmann of 11 October and 27 November 1907 quoted above.

Previous commentators have seemed to struggle with this poem. Hans Berendt reads it as a religious allegory, celebrating 'eine Verwandlung […] von der Dunkelheit des Staates in den Glanz […], also in die ewige Dauer': the initial darkness ('die gottferne Welt') nonetheless contains '[den] Glanz Gottes […] in ihm geborgen';[112] the visitor pushes back 'alles Dunkel-Irdische' and glimpses 'die heile Helle', but this inspiring vision is short-lived in comparison with the 'Überstehn' of the quadriga above the central portal, a disappointment that the 'Du' registers not with despair but merely 'wehmütig'.[113] Brigitte Bradley is irritated by the poem's alleged empirical inaccuracies, contending that San Marco is in reality much lighter inside than Rilke implies, that there is no inner 'Galerie', only an external one, that the four horses above the central portal do not constitute a 'Viergespann', and that the image of the interior given by the first three lines 'bietet sich bei faktischer Betrachtung nicht dar'.[114] Requadt says less about 'San Marco' than about the other sonnets and, unusually, tends to paraphrase: its images, he thinks, 'muten gesucht an, manieriert'; the dark of the church 'soll das Wirken der Staatsraison allererst konturieren, damit ein "Gleichgewicht des Lichtes" entsteht'; there is 'eine überzeugendere und kräftigere Bewältigung von Licht und Dunkel in der […] Gruppe der antiken Rosse', which in their 'Überstehn' represent the power of art to communicate 'das Unbegrenzte politischer Macht'.[115]

More persuasively, Judith Ryan has demonstrated a specific architectural aesthetic in this poem linked to the development of Rilke's poetics in 1907–08. She shows how 'San Marco' is indebted to John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* (1851–53), which reads St Mark's Basilica as a repository of different stages of cultural history that need to be pieced together.[116] She concludes that, inspired by Ruskin's concept of an eclectic or 'incrusted' style – with St Mark's as a model of art 'composed of fragments, fearing to be found decadent but striving to create something new' (ibid., p. 97) – conflicting ideals of the Gothic, the Romantic and the Classical 'jostle' in the poem, which shifts uncertainly between past and present, object and observer. She observes that it is hard to follow the poem unless one 'has already seen the basilica and read the guide book' (ibid., p. 95), but whilst what follows adds some details to such a 'Baedeker-style' exegesis, a coherent reading is nonetheless possible from the plain text.

[112] Rilke wrote to his mother – choosing his addressee carefully for her piety – of 'der milde Glanz der vielen silbernen Herzen' in the Basilica, which 'herrscht dort vor und schafft in all der Pracht eine Nähe und etwas wie eine seelische Häuslichkeit' (*BadM*, II, p. 21; 7 May 1910).
[113] Berendt, *Rainer Maria Rilkes 'Neue Gedichte'*, p. 296.
[114] Bradley, *NGAT*, p. 162.
[115] Requadt, *Die Bildersprache*, pp. 209–10.
[116] Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and the Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 91–97, who notes that a French translation of the two-volume 'Traveller's Edition' of Ruskin appeared in 1906 (p. 91), and that Rilke knew a German translation as early as 1902 (p. 92).

Rilke initially sees San Marco as a kind of kaleidoscopic treasure chest, which certainly echoes Ruskin, who wrote of the approach to it as a vision of 'a treasure-heap, it seems, partly of gold, and partly of opal and mother-of-pearl, hollowed beneath into five great vaulted porches, ceiled with fair mosaic'.[117] In a sense, the whole edifice was almost literally a treasure chest, incorporating materials seized or traded from abroad into its very fabric, its very façade 'a shrine at which to dedicate the splendour of miscellaneous spoil' (*Stones*, p. 97). But what Rilke suggests is hoarded so jealously, as if by a dragon in its lair, is not Ruskin's bright marble and sparkling stones but their apparent opposite, 'dieses Staates Dunkelheit'. This is an allusion to Venice's accumulation of wealth by plunder and dark dealings in politics and trade, 'the mystery of Venetian power',[118] so the 'light' of the materials derives from the 'dark' of their acquisition.

However, the literal sense of darkness is also implicit in the fact that the interior of the church is 'hollowed out' – it is described by Ruskin as 'a vast cave, hewn out into the form of a Cross' and as housing 'darkness and mystery; […] artificial light employed in small quantities, but maintained with a constancy which seems to give it a kind of sacredness' (*Stones*, pp. 88 and 90). Ruskin is sceptical of the relationship between the treasures and religious faith, describing 'preciousness of material easily comprehended by the vulgar eye', the smell of incense, the 'solemn music' and the 'tangible idols or images' as 'the stage properties of superstition […] exhausted in the amination of a paralyzed Christianity' (*Stones*, pp. 90–91). The link between city and stage is of course familiar in Rilke's cycle. For Ruskin, San Marco is emblematic of 'the decline of the Venetian character' (*Stones*, p. 92); Rilke follows him only up to a point, locating significance in past political power instead of present touristic attractiveness, but not conceding decline.

Rilke describes the decorative treasures as distributed around the concave surface of the 'cave' like a layer of oil (and 'oiled' here conveys a suspicion of glibness or 'mechanistic' [MC] superficiality[119]). This repository of darkness is specifically a 'Gleichgewicht | des Lichtes, das in allen seinen Dingen | sich […] vermehrte', but does 'sein' here refer to 'der Staat' in line 4, or to 'dieses Innere' in line 1? The former seems more natural, but since San Marco is here the very symbol of the power of the Venetian state, there is little effective difference in the sense.[120] This inner light has, over

[117] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, II, *The Sea-Stories*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, *The Library Edition*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (George Allen and Longmans, Green and Co, 1905), X, p. 82 (= *Stones*).

[118] Dürr, *The Poet's Trajectory*, p. 74; cf. Ryan, *Rilke*, p. 92, and Requadt, *Die Bildersprache*, p. 210.

[119] 'Tränenkrüglein' (*KA*, II, p. 292; September 1923) refers to 'die Öle | in dem gehöhlten Gewölb', which echoes images and phrasing in 'San Marco' but treats them quite differently. I owe the comparison to correspondence with Martyn Crucefix, and phrasing or ideas taken from his contribution to these exchanges here and below are indicated by MC in parentheses.

[120] Ryan, *Rilke*, p. 93.

time, so accreted and increased in intensity that it seems almost to stifle the continued existence of the materials from which it emanates, 'their own dazzling achievement' overwhelming their origins, and the possibility that 'there [is] perhaps a buried alchemical process here' (MC) offers a suggestive link to 'Die Kurtisane'. Whether the 'Dinge' are the tangible 'gilded objects' or 'gilt decorations' in the church or the more abstract splendours of the state is immaterial; the literal and the metaphorical overlap; but as Ryan explains, 'this vision of architectural decadence owes much to Ruskin's view that Venetian culture began its downward course with excessive acquisition of riches'.[121] The sixty-ninth entry in *Malte* offers a helpful perspective on Rilke's imagery here: Malte writes of 'der suggestive Staat, der das Salz und Glas seiner Armut austauschte gegen die Schätze der Völker', but also of a necessary counterweight, 'das schöne Gegengewicht der Welt, das bis in [Venedigs] Zierate hinein voll latenter Energien steht, die sich immer feiner vernervten' (*KA*, III, p. 625). Rilke sees the superficial splendours of the city of Venice as defined by its more substantial past strength. The 'Gegengewicht' in *Malte* is the light; in the poem, the 'Gleichgewicht' is the dark; the point is that the relationship is reciprocal.

There is a dramatic pause midway through 'San Marco' as the figure of an observer is introduced and as a question shifts the past tenses of the previous lines into a vivid present. The darkness of history has been presented as a necessary counterweight to, and origin of, the light of the superficial present that is becoming dangerously intense, but in line 8 there is an urgent moment of doubt or panic about the materials thus imbued with light: 'Und plötzlich zweifelst du: vergehen sie nicht?' ('sie' here must mean the same as 'sie' in l. 7, 'alle seine Dinge'). This line appears to challenge the word 'fast' in line 6, wondering anxiously, 'goodness, perhaps they really *are* vanishing entirely, maybe to say "almost" was too optimistic' (although 'nicht' is ambiguous, and the anxiety might in fact be about whether these things are in fact *not* vanishing but dangerously maintaining their superficial pre-eminence).[122] To understand this moment of doubt, one needs to trace the response to it within the poem, which is pressing: the first tercet follows on immediately, beginning with 'und' (with a lower-case 'u', so part of the same sentence), and indicates that the reflex triggered by the question is for the 'Du' to 'push back' (reject or 'bustle back along'

[121] In a letter to Marie Taxis quoted below, Rilke makes a cognate point about 'dieser stupide Superlativ von Licht' as tourists view the artificially illuminated Basilica.

[122] Another city poem from July 1907, 'Quai du Rosaire' (noted by MC), asks with comparable ambiguity, 'Verging nicht diese Stadt?' – having just asserted the superior reality of 'die eingehängte Welt von Spiegelbildern' over the real 'Dinge' of Bruges (*KA*, I, pp. 493–94). According to 'ein unbegreifliches Gesetz', the observer sees how the city becomes 'wach und deutlich im Umgestellten' (in the watery mirror images): 'dort' (in the reflections) the gardens 'gelten' and there is dancing in the bars; but 'oben' (in the real world) there is only 'Stille', albeit one conjured as rich and sweet like grapes from a vine. There is profundity in the reality, but vivid life in the simulacrum – a relationship akin to Rilke's view of Venice.

[MC]?) the 'gallery' that calls to mind a passageway in a mine and allow this person to take in ('erkennen') the brightness as one looks from within the church out into the square. What Rilke has in mind when he refers to 'gallery' here is in all likelihood one of the former *matronei* or women's galleries in the western arm of the cross-shaped church. They were high above the nave, close to the ceiling mosaics, and provided the best view of these ('nah am Glanz | der Wölbung'). They no longer exist in their original form – repeated fires caused them to be modified – and were replaced centuries ago by simple passageways perched above the side aisles of the nave ('wie ein Gang im Bergwerk'), for which the verb 'hängen' is an entirely appropriate description.[123] Rilke refers to them in his long letter to Gisela von der Heydt: 'es ist rathsam, einmal die oberen Galerien in S. Marco zu besteigen' (*BwvdH*, p. 147). In the modern church, one can access the external gallery with the bronze horses from the former *matronei* inside.

