

THE IMAGE OF VENICE IN HENRI DE REGNIER'S PROSE

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Abstract

The focus of the article is on the image of Venice in the short stories by the French writer Henri de Regnier (1864-1936), a poet and a prose writer, whose work complements the general picture of French culture at the turn of the 19th century, a contradictory period, which was called «La belle époque» in the West.

The article deals with the image of a city-maze, a city-museum. The motif of the maze in Regnier's prose has mythological associations; the characters' wandering in the maze is understood as a metaphor for their search for their own identities.

The article analyzes the influence of various aesthetic movements of the turn of the 19th century on the writer's work. The influence of symbolism can be traced in the motif of destruction, which significantly affects the organization of the artistic space. It is saturated with signs indicating the movement towards the end, a decline. The world of things in Regnier's short stories is vivid and tangible. Regnier's love of visual and graphic images can be explained by the influence of T.Gautier and the Parnassians.

In Regnier's works Venice is depicted as a huge museum expressing the writer's nostalgia for the beauty and harmony of classical culture. The analysis of the image of Venice in the French writer's short stories testifies to Regnier's sensitivity to the aesthetic side of the outgoing world. Idealizing the past, Regnier expresses a person's insecurity and anxiety during the disharmonious time of the transitional period.

Thus, presenting Venice as a city-maze, a city-museum, Henri de Regnier writes about time, about the past "glancing" through modernity and possessing aesthetic superiority over modernity.

Keywords: Henri de Regnier, the turn of the 19th century, the image of Venice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Henri de Regnier (1864-1936) was a French poet, short story writer, novelist, essayist and critic, an aesthete who absorbed the experience of the Parnassian school. He was an enthusiastic admirer of S. Mallarme, a symbolist and neoclassicist who wrote gallant and sensitive prose, romantic and Gothic novels, melancholic meditations. Once Maximilian Voloshin predicted that Henri de Regnier would become the first writer of France in the 20th century. History decided otherwise and Henri de Regnier remained a writer of the second

row, although an outstanding and original one. Indeed, Henri de Regnier did not make any artistic breakthroughs in contemporary literature like Marcel Proust, who was so similar to him at the beginning of his creative career. At the same time, he organically combined elements of various novel poetics, illuminating all this with his poetic gift. In his prose one can find elements of literature of chivalry, of the 17th century psychological prose, as well as the romanticism and aesthetic constructs of the turn of the century. It is no accident that the term most widely used in French criticism in relation to Henri de Regnier is syncretism. His work complements and adds new colours to the panorama of French culture at the turn of the century, a period that was called "La belle époque" in the West, although it was at this time that the contradictions that led to World War I were maturing.

Henri de Regnier very often chooses Venice as the setting for his novels and short stories (the collections "Unusual Lovers" (*Les amants singuliers*, 1901), "The Haze of Time" (*Couleurs du temps*, 1909), "Mysterious Stories" (*Histoires incertaines*, 1919)).

The theme of the modern city played a significant role in the French literature of the second half of the 19th century. The core motif in literature was the juxtaposition of the city and nature, the city and the province; the role of the urban landscape in prose was growing. In the picturesque descriptions of streets and boulevards, markets and festivities, cafes and ports, one could see a dramatic picture and feel the writers' bitterness and doubts about the ways of the development of modern civilization.

2. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

In Henri de Regnier's works Venice appears as a city-maze, a city-museum, fascinating with its winding streets, the reflections of castles and palaces in the waters of the Venetian canals.

The imaginary walks through the city of the Doges correspond to the author's real visits to Venice, the memories of which are described with extraordinary precision in the book "Altana, or Venetian Life" (*L'Altana, ou la Vie vénitienne*, 1928).

Abundant evidence of the city's magical effect on the writer can be found in many of his works. Thus, in the essays "Portraits and Memories" (*Portraits et Souvenirs*, 1913), the author asks: "Wasn't Venice, with its intricate maze of canals and "calli", created in order to constantly return us to ourselves, to make us get in touch with our spiritual possibilities?" (Regnier, 1913, p. 123).

Here is another statement made by Regnier about his favourite city, emphasizing the idea of Venice's extraordinary impact on those who are in it: "It seems that here, when you are in a blissful state of mild egoism, it is easier to tolerate oblivion, ingratitude, injustice. You seem to be in a maze, where sorrows cannot overtake you. Everything that happens to you is just a reflection, an echo. Every day is perceived here as the end of life" (Regnier, 1928, p. 92).

For Regnier Venice was an ideal embodiment of the image of the city-maze. In the Prologue to "Venetian Life", Regnier asks the question: "Besides, how could I have guided anyone in this enchanting labyrinth, where I got lost myself and was not able to find the way out? Even though I met Ariadne in Tintoretto's painting, she did not give me the thread showing the way out of this enchanted place. Nothing will help you get out of here" (Regnier, 1928, p. 10).

The maze is one of the oldest symbols. L. V. Starodubtseva in her work on the history, symbolism and semantics of the maze, which is defined by her as a spatial analogy of the process of consciousness, argues: "In archaic cultures there was a burial, an entrance to a different world in the centre of a maze. Mythological consciousness placed a fight with the Minotaur in the centre of the maze, whereas religious consciousness placed the "Jerusalem-Grad" (Starodubtseva, 2000, p. 282).

In Regnier's texts the maze has mythological associations. The mythology of the path is recoded into wandering in a maze, which is understood as a metaphor for a person's search for himself.

In the writer's works, the motif of the maze is most often correlated with walking through the labyrinth of corridors in a secluded castle and along the park alleys or wandering the streets of the city leading to the mysterious centre (which may be a mysterious room or a square). Here is a description of the city, symbolizing a vain and empty life, in the novel "Hermogenes" (Regnier, 1908):

The city was vast and crowded. Its countless streets criss-crossed in thousands of bends, and they all ended, through several streets into which they poured, in a large central square paved with marble. Fragrant trees grew here and there between the clefts of the slabs and painted delightful shadows on them; fresh water was splattering in the moist silence of the crystal air. But the square was always deserted; it was forbidden to stop in

it and even pass through it. One could dream there under the trees, drink water, remain in seclusion - and yet it was necessary for the crowd to wander continuously through the labyrinth of dusty streets, between tall stone buildings with bronze doors, among dissimilar faces and useless speeches (p. 264).

For the hero of the novel there is also no way out of the labyrinth of worthless life: "Once you lose yourself, you cannot find yourself again, and love does not return us to ourselves" (Regnier, 1908, p. 267).

Of course, any city with a complex intertwining of streets could fulfil the function of the city-maze. These could be the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, which Regnier visited during two sea voyages across the Mediterranean and depicted in many of his stories. But none of them has the advantage of a double Venetian labyrinth of streets and canals, the advantage of the city that has a unique appearance and preserves the echo of the charming past. Not surprisingly, for many of Regnier's characters Venice becomes a place where they search for themselves, a place of unusual coincidences; this is where they find love, as well as death.

Wandering through the labyrinth of Venetian streets ends in a disastrous meeting for the main character of the novel "Meeting", who sets out on a walk about the city immediately upon arrival. He is happy to be back in night Venice, along the winding lanes of which he had wandered so often. But that evening he notices that his usual ability to navigate confidently in a bizarre Venetian maze has left him: "I was forced to stop several times, and once I got into one of those dead ends that do not have an outlet and are broken off at the canals, where I have to go back" (Regnier, 1919, p. 23).

The walk, during which the narrator lost his way in the streets of Venice, becomes a kind of prelude to the unusual events that happened afterwards. Every