There is a noticeable change of pace in the sestet (resembling a similar acceleration in 'Spätherbst in Venedig'). The doleful image of 'vergehen' is succeeded by forceful proactivity as the 'Du' rejects the interior in favour of the exterior and seeks the 'Ausblick' into the quite different light of St Mark's Square. The light outside is 'heil' (emphasised almost too urgently at the rhyme position) because it is not tainted by 'vergehen', as the inner light is. And yet this contrast does not after all entirely favour the light outside, whose 'müde Weile' matches the languor of the puppets in 'Spätherbst in Venedig' and thereby reminds us (and, as 'messend' implies, the 'Du' of the poem) of how bright sunshine daily renewed is not really what reveals the energetic truth of the 'Lagunenstadt'. It pales beside '[das] nahe Überstehn des Viergespanns', the man-made bronze horses that both literally 'stand above' the west door but also 'withstand' time and endure. This monument – despite being so prominently in the light of day – is a token of 'dieses Staates Dunkelheit' and its political power. It came to Venice as part of plunder gathered by the Venetians under Doge Enrico Dandolo after the conquest of Constantinople at the end of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. 'Irgendwie' is placed at the rhyme and is perhaps strangely prominent for such an apparently throwaway word, although this is entirely appropriate for a poem whose questions are so ambiguous, where light and dark seep into each other, and in which conquest and decay are mutually interdependent as essential components of the reality of what a draft of *Malte* calls 'das mitten im *Unmöglichen* durchgesetzte Venedig'.[124] The potential ambiguity in line 8 can be resolved by reading the poem thus: the historical roots of the dark power of the state are a necessary counterweight to a light that emerges from within the superficial brilliance

[123] This is not a (vertical) 'mineshaft' (*pace* Ryan, *Rilke*, p. 93), but a horizontal 'gallery' (the mining term is the same in English and German).
[124] *BT*, I, p. 149 and II, p. 149 (my emphasis).

of the modern city and which threatens to overwhelm it; a moment of panic suggests that the inner light is indeed fatally stifling the strength of the dark; but when one escapes from the literal darkness, chasing the appeal of the sunlight, one realises that it is after all the (dark) weight of the past that lasts and provides significance and not the surface glamour.[125]

## ANTI-TOURISM AND 'BESITZLOSE LIEBE': *MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE* (1909–10)

Bernhard Blume describes Rilke's letter to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin of 24 November 1907 (quoted above) as 'ein erster Entwurf zu [Spätherbst in Venedig]' and goes on to say how the sixty-ninth entry in *Malte* (*KA*, III, pp. 623–68) 'liest sich wie eine Fortführung der angezogenen Briefstelle, die Rilke teils erweitert und teils verdichtet'.[126] The editors of the *Kritische Ausgabe* provisionally date that section of Rilke's novel to an 'intensive Arbeitsphase' in 1909 (*KA*, III, p. 877), but the wealth of close connections between it and letters allows one to speculate that its origins, at least, lie earlier than that.

The episode is savagely, almost sarcastically, anti-tourist. Its 'frame' is Malte's memories of Abelone, his mother's youngest sister and for a while the object of his love, whom he recalls during an autumn 'salon' in one of the noble Venetian palaces, presumably rented since both guests and host are 'fremd'. The strangers are delighted when someone whispers an authentic Venetian name and are incapable of controlling the emotions provoked in them by this exotic city: 'Wie sie, ganz unvorbereitet, keine Gefahr begreifend, von den fast tödlichen Geständnissen der Musik sich anreizen lassen wie von körperlichen Indiskretionen, so überliefern sie sich, ohne die Existenz Venedigs im geringsten zu bewältigen, der lohnenden Ohnmacht der Gondeln' (*KA*, III, p. 624). There is something essentially voyeuristic about this manner of experiencing Venice, as if the city were a kind of perpetual peepshow or indeed an amusement park akin to its 1890s Viennese copy. A married couple bickers or falls silent; the husband is overcome by 'die angenehme Müdigkeit seiner Ideale'; the wife

[125] Imagery and phrasing in 'San Marco' (gold, roundness, heaping, 'Dinge') echo another of the *Neue Gedichte*, 'Buddha' (*SW*, I, p. 489), written a year before it on 19 July 1906. Here, a visiting pilgrim observes a golden statue initially 'as if made from the heaped-up riches of empires – filled with remorse for their imperialistic or worldly sins' (MC) – 'als hätten Reiche voller Reue | ihre Heimlichkeiten *aufgehäuft*' – although on closer inspection these are not mere trinkets collected by conquerors and there is an inner light, something beyond the worldly, in this accumulation of gold; he does not know 'welche | Dinge eingeschmolzen wurden' to shape it. 'Buddha' also shares with 'Die Kurtisane' the image of eyebrows (albeit not in a Petrarchist manner there) and hints of alchemical transformation, and with 'Venezianischer Morgen' the 'Ohrgehänge'. The Buddha offers a complement to the basilica: self and surrounding world are one, '[er] hält sich ständig im Gleichgewicht' (Bradley, *NG*, p. 128), effortlessly, whereas the observer in the church is at pains to perceive the same balance in the very incarnation of the city whose traditional epithet, *La Serenissima*, is no longer so obviously appropriate.

[126] Blume, 'Rilkes "Spätherbst in Venedig"', pp. 347–48.

starts to feel young again 'und den trägen Einheimischen aufmunternd zunickt mit einem Lächeln, als hätte sie Zähne aus Zucker, die sich beständig auflösen' (*KA*, III, p. 624).[127]

The visitors Malte despises have lost every vestige of willpower; they are akin to marionettes whose strings have been cut, or they have been drugged by the spirit of this city, 'stärker als der Duft aromatischer Länder'. The sin of the tourist is not so much to view the city superficially, although that is part of it; it is failing to realise how all that the light reveals is the product of Venice's historical relationship with the world, via trade and politics – a relationship enshrined both in Rilke's appreciation of the city in *Malte* and in 'dieses Staates Dunkelheiten' at the core of 'San Marco'. Rilke's own decisive visit was in November 1907, in wintry weather, but Malte's experience is of a different season. As autumn fades, Malte is pleased to be staying on, and he contrasts the narcotic blandishments of exoticism, atmosphere and the gondola in the high season to which emotionally incontinent tourists succumb with a 'real' Venice that re-emerges when they have gone:

> Das weiche, opiatische Venedig ihrer Vorurteile und Bedürfnisse verschwindet mit diesen somnolenten Ausländern, und *eines Morgens* ist das andere da, das *wirkliche*, *wache* bis zum Zerspringen *spröde*, durchaus nicht erträumte: das mitten im Nichts *auf versenkten Wäldern* gewollte, erzwungene und endlich so durch und durch vorhandene Venedig. Der abgehärtete, auf das Nötigste beschränkte Körper, durch den das nachtwache *Arsenal* das Blut seiner Arbeit trieb, und dieses Körpers penetranter, sich fortwährend erweiternder Geist, der stärker war als der Duft aromatischer Länder. Der suggestive Staat, der das Salz und *Glas* seiner Armut austauschte gegen die *Schätze* der Völker. Das schöne *Gegengewicht* der Welt, das bis in seine *Zierate* hinein voll latenter *Energien* steht, die sich immer feiner vernervten –: *dieses* Venedig. (*KA*, III, pp. 624–25; my emphases)

The numerous direct echoes of vocabulary, imagery and theme from other Venetian writings, poems and letters are italicised. Rilke maintains the distinction between a 'true' Venice and the sentimental version of itself accessible to tourists. Particularly notable here is the re-use of the adjective 'spröde', which marks its complete transition from a seasonal meteorological observation (in the letter to Schalk quoted above) to the affirmation of an existential quality of tension and fragility akin to the glass for which the city is famous. Also clearer here than perhaps elsewhere is the

[127] This mocking image has something in common with a passage from Rilke's important letter to Gisela von der Heydt of 24 March 1908 in which he writes of the unique operation of time in Venice: 'Was sind Tage in Venedig? Man zählt sie nicht, man weiß nicht, wie lang sie sind, wann sie anfangen, wann sie enden; es ist ein Zustand verwandelten Seins. Man ist wie Zucker im Tee, kein Stück mehr, auf keine Weise wieder herauszuholen und ein bischen [*sic*] überall –' (*BwvdH*, p. 145). The dissolution of the self in the city here is positive; the dissolving teeth, however, are a negative indication of the tourists' lack of critical 'bite'.

idea that the decorative ('Zierate') is not considered as superficial but as the expression of the city's very existential force, the capillaries, so to speak, in the circulation of its lifeblood, to adapt Rilke's own image.

The force with which Malte realises that he intuitively knows 'dieses Venedig' and 'das Wesen dieser Umgebung' unsettles him; he can hardly believe that he is the only one amongst fifty present who 'sofort begriff, daß hier nicht ein Genuß aufgeschlagen war, sondern ein Beispiel des Willens', and he is almost tempted to clap his hands publicly to draw attention to 'das von allen zerredete Mißverständnis' of the identity of Venice (*KA*, III, p. 625). He is observed by an unknown young Danish woman who reminds him powerfully of his first love, Abelone; her features seem to imitate his own anger and betray the same 'böse Unduldsamkeit' (*KA*, III, p. 626). She performs an inauthentic Italian song, 'eines […] die die Fremden für sehr echt halten', but without conviction, and then sings an unknown German song, 'wie etwas Notwendiges', that silences the chattering crowd. It articulates Rilke's (and Malte's) doctrine of 'besitzlose Liebe', concluding:

> Du machst mich allein. Dich einzig kann ich vertauschen.
> Eine Weile bist dus, dann wieder ist es das Rauschen,
> oder es ist ein Duft ohne Rest.
> Ach, in den Armen hab ich sie alle verloren,
> du nur, du wirst immer wieder geboren:
> weil ich niemals dich anhielt, halt ich dich fest.[128]

It is not hard to see parallels between this view of love and Rilke's evocations of a self-renewing city whose identity manifests deeper, long-standing political and artistic forces rather than the narcissistic mirroring phenomena of the popular imagination. The Venetian Gaspara Stampa, whom Rilke read with Mimì Romanelli in 1907, is one of the idealised artist figures that illustrate this doctrine, those who love without being loved and who 'have turned their lives into their works'.[129] In *Malte* she is mentioned with others in a sequence of entries that link the young women observed sketching motifs from the tapestries of 'La Dame à la licorne' in the Musée de Cluny and the women who crafted the lace that Malte's mother lovingly shows her son, including Points d'Alençon, Valenciennes, Binche and the 'venezianische Nadelspitze' that recall Rilke's very first published reference to Venice. The lace-workers have also 'turned their lives into their works': 'sie sind ganz und gar drin' (*KA*, III, pp. 551–52).

[128] *KA*, III, p. 628. Anton Webern regarded this as a second song; he set both in August 1910 (very soon after *Malte* was published on 31 May), for soprano and eight instruments (op. 8).
[129] Louth, *Rilke*, p. 197.

## ADMIRAL ZENO (1910): 'NICHT GEBILDET, SONDERN NUR GLEICHSAM AUSGESPART'

The authors of these lacework labours of love, like the women who sewed the unicorn tapestries, cannot be identified individually. They are present ('drin') but also absent, like the holes in the lace, which as Charlie Louth notes is 'a form constructed round and out of emptiness, a design which incorporates absences into its fabric, the holes being as much part of it as the threads'.[130] There is a correlation between this patterning of presence and absence and a descriptive technique that Rilke evokes on a number of occasions, including as part of his plans for a biography of a fourteenth-century Venetian admiral, Carlo Zeno. The primary purpose of Rilke's fourth visit to Venice was research for this biography in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia, the Biblioteca Marciana and the Museo Civico Correr. He travelled directly from Duino and stayed at the Hôtel Regina on the Grand Canal between 28 April and 11 May 1910, thus not long after he had dictated the text of *Malte* to Kippenberg's secretary (January 1910). The biography had been encouraged by 'Scottish landowner Horatio Brown, friend and literary executor of John Addington Symonds and an authority on the history of Venice',[131] whom he had met in Duino, and whilst the castle library was rich in source material, gaps necessitated a research visit to Venice.[132]

Zeno was 'a former cleric turned adventurer',[133] the victor of the battle of Chioggia in 1380 and often described as the 'Saviour of Venice'. Rilke saw in Zeno a kind of alter ego: 'je mehr ich von ihm weiß, desto mehr werd ich mir in seiner Figur das Fremde, das ich mir wünsche, aneignen', he wrote to Marie Taxis.[134] He also confessed that he was 'aussichtlos unfindig' in the archives, distracted from his work by the slap of water against marble, and more interested in the 'Garden of Eden' (ibid.). His difficulty lay in establishing a firm grip on his subject's identity, and, it is implied, on aspects of his own. To address this, he considered that

[130] Ibid., p. 196.

[131] Donald Prater, *A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 196.

[132] *BadM*, II, p. 18 (29 April 1910), II, p. 20 (1 May 1910), and II, p. 21 (7 May 1910). He had excellent letters of introduction and had yet again prepared assiduously.

[133] Dennis Romano, *Venice: The Remarkable History of the Lagoon City* (Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 240.

[134] Rilke and Marie von Thurn und Taxis, *Briefwechsel*, ed. by Ernst Zinn, 2 vols (Niehans & Rokitansky and Insel, 1951) (= *BwTT*), I, p. 15 (29 April 1910), and *B07–14*, p. 101 (5 May 1910; to Clara Rilke). Nonetheless, during the war he wrote to the Director of the Wiener Kriegsarchiv, Generalmajor Maximilian Ritter von Hoen, for permission to go to Constantinople at the invitation of the German Ambassador so as to complete 'gründliche Ortsstudien' for this project: Rilke, *Briefe zur Politik*, ed. by Joachim W. Storck (Insel, 1992), p. 159 (3 February 1917). In 1922 he was to describe his archival efforts as 'unseelig' (*BwTT*, II, p. 724; 18 July 1922).

there was 'nur *ein* gewagtes Mittel, sich seiner zu bemächtigen, nämlich, sich seine Zeit durchaus lebhaft zu machen'.[135] This was consciously a ruse, '[eine] List, sich Carlo Zeno's zu bemächtigen, indem man ihn gleichsam ausspart, alles andere sich auszieht und koloriert, so daß eben dann das Weißgelassene am Ende seinen Umriß bilden muß' (ibid.). That is exactly what Rilke tried to do: the Zeno notebook in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach has notes on both sides of forty-five sheets covering historical details from 1340 to 1366, and there is a folder of loose sheets covering 1333–39, copied, translated or paraphrased from his historical background sources. The subject matter includes 'unzählige Schlachten und Staatsstreiche, Belagerungen und Brandstiftungen, Verrate und Morde, Bestechung und Ablaßhandel, Eheschließungen und andere Bündnisse, unzählige Personen und Schauplätze', but Zeno himself is absent: 'Der Held der zu schreibenden Vita, Carlo Zeno, kommt in diesen ganzen Aufzeichnungen überhaupt nicht vor.'[136] Karine Winkelvoss identifies the main protagonist of these notes as the Black Death that struck Venice in 1348 and killed between a third and half of the population.

Rilke's term 'aussparen' is borrowed from painting: Grimm glosses the verb 'aussparen' with 'die mahler sparen stellen aus, *halten sie noch frei von farbe*'.[137] Malte uses the same word when evoking his difficulty in grasping the identity of Ingeborg, a relative whose precise family connection is left undetermined but in whose bureau his mother's lace is kept. Ingeborg is absent – already dead – but present on one occasion as a ghost (again as an empty space around which a dog circles and jumps anxiously), and Malte notes:

> ich merkte, wenn sie von ihr erzählten, wie sie sie *aussparten*, wie sie die anderen nannten und beschrieben, die Umgebungen, die Örtlichkeiten, die Gegenstände bis an eine bestimmte Stelle heran, wo das alles […] aufhörte mit dem leichten, niemals nachgezogenen Kontur, der sie einschloß. (*KA*, III, p. 513)

This technique for uncovering the identity of an evasive subject consists in filling in the background and waiting to see what shape is left, creating a silhouette. The identity of an unknown (absent) may emerge and fill an undefined space created by the construction of the known (present). Rilke's appreciation of it may initially have derived from his reading of Scandinavian literature. In 1903 he had written of the 'silhouettenhafte Klarheit' of the Danish novelist Herman Bang's characterisations and of his 'Technik, diese [Frauengestalten] *auszusparen*, wenn er ihnen einen bewegten und wogenden Hintergrund giebt, er läßt sie *weiß*' (*KA*, IV,

[135] *BwTT*, I, p. 125 (9 March 1912; Rilke's emphasis).
[136] Karine Winkelvoss, 'Rilkes historische Studien über Carlo Zeno: ein unveröffentlichtes Manuskript aus dem Jahr 1912', *Geschichte der Germanistik*, 23/24 (2003), pp. 45–50 (pp. 46–47).
[137] Online edition: https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB&lemid=A09032.

p. 551). In a fiftieth-birthday tribute to the Swedish writer Verner von Heidenstam, published in 1909, he attributes to his reading of *Karolinerna* (in a partial German translation from 1898) an understanding of 'was es hieß, einer Gestalt mächtig sein; daß es darum handelte, sie nicht ängstlich festzuhalten, sondern […], wo sie unfaßbar war, ihre Form *auszusparen* mit Anderem, Faßbaren [*sic*]'.[138]

Rilke usually evokes this technique when writing about depictions of women. A poem commemorating the death of Gräfin Luise Schwerin in January 1906 offers to those who did not know her personally 'nichts […] als: dich aus allen Dingen *auszusparen*, | so wie man in deinen Mädchenjahren | zeichnete das Weiß des Wasserfalls', describing her as 'tiefer Hintergrund, | sanft umrahmt von deinen liebsten Dingen' (*KA*, II, p. 355). In a 1908 letter to Rodin, Rilke describes how he has 'évoqué surtout des femmes en faisant soigneusement toutes les choses autour d'elles, *laissant un blanc* qui ne serait qu'un vide, mais [qui …] devient vibrant et lumineux'.[139] Zeno seems to be the only male figure approached directly in this way; it is true that the verb appears in 'Der Abenteuerer', but there the *space* around the figure is 'ausgespart' (l. 4), not the figure itself, and the 'silhouette' technique is reversed. 'Aussparen' is not limited to individual human beings: in the *Sonette an Orpheus*, 'das Tier, das es nicht gibt' is given space and in that space is 'klar und ausgespart', nourished only 'mit der Möglichkeit, es sei' (*KA*, II, p. 258). When the unicorn comes into being, when absence becomes presence, '[es] war im Silber-Spiegel', just as it is in 'Vue' in the 'Dame à la licorne' tapestries: mirrors are also blank spaces in which things can come into being, and in the *Sonette*, Rilke describes their 'Wesen' (using an image that echoes that of Malte's mother's lace) as 'mit lauter Löchern von Sieben | erfüllten Zwischenräume der Zeit' (*KA*, II, p. 258). Shortly before writing these sonnets, on 28 January 1922, Rilke had used the word 'ausspären' of time itself – time granting creative 'space' for something to be or become, just like the unicorn: 'Was war das für ein Moment der Windstille in der großen Ägyptischen Zeit? […] Wie schloß sich wieder, gleich hinter ihnen, die Zeit, die einem "Seienden" Raum gegeben, – es "ausgespart" hatte?!'[140] The final poem in the first volume of *Neue Gedichte*, 'Die Rosenschale' (written on Capri early in 1907), attributes to the roses a state of 'fast nicht Umrissensein wie *Ausgespartes* | und lauter Inneres' (*KA*, I, p. 509). A letter sent in 1915 to Marie Taxis about the park at Saonara (the country residence of Pia Valmarana's uncle, Count Cittadella) makes the same comparison, again referring to time, space and stillness:

[138] *Svenska Dagbladet*, 6 July 1909, p. 10; quoted from Schoolfield, *Young Rilke*, p. 374.
[139] Rilke/Rodin, *Correspondance*, pp. 117–18 (29 December 1908).
[140] Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot 1921–1926*, p. 111 (to Lotti von Wedel).

> draußen der Park: alles war Einklang zu mir, eine jener Stunden, garnicht gebildet, sondern nur gleichsam *ausgespart*, als ob die Dinge zusammenträten und *Raum gäben*, einen Raum, unberührt wie ein *Roseninneres*, einen angelischen Raum, in dem man sich *still* hält.[141]

This (temporal) space is not 'gebildet', not shaped by someone else via an act of artistic or creative will, but quietly left open to receive, contain and generate significance, in some respects therefore akin to the epiphanies familiar from Joyce and Hofmannsthal.

Rilke assures Rodin that the blankness of the women left 'un-coloured-in' is nonetheless 'vibrant and luminous'; the unicorn exists because a space created around it by real things offers it the possibility of being; a blank in time is filled with 'Seiendes' in the reign of Akhenaten; a chance moment in the park, un-engineered, allows Rilke a 'space in time' to experience 'Einklang' with nature. The descriptive technique casts light on the nature of Venice itself: in 'Venezianischer Morgen', she is at first 'die Stadt, die […] sich bildet, ohne irgendwann zu sein', but this fruitless circularity is cemented into identity when the mirroring of the water in the canals permits 'sich zugeben' and 'sich einfallen'. Rilke uses a term related to 'aussparen' and the silhouette profile in a letter to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin recalling his last morning in Venice in 1907:

> Zwar fühl ich ihn noch, den dunkelflüssigen Morgen, in dem die Glocken sich auflösten, so daß er heller würde von ihnen, und auf dessen Grunde wie ein Niederschlag, weißlich und grau, die Stadt *sich abzusetzen* schien in Kristallen und kristallinischen Stücken.[142]

Here, too, there is a unique moment in time, a kind of epiphany, that matches the imagery of a door or curtains closing behind in the Egyptian letter quoted above: 'das war da ich eben aus der zu frühen kalten Gondel die Treppe zum Bahnhof betrat […], aus dem Zauber hinaus, der zurückblieb, der sich schloß, der schon hinter mir zugegangen war' (ibid).

In most instances, 'aussparen' facilitates, or is a step in the process towards, 'sich bilden', but in the case of Zeno, Rilke's hope that delineating a blank would allow a meaningful figure to emerge was not fulfilled. Rilke was ultimately unable to write the biography. His historiography was at root displacement activity during a creative lull, what he called 'Schülerarbeit'.[143] Rilke seems nonetheless to have considered adapting his historical research to more literary ends, fascinated above all by the admiral's achievement of great age. Editha Klipstein wrote to Ilsa Erdmann on 15 July 1915 after a three-hour conversation with the poet, 'Rilke wünscht jetzt, die Geschichte eines Mannes zu schreiben der *alt* geworden

[141] *BwTT*, I, pp. 452–53 (26 November 1915; my emphasis).
[142] *BwNvB*, p. 35 (15 December 1907; my emphasis).
[143] *BwTT*, I, p. 121 (2 March 1912).

sei. […] Der Held solle ein Venezianer sein, der fünfundachtzig Jahre alt würde, Feldherr, Dichter, Lebenskünstler war.'[144] Zeno (1333–1418) lived to be eighty-five, and this description fits him well. Alfred Wolfenstein also reports a conversation with Rilke from May 1918 'von seinem Plane eines Romans, dessen Held ein die Meere mit seinen Taten erfüllender Admiral werden sollte'.[145] Antonina Vallentin (a Polish-born political journalist, Berlin *salonnière* and biographer of Einstein, Heine, Mirabeau, Leonardo da Vinci and Stresemann) corresponded with Rilke in 1918 and in her 1952 memoir recollected this project in some detail:

> Il voulait écrire un livre: *La trahison de Zeno*. Il m'en parla longuement. Je ne sais plus s'il en avait écrit une partie. Mais le livre était déjà complètement construit dans son esprit. […] Je me rappelle seulement une scène dans la prison où Zeno revit sa vie, la rétablit dans ses justes proportions. 'Une prison', disait Rilke. Je comprends à présent ce qu'un homme peut éprouver devant une porte verrouillée, quand les murs semblent se refermer sur lui. Il ne songe qu'aux routes qui s'étaient autrefois ouvertes devant lui, aux routes qu'il n'a jamais prises.[146]

Yet again a prison features in the life of a Venetian figure in whom Rilke was interested, recalling both Pellico and Casanova, with whom the admiral shared the qualities of the 'Abenteuerer'. In 1406, at the age of seventy-two, Zeno was imprisoned for a year in the Pozzi prison, sentenced by the Council of Ten for bribery and treasonable corruption during his otherwise heroic defeat of the Lord of Padua the previous year.[147] However, no more came of Rilke's fictional treatment of Zeno than of the biography; his failure here may have impeded all further literary work on Venice.

## PREFIGURING THE CYCLE: AN EXPLORATION OF 'FORTGEHN' (1906)

A Venice poem much less well-known than any of those so far discussed was the third in a sequence intended for Princesse Madeleine de Broglie. 'Fortgehn' was first published in 1953, but it was written in June 1906. Malte Kleinwort sees it as a 'Vorstufe oder […] thematisches Reservoir' for the later Venice poetry, convincingly attributing to it 'eine Brücken- oder Scharnierfunktion zwischen der frühen und der späteren

[144] Quoted from Rolf Haaser, *Editha Klipstein und Rainer Maria Rilke im Sommer 1915* (Litblockin, 2007), p. 24.

[145] Alfred Wolfenstein, 'Erinnerungen an Rilke', *Sonntags-Beilage der National-Zeitung*, Basel, 23.675 (15 February 1942), p. 1 (quoted from *Erinnerungen an Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. by Ebneter and Unglaub, II, p. 772).

[146] Antonina Vallentin, 'Rainer Maria Rilke', *Les temps modernes*, 8.83 (1952), pp. 385–434 (p. 420).

[147] The story is a perfect example of the tension explored in 'Ein Doge' between admiration and suspicion of the powerful or successful in the Venetian Republic. Zeno might have been elected Doge in 1382 had it not been for his very popularity.

Venedigdichtung'.[148] Anthony Phelan, too, observes that it is a poem 'dessen thematisches Material im "Venezianischen Morgen" der *Neuen Gedichte* umgearbeitet wird'.[149] Whilst it might therefore have been logical to explore 'Fortgehn' in its chronological place – *before* any of the poems published in the *Neue Gedichte* – its significance as a turning point is hard to appreciate without familiarity with those poems, with *Malte*, and with the idea of 'aussparen', so it is considered here out of sequence. Reminiscent in many ways of Rilke's much later work, it is a poem hard to read coherently without recourse to contextual detail such as this.[150]

FORTGEHN

Plötzliches Fortgehn; Draußensein im Grauen
mit Augen, eingeschmolzen, heiß und weich,
und nun in das was *ist* hinauszuschauen –:

O nein, das alles ist ja ein Vergleich.

Der Strom ist so, damit er dich bedeute,
und diese Stadt stand auf weil du erschienst;
die Brücken gehn mit Anstand der dich freute
gelassen her und hin in deinem Dienst.

Und weil das alles ausgedacht ist nur:
dich zu bedeuten –: ist es wie die Erde;
die Gärten stehn in dunkelnder Gebärde,
die Fernen sind voll deutsamer Figur –.

Und doch trotzdem, nun kommt es trotzdem wieder:
der Schmerz, der Schmerz des ersten Augenblicks.
Noch war es da –: auf einmal ging es nieder
oder flog auf oder war aus wie Lieder –:
das war so voll unsäglichen Geschicks –.

Wie wenn ….
(bin ichs zu sagen denn imstande?)
Sieh: diese Augen lagen da: Gewande,
ein Angesicht, ein Glanz ging in sie ein
als wären sie – – ja was ? – –:

[148] Malte Kleinwort, 'Sehnsucht nach Venedig um 1900: Rainer Maria Rilkes Gedicht "Fortgehn"', in *Fernweh nach der Romantik: Begriff – Diskurs – Phänomen*, ed. by Irmtraud Hnilica, Malte Kleinwort and Patrick Ramponi (Rombach, 2017), pp. 53–72 (pp. 58–60).

[149] Anthony Phelan, 'Die "Gedichtentwürfe" und Rilkes Lyrik-Entwurf 1906–1911', in *Im Schwarzwald: Uncollected Poems 1906–1911*, ed. by Erich Unglaub and Jörg Paulus, Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft, 31 (Wallstein, 2012), pp. 228–42 (p. 229).

[150] Werner Hamacher's is a virtually 'textimmanent' deconstructive reading, but even he has recourse to *Malte* and a few other poems: Werner Hamacher, 'Rilkes "Fortgehn": Ein Kommentar', in *Gedichte von Rainer Maria Rilke: Interpretationen*, ed. by Wolfram Groddeck (Reclam, 1999), pp. 26–57 (pp. 30 and 50).

der Canal Grande
in seiner großen Zeit und vor dem Brande –
– – – – – – – – – – – – – – –
und plötzlich hört Venedig auf zu sein. (*KA*, I, p. 360)

The relevance of this poem to the Venice cycle only emerges overtly towards the end, with mention of the Grand Canal and the name of the city itself. Once the connection is recognised, motifs such as the bridges (l. 7) and the gardens (l. 11) can also be seen to fit the Venetian context, and the phrase 'stand auf' to describe the city's emergence might allude to the wooden pilings of 'Spätherbst'. Other lexical features, such as 'gelassen' (l. 8, prefiguring the use of 'lässig') and 'Glanz' (l. 20), also align themselves with Venice, and the repeated references to eyes (l. 2 and l. 19) recall the 'verschlossene Fenster' that Rilke compared to 'erloschene Augen' or the 'mächtige Mosaiken unter breitgewölbten Bogen wie bedeutende Augen unter ernsten Brauen' in letters to Goudstikker from 1897, or they anticipate '[die] lautlose Gefahr | der Augen, die ein heimlicher Verkehr an die Kanäle schließt' ('Die Kurtisane', 1907). The past participle 'eingeschmolzen' (l. 2) might resonate with the etymology of 'ghetto' (see above) or even with that of 'Smalten' (which in 'San Marco' denotes the particular blue that Grimm suggests is derived from 'schmelzglas, das als glasartige masse durch schmelzen von kobalt mit sand und pottasche gewonnen […] wird'[151]), and along with 'heiß und weich' might suggest alchemy. Some elements of the poem remain resolutely 'un-Venetian', however; the references to 'der Strom', for example (which is not the same as 'die Flut' in later Venice poems), or to 'die Erde' and 'die Fernen', imply a landscape that does not really recall the lagoon city, and Venice might be said only to establish itself in 'Fortgehn' towards the end.

The poem articulates a state of mental anxiety sometimes amounting to panic, in four phases. First, the fact of sudden departure is registered and its (very oblique) description is retracted as insufficiently authentic (ll. 1–4); then a world is evoked that is determined by or in a sense created as a function of the self (ll. 5–12); then, 'doch trotzdem', an old agony resurfaces, and the loss of promise is registered again (ll. 13–17); and finally, with echoes of the first section, the fourth enacts the genesis of a poem, potentially as a form of therapeutic formal and semantic regathering, using Venice as an object of comparison, but with an uncertain outcome (ll. 18–26).

The 'plötzliches Fortgehn' announced in the first line has no context; we do not know who is leaving, where they are going from or to, or why. All the lines of the poem have five stresses; this is one of only four that begin with a stressed syllable (and a dactyl instead of an iamb), and all four underline urgency (ll. 1, 10, 15 and 19). The semicolon perhaps implies some kind

[151] Online edition: https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB&lemid=S13070.

of apposition,[152] and thus 'departure' might indicate being in (or moving into) a state of 'Draußensein' (in which the eyes are at first liquid, melted and not seeing) and starting ('nun') to gaze further outwards into 'das was *ist*'. There is a contrast here between lability and solidity familiar to readers of the later Venice poems, and the next – separated – line draws attention to the role of language and poetry in representing or even creating the reality of 'was *ist*'. A tentatively emerging sense of progress (a latent sense of the word 'Fortgehn' and more overt in the cognate 'Fortgang') is anxiously taken back with 'o nein' and the suggestion that what is being proposed is merely a comparison, a simile or a metaphor – an approximation rather than a truth. The phrase 'das alles' in line 4 is important, despite its imprecision, because it is taken up again in line 9, and (as 'es') in lines 10, 13, 15 (twice) and 18 (within 'ichs'), and then as 'das' in line 17. There is no more precise subject or object for many verbs in the middle of the poem than 'das alles', 'es' or 'das', and these words may not all refer to the same thing.

The verb 'fortgehn' appears five times in another poem written in the same month, June 1906, which sheds some light on what it might imply. 'Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes' (*KA*, I, p. 458) was included in the *Neue Gedichte*, and reads troublingly as an account of childhood trauma. In this poem, the verb in question is insistently connected with what is strikingly absent from 'Fortgehn' itself: reasons and trajectories. In the first line, the infinitive again conveys a subject-less gesture: 'Nun *fortzugehn* von alledem Verworrenen | das unser ist und uns doch nicht gehört'.[153] These confusions authentically reflect the self, but only fragmentarily, as water tumbling down in a spring distorts the reflection that a smooth surface might offer. '*Fortzugehn*' (l. 6) here means leaving behind the confusion that impedes one's progress, like thorns in a thicket; it means suddenly confronting reality, 'Das und Den, | die man schon nicht mehr sah | (so täglich waren sie und so gewöhnlich) | auf einmal anzuschauen', which in turn means acknowledging 'das Leid […] | von dem die Kindheit voll war bis zum Rand –: | Und dann doch *fortzugehn*' (ll. 13–15). The victim is dissociated from the suffering (it happens 'unpersönlich, | wie über alle hin') and acknowledging it feels like making a new beginning (l. 11). However, the hinted-at possibility of reconciliation is rejected: 'Und dann doch *fortzugehen*, Hand aus Hand, | als ob man ein Geheiltes zerrisse, | und *fortzugehen*: wohin?' (ll. 15–17). The familiar locution 'hand in hand' is poignantly modified into an expression of conscious separation or abandonment, 'Hand *aus* Hand'. The poem answers its own question about where the departure will lead with 'Ins Ungewisse, | weit in ein unverwandtes warmes Land', where 'unverwandt' reads as a firm rejection

[152] This is corrected in *KA* from a colon in *SW*, II, p. 195 (see Hamacher, 'Rilkes "Fortgehn"', pp. 26–27, n. 1).

[153] *KA*, I, pp. 458–59 (all emphases in quotations from this poem are mine).

of family.[154] The desire for that land to operate as a 'Kulisse', 'gleichgültig', is fully cognate with the implications of the final entry in *Malte*, where 'der verlorene Sohn' – the usual English adjective, 'prodigal', has quite different implications from 'lost' – seeks to avoid the directness of his family's love.[155] The final instance of the verb in the poem asks why departure is necessary: 'und *fortzugehen*: warum? Aus Drang, aus Artung, | aus Ungeduld, aus dunkler Erwartung, | aus Unverständlichkeit und Unverstand' (ll. 21–23). There is a risk in this gesture, however, that things securely held ('Gehaltenes') will be dropped and that the self will be cut off from all others and die alone, 'wissend nicht warum' – without an answer to the last question about 'fortgehn'. There is considerable doubt that the gesture of departure really is 'der Eingang eines neuen Lebens' (l. 27) and a genuine danger that the search for 'self' implied in the narcissistic image of the self's reflection in the spring in lines 3–4 will fail.

'Fortgehn' also suggests the debilitating presence of a traumatic past, and shares with 'Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes' some of its reflexiveness, as the river, the city, and its bridges exist in order to illuminate and define the self: 'damit er dich bedeute | weil du erschienst | in deinem Dienst | ausgedacht […] nur: | dich zu bedeuten'. 'Das alles' is compared to the earth, full of mysterious promise; distance (in time as well as space) is 'voll deutsamer Figur'.[156] Just as in the other poem, in 'Fortgehn' this moment of imprecise hope or promise vanishes, and a memory of a profounder reality rushes in upon the one whose mental processes are here being exposed. Alarm is suggested by the incomplete phrases, the repetition of 'trotzdem' and then of 'Schmerz' in 'Der Schmerz, der Schmerz des ersten Augenblicks': a moment of traumatic stress has been instigated, the 'first moment' perhaps suggesting an instance of creation, a painful birth of some kind. The substance of the traumatic memory is the 'es' of lines 15–16, unarticulated in detail because overwhelmingly painful. Lines 15–17 evoke an intense process, a shift of states between an ongoing condition ('noch war es da'), sudden decline ('auf einmal ging es nieder'), abrupt resurrection ('flog auf') and extinction ('war aus'). And yet line 17 suggests positive potential once more, the experience having promised something ineffably fateful.

[154] David Kleinbard, *The Beginning of Terror: A Psychological Study of Rainer Maria Rilke's Life and Work* (New York University Press, 1993), pp. 189–90, reads this poem (via *Malte*) as about 'the threat of engulfment and […] impingement' that Rilke experienced in his relationship with a new father figure, Rodin, although he notes that the poem was written a few months after the death of Rilke's own father.

[155] This episode in *Malte* also emphasises 'fortgehen', asking first 'Wird er bleiben und das ungefähre Leben nachlügen, das sie ihm zuschreiben?' and replying, 'Nein, er wird fortgehen. […] Fortgehen für immer' (*SW*, III, p. 631).

[156] This phrase recalls a line from 'Der Einsame' (April 1903) in *Das Buch der Bilder*, which contrasts the outsider with 'die ewig Einheimischen': their tables host fullness and presence, whilst for 'der Einsame' there is only promise – 'mir ist die Ferne voll Figur' (*KA*, I, p. 277).

Rilke seems again to be questioning the capacity of poetry to capture the essence of these processes: 'war aus' is followed by 'wie Lieder', as if song and verse are the very incarnation of the ephemeral, and 'unsäglich' reinforces the inadequacy of language to capture reality. The next (divided) line overtly questions the capacity of the poet to express what is transpiring, for Rilke begins with a comparison – 'wie wenn', virtually a trademark, and for him the very stuff of poetry[157] – and then pulls back, as he did in line 4, doubting whether he is in a position to find the words. This, too, is a moment of crisis, albeit one less agonising. Almost calmly, the poet enjoins us to look, and the objects of our gaze or recognition are disassembled bodily parts and clothing: eyes, garments[158] and a face, all of which absorb 'Glanz' – they are reminiscent perhaps of the 'Haufen Marionetten | kopfüber, müde, umgebracht' of 'Spätherbst in Venedig', and the 'Glanz' may be a prefiguration of the 'Schimmer' of the canals in 'Venezianischer Morgen'.

Rilke then once more attempts a comparison, 'als wären sie', which at first he cannot complete. 'Ja was?' and the dashes show the search for something to which to compare these things that will articulate what the poet means (where 'fortgehn' is the *tertium comparationis*). There is something awkward about the rhymes in this section, as if Rilke is deliberately demonstrating clumsiness in the construction of the poem, not just difficulty in the search for metaphors and similes: the unusual plural 'Gewande' is needed to rhyme with 'imstande'; they are followed by an ungainly translingual rhyme with 'Canal Grande' and an unspecified 'Brande'. Formally this section resembles a fractured sestet of a sonnet with a regular if not perfectly Petrarchan CCDCCD rhyme pattern and mostly in iambic pentameters. The comparison that eventually emerges is with the Grand Canal in Venice, in its glory days, before 'der Brand'.[159] And then there is a pause of a full

[157] If the search function on gutenberg.org is reliable, the word 'wie' is used 272 times in *Neue Gedichte*, 237 times in *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*, and 709 times in *Malte*. The precise phrase 'wie[,] wenn' is found in the eighth *Elegy* (*KA*, II, p. 225, l. 63) and 'Die Gazelle' (*KA*, I, p. 470, l. 12), in several other poems from various periods, as well as ten times in *Malte*, including in the song in the Venice 'Aufzeichnung': 'wie, wenn wir diese Pracht | ohne zu stillen | in uns ertrügen' (*KA*, III, p. 627). The other formula for comparison in the poem, 'als wäre' (l. 21), is used eighteen times in the two volumes of *Neue Gedichte* and twenty-two times in *Malte*.

[158] This plural form of 'Gewand' is unusual but quite widely attested, and Grimm cites Brentano, Goethe and Schiller amongst many others. 'Gewande' can also mean 'units of land' or 'plots', permitting another reading (roughly 'these eyes were there: plots of land, into which a countenance, a sparkle/lustre was absorbed', suggested by Henrike Lähnemann).

[159] Rilke does not specify which fire he has in mind, if indeed a literal fire is meant at all, but Venice's history is peppered with conflagration – houses built so close together inevitably help flames spread. Possibilities 'in der großen Zeit' include two fires in the Arsenal (1509 and 1569) caused by gunpowder explosions, or the 1577 fire in the Doge's Palace that melted the lead on the roof, destroyed the Council Chamber, and incinerated paintings by Titian, Gentile da Fabriano, Giovanni Bellini and Carpaccio.

line, and suddenly Venice ceases to be. It is as if the tentative and clumsy emergence of a poem kills the city.[160]

The phrase 'plötzlich hört Venedig auf zu sein' has other resonances within Rilke's writings. He uses the same phrase to Gisela van der Heydt in a letter written two years after 'Fortgehn': 'man kann diese Stadt nicht nach [Baedekers] Auswahl sehen, in der alles sehenswert ist oder nichts; in der, was man konstatiert, schon gewissermaßen *aufhört zu sein*: so empfindlich ist es in seiner unbeschreiblichen Existenz'.[161] The reality of Venice cannot be pinned down by mere observation, via tourism, just by looking at the buildings. Its 'Existenz' is more complex; it depends on an awareness of its origins and history; it can only be captured poetically and only in poems that grasp its paradoxical strengths and weaknesses. Another of the 'new poems' uses a very similar phrase in a cognate context: 'Nächtliche Fahrt' was written between 9 and 17 August 1907. There, 'auf einmal' takes the place of the repeated 'plötzlich' in 'Fortgehn': 'damals hörte diese Stadt | auf zu sein. Auf einmal gab sie zu, | daß sie niemals war, um nichts als Ruh | flehend' (*KA*, I, p. 551). The poem is another city poem, about St Petersburg (often called 'the Venice of the North' because of its networks of waterways, its numerous bridges and islands, and the need to drain marshland to build it). In one sense, the 'existential cessation' of St Petersburg here is simply the consequence of the ride that takes the travellers away at night; after a while, the city cannot be seen any more. But 'damals' hints at a broader existential issue than, say, 'dann' might have implied. The ride itself is a process of evanescence: in line 6, Rilke feels for the right verb, '[als wir] fuhren, nein: vergingen oder flogen', and in line 15 the stone contours of the city '[vergingen] hinter uns, wie wir fuhren'. There is some confusion: 'damals' does not match 'auf einmal'; a city that never existed cannot cease to be; and the rest of the poem evokes a powerful sense of giddy intoxication. The metaphorical sense of 'ceasing to be' is akin to that in 'Fortgehn': it takes an act of poetic will to grasp the identity of a city such as Venice or St Petersburg; that identity is liable to crumble as the lyric epiphanic moment passes; the imaginative loss is so great that it amounts to the destruction of the real world.

'Fortgehn' thus anticipates how the poetics of the *Neue Gedichte* would become Rilke's means of grasping and communicating the identity of Venice. What prompted Rilke to recall the city in 1906, after three years' absence, and use it in this way? There is little evidence from letters that his interest was reinvigorated before 1907, but Henri de Régnier's *Esquisses*

[160] Peter Por's conclusions about the five central Venice poems do not to my mind fairly reflect the poetics of that sequence as a whole, but they might apply limitedly here. Por suggests that Rilke's conception of Venice in the *Neue Gedichte* – his 'poetisches Prinzip selbst', the 'verwandelte Stadt-Figur' and the poetic transformation of that city into a '"wirklichere" Gestalt' – is 'in der Reihe der fünf Venedig-Gedichte zersetzt und vernichtet'. Peter Por, *Die orphische Figur: Zur Poetik von Rilkes 'Neuen Gedichten'* (Winter, 1997), pp. 158–59.

[161] *BwvdH*, pp. 144–45 (24 March 1908; my emphasis).

*vénitiennes* may have played a role. De Régnier was a devotee of Venice, staying between 1899 and 1901 in the Palazzo Ca' Dario, next to the Palazzo Barbaro Wolkoff where Duse had lived, and a few minutes' walk from the Palazzo Valmarana and Rilke's *mezzanino*. There he worked in the *altana* or rooftop loggia, which later inspired a novel, *L'Altana, ou la vie vénitienne* (1928), and several other Venetian works. Rilke knew de Régnier and his wife, Marie, personally, recalling in 1924 that he had seen the two of them in the Campo San Vio whilst staying in the *mezzanino*.[162] He will have been aware of de Régnier's poetry from the 1890s (perhaps via Stefan George's translations in *Die Blätter für die Kunst* in 1892, perhaps via an important essay by Harry Graf Kessler in *Pan* in 1895); he certainly knew the 1902 collection *La cité des eaux*, and they were both friends of the Princesse de Broglie, for whom Rilke intended 'Fortgehn' (*Chronik*, p. 1169). *Esquisses vénitiennes*, illustrated with ten plates by Maxime Dethomas, rolled off the presses in April 1906, two months before that poem was written. The first sketch is entitled 'L'Illusion' and begins with an evocation of Venice as 'un lieu de sortilège, de magie' only to dispel that by reminding the reader that the inhabitants are not 'fantômes' but 'des hommes qui naissent et meurent'.[163] Interestingly, in the context of 'Fortgehn' and 'Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes', de Régnier's instinct is confessional – 'je voudrais leur parler et leur avouer mon angoisse' (*EV*, p. 7) – although many of the later sketches revert to a sentimentalised image of the city. There is a hymn to the Zattere, where Rilke would stay just over a year later (ibid., pp. 19–21). In 'Le Traghetto', he likens the Grand Canal to 'un fleuve de verre', which may have inspired 'der Strom' in 'Fortgehn', not least since in his gondola ride de Régnier looks straight ahead to avoid nausea, 'les yeux fixés au fanal rouge et au fer luisant' (ibid., p. 33), referring to the denticulated prow.

## THE *MEZZANINO*, DUSE, GARDENS: VENICE WITHOUT LITERATURE (1911–12)

Rilke published no more poems or literary prose dedicated to Venice after *Malte* in 1910. His abortive work on the Zeno biography may be the reason: the technique of 'aussparen' had not worked, and he had reached a creative dead end. The reference to the Venetian poet Gaspara Stampa in the first of the *Duineser Elegien* dates from January 1912. There are no further substantial literary echoes of the city, although there are copious references in letters. Requadt's suggestion that 'Venedig als Gesamtkomplex hält sich nicht weit über die Vollendung des "Malte" hinaus' is surely correct.[164]

However, Rilke's craving for Venice did not abate. A little under a year after his research visit, Rilke stopped off for a few days at the Hôtel Luna

[162] Catherine Pozzi, *Rainer Maria Rilke, Correspondance 1924–1925*, ed. by Lawrence Joseph (Editions de la Différence, 1990), pp. 68–69 (21 August 1924).
[163] Henri de Régnier, *Esquisses vénitiennes* (Collection de l'Art Décoratif, 1906) (= *EV*), p. 6.
[164] Requadt, *Die Bildersprache*, p. 195.

only a few metres from the Piazza San Marco (29 March to 4 April 1911). For the first time, he arrived by sea, on a ship from Alexandria.[165] It was cold again, and his time was mostly spent with Marie von Thurn und Taxis, but he took time to drop in on Mimì Romanelli (*LAV*, p. 66). Rilke's sixth, very fleeting, visit was in October 1911 as a late staging point in a long car journey chauffeured by the Princess's driver, Piero, between Paris and Duino, where he was to stay for nearly six months. That long sojourn in Duino was when the *Elegien* were begun, but during that time, encouraged again by Horatio Brown, he took yet another short holiday in Venice in late November and early December 1911 with Marie Taxis and her eldest son Erich, staying in the Grand-Hôtel. Again he visited Mimì for a 'promenade au Lido' and a visit to the church of San Nicolò, and he was shown cityscapes by the eighteenth-century artist Michele Marieschi.[166]

In February and March 1912, while still in Duino, he repeatedly considered taking a Venetian break.[167] He re-read the whole of Goethe's *Italienische Reise*,[168] and secured from Marie Herzfeld an introduction to Professor Heinrich Kretschmayr (author of a three-volume history of Venice published between 1905 and 1934) to assist with his work on Zeno. In March he was voraciously reading Lodovico Antonio Muratori's *Annali d'Italia* (1744–49), transcribing passages about Carlo Zeno amongst others: 'ich habe mich über alles Venezianische gemacht, was unten in den Bibliotheken zu finden war', he wrote to Marie Taxis, admitting at the same time that historical reading was merely a substitute for the poetic creativity that appeared to have deserted him.[169] He suggested to Lou Andreas-Salomé that the sheer range of influences on Venice in the fourteenth century meant that it was hard to focus on the city itself.[170] This may be why the technique of 'aussparen' did not work: the background was too complex and too important. His study of that period threw up some far-reaching existential uncertainties, as a passage rarely quoted in the literature on Rilke and Venice suggests:

> Ich staune, staune dieses vierzehnte Jahrhundert an, das mir immer das Merkwürdigste war, unserem so genau entgegengesetzt: wo immer mehr alles Innere Inneres bleibt und sich dort zuende spielt ohne eigentliches Bedürfnis, bald fast ohne Aussicht, für seine Grade und Zustände draußen Äquivalente zu finden. […] Die Welt zieht sich ein; denn auch ihrerseits die Dinge thun dasselbe, indem sie ihre Existenz immer mehr in die Vibration des Geldes verlegen und sich dort eine Art Geistigkeit entwickeln, die schon

[165] *BadM*, II, pp. 65–66 (29 March 1911).
[166] *Chronik*, pp. 381–84; *LAV*, p. 69. He mentioned 'ein paar Tage in Venedig' to his mother (*BadM*, II, p. 98; 6 December 1911).
[167] See e.g. *BwTT*, I, pp. 111–12 (12 February 1912) and I, p. 122 (2 March 1912).
[168] *Chronik*, p. 395, and Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Briefwechsel*, ed. by Ernst Pfeiffer (Insel, 1975) (= *BwLAS*), here p. 274 (1 March 1912).
[169] *BwTT*, I, p. 121 (2 March 1912).
[170] *BwLAS*, pp. 274–75 (1 March 1912).

> jetzt ihre greifbare Realität übertrifft. In der Zeit mit der ich umgeh, war das Geld noch Gold, noch Metall, eine schöne Sache, die handlichste, verständlichste von allen. Und ein Gefühl gab nichts darauf, sich in irgend einem Innern zu benehmen und dort etwas zu werden, kaum war es da, sprang es schon in die nächste Erscheinung und überfüllte die von lauter Sichtbarem volle Welt, in die der Große Tod des Jahres 1348 [= the Black Death], berauscht von so viel Dasein, seiner selbst nicht mehr mächtig, hineinzielte. Mir handelt sichs um Venedig […]. (*BwLAS*, p. 275)

Rilke contrasts the fourteenth century with modernity, which retains 'alles Innere', and sees no need to project this onto externalities (in contrast to the world he evoked in 'San Marco'). The materiality of the modern world is retrenching, and significance now is located in a form of money that almost has a life of its own, albeit an oblique one (its effects felt as 'vibrations') that is certainly not tangible in the way that solid gold currency was in the earlier era, 'handlich' and 'verständlich'. 'Das Innere' was manifested externally in that world, and this is specifically associated with Venice. Simmel uses similar imagery in 'Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben' (1903): '[das Geld] *höhlt* den Kern der Dinge, ihre Eigenart, ihren spezifischen Wert, ihre Unvergleichbarkeit rettungslos aus'.[171]

Eventually Rilke departed Duino for Venice with Prince Alexander (Sascha, known also as Pascha), Marie's youngest son,[172] and between 21 March and 1 April 1912 stayed at one of the most elegant hotels in the city, the Grand-Hôtel (formerly the Hôtel New York) in the Palazzo Ferro-Fini; this was his eighth visit to the city. He spent time with Richard Beer-Hofmann and Baroness May Knoop, who introduced him to the English writer Algernon Blackwood, and the two 'spent several hours together in a gondola'.[173] He wrote of being 'recht erfrischt' by this visit,[174] and particularly relished 'das starke Meer am Lido' which was 'von großer Befreiung' and produced 'eine ganz gelassene entspannte Ruhe',[175] and he mentioned to his mother that he had discovered the Faro di San Nicolò on a long spit of land on the Lido.[176] Nonetheless, after his return to Duino, he complained to Sidonie about the gradual architectural despoliation of the Lido with 'große, ungeheure, übertriebene Hotels', 'stupide Häuser', 'banal angelegte moderne Militärbauten, trist, voller Unbeschäftigtsein', all a symptom of 'die Veränderungen der Zeit (ins Amerikanisch-Allgemeine

[171] Georg Simmel, 'Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben', in *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Otthein Rammstedt, 24 vols (Suhrkamp 1989–2015), VII: *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901–1908 Band I*, ed. by Rüdiger Kramme and others (1995), p. 122 (my emphasis).

[172] For an explanation of the nomenclature, see Klaus E. Bohnenkamp, 'Rudolf Kassner an Marie von Thurn und Taxis: Briefe (1902–1933) und Dokumente Teil I: 1902–1907', *Hofmannsthal Jahrbuch zur Europäischen Moderne*, 22 (2014), pp. 91–204 (p. 118, n. 120).

[173] Prater, *A Ringing Glass*, p. 208; *Chronik*, p. 384.

[174] *BV*, I, p. 171 (16 April 1912).

[175] *BwTT*, I, p. 111 (5 April 1912).

[176] *BadM*, II, p. 131 (31 March 1912).

[…])'.[177] The visit of the German Emperor 'gehörte nicht zu Venedig, entstellte das Bild' for him.[178]

This visit was a prelude to an extended stay between 9 May and 11 September of the same year, driving down from Duino with Princess Marie, unable to resist the city's 'stärkste Anziehung'.[179] True to his anti-touristic agenda, he timed his visit to avoid the 'Campanilefeste' that celebrated the reconstruction of the bell tower after its collapse in 1902; these culminated on 25 April 1912, the Feast of St Mark.[180] Nonetheless, sightseers drove him to distraction during this visit, prompting almost the disintegration of language itself in a letter to Marie von Thurn und Taxis:

> die Fremden sind doch über Hand und wehe, wenn man abends über den Markusplatz kommt und sie alle angeleuchtet findet von den Glühlampen der Illuminierung; dieser stupide Superlativ von Licht vertreibt die letzten Züge aus ihren Gesichtern, sie sehen alle Ah-Ah-Ah aus, ohne Unterschied der Abstufung.[181]

Rilke's negative response in 1912 to *Der Tod in Venedig* focuses on light and seems to imply that Thomas Mann has succumbed to the atmospheric vagueness of the tourist. He writes of the Venice section:

> daß da, in der verhängnisvollen Auflösung und Zersetzung, deren Phosphoreszieren gleichsam eine einzige Lichtquelle ist, […] daß die Konturen eigentlich nicht mehr zu geben waren, sondern nur Dünste, Gerüche, Trübungen, die sich ineinander hinüberschieben, alles das begreif ich ganz und gar, und doch, ich weiß nicht, es ist, als würde dem Leser kein Standpunkt mehr angewiesen, von dem aus er sich das alles gefallen lassen mag.[182]

Rilke's efforts to understand Venice since 1906 had all been in the opposite direction.

For parts of this, his ninth and longest visit, which lasted almost exactly four months, Rilke had a choice of elegant places to live. Until the end of May he rented a cheap, hot room on the Zattere, this time Ponte de la Calcina 775, about half a kilometre from the Romanellis' old house, but thereafter he rejected grand accommodation offered by Prince Aleksandr Nikolaevic Volkov-Muromcov, a Russian painter and art critic, in favour of a *mezzanino* in the Palazzo Valmarana (now the Palazzo Cini) on the Campo San Vio with a view towards the Grand Canal – 'neben dem Palast des Don

[177] *BwNvB*, p. 140 (10 April 1912).
[178] *BadM*, II, p. 133 (4 April 1912).
[179] *BadM*, II, p. 144 (12 May 1912).
[180] *BV*, II, p. 171 (16 April 1912).
[181] *BwTT*, I, p. 149 (14 May 1912).
[182] Rilke, *Briefe. An das Ehepaar S. Fischer*, ed. by Hedwig Fischer (Klassen, 1947), p. 73 (to Frau Fischer; 31 December 1912).

Carlos', as Rilke more than once reminded friends.[183] This was rented by Marie Taxis from the palace's owners: Contessa Giustina and her daughter, Contessina Pia di Valmarana.[184] This choice also gave Rilke a central vantage point over Venetian high society: it was the topographical and social centrality of the Valmaranas, for example, that prompted invitations for Rilke to attend soirées and to watch the annual gondola regatta at the end of June from another noble palazzo owned by Countess Valentina Robilant-Mocenigo.[185] While Rilke hardly engaged with the substantial French and English literary and artistic communities to which Venice was permanently host,[186] his visitors included the Austrian actor Alexander Moissi,[187] and thanks to his aristocratic friends he also met the Florentine poet Carlo Placci, through whom he then made the acquaintance of Eleonora Duse. He had dedicated his 1898 play *Die weiße Fürstin* to Duse in 1904, publishing a revised version in 1909, and – knowing that Rodin was acquainted with her – had been trying to engineer a personal meeting for some years.[188] This eventually took place in July 1912. Princess Marie's memoirs testify to the 'unerwartete Katastrophe' that this represented for Rilke, 'die Duse als Ereignis des Lebens und nicht des Spiels'.[189] For a few weeks, Rilke spent part of almost every day with Duse, and his devotion to this cantankerous fading star survived visits and excursions that for others would have been fatally marred by La Duse's histrionic outbursts. He confessed to Editha Klipstein in 1915 that even a few hours spent with Duse during that period would leave him 'zerschlagen'.[190]

Rilke thought of truncating his extended stay in 1912, writing to Kippenberg on 3 August of the heat as 'force majeure': he insisted 'ich will jetzt bald fort' but claimed that too many social obligations prevented that

[183] *BwNvB*, p. 219 (1 October 1914). The reference is to Don Carlos de Borbón y Austria-Este, Duke of Madrid (1848–1909), claimant to the thrones of both Spain and France, whose residence in Venice was the Palazzo Foscari-Loredan.

[184] On Rilke's relationships with the Valmaranas, see Rätus Luck, '"Mezzanino": Rainer Maria Rilke und die Damen Valmarana', in *Rilke und Venedig – Rilke in Schweden*, ed. by Hansgeorg Schmidt-Bergmann, Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft, 16/17 (Thorbecke, 1991), pp. 43–55. Quotations below are from Karin Wais, 'Rilkes Briefe an Pia und Giustina Valmarana', in *Rilkes Paris 1910–1925: Neue Gedichte*, ed. by Erich Unglaub and Jörg Paulus, Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft, 30 (Wallstein, 2010) (= PGV, I), pp. 329–49; *Im Schwarzwald: Uncollected Poems 1906–1911*, ed. by Erich Unglaub and Jörg Paulus, Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft, 31 (Wallstein, 2012) (= PGV, II), pp. 263–97; *Rilke in Bern: Sonette an Orpheus*, ed. by Jörg Paulus and Erich Unglaub, Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft, 32 (Wallstein, 2014) (= PGV, III), pp. 297–325.

[185] *BadM*, II, p. 155 (28 June 1912).

[186] See Plant, *Venice: Fragile City*, esp. pp. 222–25 and 250–54.

[187] *BV*, I, p. 178 (9 August 1912).

[188] See Gunnar Decker, *Rilke: Der ferne Magier* (Siedler, 2023), pp. 322–23; *BV*, I, p. 173 (15 May 1912); and *Chronik*, pp. 210 (January 1905), pp. 230–32 (November 1905), and p. 255 (November 1906).

[189] Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 51–56 (p. 51); Rilke, *Briefwechsel mit Regina Ullmann und Ellen Delp*, ed. by Walter Simon (Insel, 1987), p. 70 (30 August 1915; to Ellen Delp).

[190] Haaser, *Editha Klipstein und Rainer Maria Rilke*, p. 24.

(*BV*, I, p. 175). His excursions with Duse developed Rilke's appreciations for the gardens in and around Venice. In the wake of his 1907 visit, he had advised his friends Karl and Elisabeth von der Heydt of the wealth of beautiful gardens, mostly hidden from tourist view:

> diese aus alten Mauern überfließenden Gärten, die erst vor ein paar Jahren ein Dichter (Henri de Régnier) wiedergefunden hat […]. Sie sind etwas unbeschreiblich Verschwiegenes, und man meint die Stille, die überall ist, muß in ihnen zu etwas Betäubendem werden; sie haben keine Ausdehnung und keine Aussicht, wenn sie nicht, wie der schöne Garten jenes alten Engländers (des Mr. Eden) draußen an der Lagune liegen.[191]

The letter has footnotes, in one of which Rilke specifically recommends the Giardini Papadopoli, but notes in his familiar tourist-guide mode that the key must be obtained from the Palazzo Tiepolo-Papadopoli on the Grand Canal between Lady Layard's 'Eckpalast' (Ca' Cappello) and the church of S. Silvestro. He praised the 'Johnson'scher Garten' in the Casino degli Spiriti, an annexe of the Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo in Cannaregio, spectacularly located on a corner of the Fondamenta Gasparo Contarini facing Murano.[192] He also revisited 'einen Garten auf der Giudecca […], vor sich hinwachsend, drängend, blühend',[193] an eight-acre English-style garden landscaped after 1884 by Frederic Eden, situated opposite the lagoon, facing the Lido, and with an entrance on the Rio della Croce.[194] The multi-layered appeal of a space colloquially called the 'Garden of Eden' to the conflicted Rilke is obvious.

This period in Venice, Rilke's ninth, was made 'schwer und bitter' by aspects of his writing. This was in part because of his failure to make progress with his life of Zeno – 'so dehmüthigt mich diese ganze großartige Gegenwart und selbst meine früheren Erinnerungen an sie sind trübe

[191] *BwvdH*, p. 149 (24 March 1908), where a note (p. 353) misleadingly suggests that Rilke is referring to *La cité des eaux* (1902). The reference is in fact to 'Le Jardin bizarre' in *EV* (1906): 'jardins […] discrets et mystérieux, à l'abri des murs qui les protègent' (p. 9).

[192] *BwTT*, I, p. 147 (14 May 1912). See Eudo C. Mason, *Rilke, Europe, and the English-Speaking World* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 121 (although both Mason and PGV, I, p. 229, inaccurately locate the house on the Fondamente Nuove, a few hundred metres to the south-east). The house had been taken by the American painter and art collector John Humphreys Johnston (1857–1941) and his wife Anne Lazarus. See also C. L. Johnstone, *History of the Johnstones 1191–1909* (W. & A. K. Johnston, Ltd., 1909), p. 28, who notes that both spellings of Johnston(e) are accepted.

[193] *BwTT*, I, p. 153 (18 May 1912).

[194] Wais twice conflates the Johnston and Eden gardens (PGV, II, p. 292 and PGV, III, p. 319), although she distinguishes them in PGV, I, p. 329. They are on opposite sides of the city. Magda von Hattingberg notes a visit to the Eden garden, 'in dem die Duse oft mit Rilke gewesen war […]. Rilke sagte, der Garten gehöre jetzt einem alten schrulligen Engländer, den man nie zu Gesicht bekomme, der aber den wenigen Fremden, die von seinem Garten wußten, Eintritt gegen Abgabe einer Visitenkarte erlaube': Magda von Hattingberg, *Rilke und Benvenuta* (Wilhelm Andermann, 1947), pp. 232–34. De Régnier devotes a chapter to the 'Garden of Eden' in *L'Altana* (1928); D'Annunzio features it in *Il fuoco* (1900), and Cocteau wrote a poem about it, 'Souvenir d'un soir d'automne au jardin Eden' (1909).

und alt geworden' – but also, tellingly, because he felt blocked by the completion of *Malte*, noting ruefully that Venice was 'mehr *zu ihm* [Malte] *gehörig*, als zu mir'.[195] He complained of fatigue several times – to Pia Valmarana in July, for example ('je suis d'une fatigue, d'une somnolence qui me rend le plus ennuyeux des hommes') – and Marie Taxis confirms in her memoirs that 'he felt contaminated by the Venetian languor and moaned a little about insurmountable joylessness and continual fatigue'.[196] He wrote to Pia on 4 September 1912, 'Venise, sans doute, ne me fait pas bien pour l'instant', explaining in a moment of unusual self-critical awareness, 'je l'ai usée comme tous mes entourages ces dernières années en leur demandant ce qu'ils ne peuvent pas donner; en m'appuyant trop, en effrayant les choses avec ce pistolet chargé d'attente dont je les visais à bout portant.'[197] This is perhaps the lowest point in Rilke's relationship with Venice. Nonetheless, in the same letter he was able to say 'je me sens encore très Vénitien et je m'en irai tel, et tel toujours, j'y reviendrai'.[198]

## FROZEN DEVELOPMENT (1920)

Rilke passed through Venice by train on 19 April 1914 on the way to what would prove to be his last visit to Castle Duino; he returned to the lagoon with the Princess and Magda von Hattingberg on 5 May, staying in the Grand-Hôtel to begin with but moving swiftly to the Hôtel Giotto. He and 'Benvenuta' were to part definitively during this stay. This emotional decision may be connected with Rilke's repeated protestations of tiredness, 'cette fatigue de mon âme cette apathie absurde dans laquelle le corps et l'esprit semblaient d'accord à ne plus rien comprendre, à ne plus rien vouloir', which he regrets will have spoiled his time with Pia Valmarana after two years without seeing each other.[199]

Italy's entry into the war in May 1915 prevented Rilke from undertaking another anticipated visit to Venice (*Chronik*, p. 498) and despite maintaining contact with Italian friends, he was not able to return there until 1920 and even then, difficulties with his (Czechoslovak) passport – 'document assez vigoureux sans doute, mais avec qui je ne suis pas encore bien familiarisé …'[200] – caused delays before he eventually obtained a visa on 8 June (*Chronik*, p. 682). He wrote to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart on 9 June, 'ich reise morgen, Donnerstag, fünf Uhr früh, mit dem Entente-Zug

[195] *BwNvB*, p. 144 (31 August 1912; emphasis in the original).
[196] PGV, I, p. 335 (to Pia, early July 1912); Marie von Thurn und Taxis, *Memoirs of a Princess*, trans. by Nora Wydenbruck (Hogarth Press, 1959), p. 172.
[197] PGV, I, p. 336.
[198] PGV, I, p. 337 (to Pia, 4 September 1912).
[199] PGV, II, p. 285 (28 May 1914); see also p. 284, and a reference to '[die] Mauer meiner Apathie' in *BwTT*, I, p. 377 (18 May 1914).
[200] PGV, III, p. 299 (13 May 1920).

direkt nach Venedig' – the 'Entente-Zug' was the Simplon-Orient-Express that from 1919 had connected Paris and Istanbul via Milan and Venice. His feelings about this visit were mixed:

> ich weiß nicht, ob ich mich freue. Nur den Fortschritt empfind ich, der damit gegeben ist, daß man einen Ort wiedersieht, der an die schönsten Erinnerungen der Vorkriegszeit angeschlossen ist: als Erlebnis der seit sechs Jahren verlorenen Continuität hoff ichs zu erfassen, und allein in *dieser* Hoffnung reis ich auch.[201]

Rilke returned to the *mezzanino* and his familiar housekeeper Gigia, wife of a gondolier named Dante,[202] during his final stay in Venice between 11 June and 13 July 1920, having sulked a little initially because he was obliged to stay in the ruinously expensive Hôtel de l'Europe until 22 June.[203] In other letters, he complained of how costly gondolas had become (even the Valmaranas had given up their own gondola), about the vaporetti strike, an interruption to the post (*BSF*, pp. 81–83), and the noise: 'ça grouille en bas sur le "Campo", ça marche, ça piétine constamment et parle et chante et gazouille dans ce moustique dialecte vénitien'.[204] Nonetheless, it was evidently a huge relief to be back in Venice, and Rilke repeatedly stressed how everything was unchanged: 'Zum Glück habe ich nicht nur die unvergleichlich wunderbare Stadt unzerstört und unverändert wiedergefunden,' he wrote to his mother, 'sondern auch schon im ersten Moment die Sicherheit gewonnen, daß alles Gute und Schöne, das ich seinerzeit hier durch Menschen erfahren durfte, fortsetzbar und pflegbar geblieben ist. Eine große Freude!'[205] To Elya Nevar he wrote 'alles ist unverändert … wie vor sieben Jahren' and that the Valmaranas both spoke of 'l'année passée' when they really meant 1912 or 1914.[206] To Dory Von der Mühll on 14 June 1920 he expressed his pleasure that 'mein Wunsch, hier alles recht unverändert zu finden, ist […] in Erfüllung gegangen […]: es ist wirklich alles genau, wie es war: die Orte, die Bilder, die Stimmen über den Kanälen' (*BSF*, p. 77). He revisited the 'Garden of Eden', too.[207] After the upheaval of the war, Rilke obviously had an urgent need for a sense of stability, and nostalgia is the dominant feature. Truth be told, after the departure of Marie Thurn und Taxis, he was lonely, deprecating the

[201] Rilke, *Briefe an Nanny Wunderly-Volkart*, ed. by Rätus Luck with Niklaus Bigler, 2 vols (Insel, 1977) (= *NWV*), I, pp. 248–49.
[202] *BSF*, p. 79 (22 June 1920; to Dory Von der Mühll).
[203] *BSF*, p. 81 (22 June 1920; to Dory Von der Mühll).
[204] *NWV*, I, p. 263 (6 July 1920); see also I, p. 262.
[205] *BadM*, II, p. 457 (14 June 2020).
[206] Elya Maria Nevar, *Freundschaft mit Rainer Maria Rilke. Begegnungen – Gespräche – Briefe und Aufzeichnungen* (Züst, 1946), pp. 158–60, and *Chronik*, p. 685. Rilke's imprecision over dates is replicated in a letter to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin in which he recalls spending the month of August in Venice (*BwNvB*, p. 360; 20 November 1920).
[207] *BSF*, p. 80 (22 June 1920; to Dory Von der Mühll).

absence of 'echte alte Venezianer' in the cafés on St Mark's Square, and irritated that when he had lunch at the Grand-Hôtel he was seated next to strangers. He even confesses that he sometimes wishes for 'etwas von dem "opiatischen Venedig", das Malte so dringend geleugnet hat' (*BSF*, pp. 84–85).

The impression of the same period he gives to Lou Andreas-Salomé is even more frustrated, focusing on 'jene Nichts-als-Wiederholung […], die mich beinah mit Entsetzen erfüllte'.[208] This is prefigured in a letter to Pia in which Rilke confesses 'Ce que je craignais partout à Venise, c'était la répétition stérile, – elle me menaçait souvent d'assez près', although he concedes that this was never a danger when he was with her, 'jamais dans les instants qui étaient vraiment nôtres –, car nous avançons'.[209] The same fear of being frozen, static, undeveloping, emerges in the letter to Dory Von der Mühll just quoted:

> es ist wirklich alles genau, wie es war […] – alles –: wer aber hätte absehen können, welcher Schrecken mir daraus entstehen würde, daß ich selbst das alles auch als genau der *Gleiche* empfange und wahrnehme, der ich vor sechs Jahren gewesen bin? Gemessen an dieser vertrauten […] Welt, erfahre ich erst recht die Unbeweglichkeit und Erstarrung, in der ich mich diese bedrängenden Jahre über gehalten habe […]; was wird aber nun durch Arbeit und Gnade geschehen müssen, damit ich wieder die arglose Beweglichkeit lerne, mit den Momenten mitzugehen.[210]

If one recalls the joy that Rilke felt at, and the aesthetic commitment he made to the fluidity and mutability of Venice in the *Neue Gedichte* and in so many letters from that time, it will be clear how dispiriting the new sensations of sterility and rigidity must have been for him. He recovered a little of the magic, and that is characteristically expressed in images that derive from his earlier familiarity with the city. He comes across the expression 'Maske des Staates' to describe the façade of the Ducal Palace:

> sieht man sie so, so bekommt die Geschlossenheit zwischen den Fenstern und das Arkadengeflecht der zwei unteren Stockwerke, das der von dem oberen Masken-Gesicht herabhängenden Spitze enspräche, eine unheimlich wirksame Bedeutung, und ob sie gleich aus einem viel späteren Venedig dem älteren Bau aufgedrängt ist, sie möchte immer für dieses Staates Haltung, für die Anonymität seiner Herrschaft, gültig gewesen sein. (*BSF*, pp. 79–80; to Dory Von der Mühll)

The authenticity of the city still lies in anonymous strength, but by 1920 Rilke's aesthetic energy on Venice's behalf is exhausted.

[208] *BwLAS*, p. 439 ([31] December 1920), and *Chronik*, p. 707.
[209] PGV, III, p. 301 (28 July 1920).
[210] *BSF*, pp. 77–78 (14 June 1920).

Almost until the end of his life, Rilke hoped to return to Venice, writing gloomily on 17 March 1924 from Muzot to Gräfin Mirbach about joining her there – '[ich muß] der Wahrheit gemäß, eingestehen, daß ich nicht recht an die Möglichkeit einer solchen Reise für mich glauben kann'. Poignantly, he laments the fact that his long-awaited reunion with his friend cannot take place in the city he loves so much: 'da Venedig mir ganz vertraut, fast heimathlich ist, hätte es mich doppelt, dreifach, zehnfach gefreut, es nun mit Ihnen wiederzuerleben. Schade, schade!'[211] A year before his death, he wrote to Aurelia Gallarati-Scotti of 'cette autre ligne vitale, celle de l'Italie … de Venise, de Padoue, de Saonara' and of the possibility of taking a cure there.[212] This was a plan he took up again actively in May 1926, even obtaining a visa for Italy and writing to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart, 'je pourrai […], si l'envie me prend, monter dans le train de Milan, pour rendre enfin cette visite si longtemps différée aux Gallarati-Scotti et, peut-être, pourrai-je même pousser jusqu'à Venise: Pia Valmarana vient de m'écrire, combien on m'y attend'.[213] On 27 July 1926, he wrote to Pia Valmarana of his thwarted hope 'de vous faire une petite visite à Venise dans la première moitié de Juin' (PGV, III, p. 315).

On 19 February 1924, Rilke dedicated a French poem to Pia that expresses his nostalgia for Venice and his regret at not being able to return there in person: 'rendez à l'air de Venise | un peu de mon cœur *vénitien*', a heart that will remain Venetian, 'même éloigné' (*SW*, II, p. 653). In August of the same year he wrote 'Comme un verre de Venise', which would appear in *Vergers* (*KA*, V, p. 18). The editors of the *Kritische Ausgabe* suggest persuasively that Rilke has in mind the costly 'Filigranglas' that recalls his first published reference to the city in 1896. It may be pure coincidence that the same image marks both the first and the last of Rilke's literary responses to Venice, but the nostalgic echo is still poignant.

[211] *Briefe an Gräfin Mirbach-Geldern-Egmont*, pp. 93–94 (17 March 1924).
[212] Rilke, *Lettres milanaises 1921–1926*, ed. by Renée Lang (Plon, 1956), p. 74 (2 January 1926).
[213] *NWV*, II, pp. 1135–36 (27 May 1926).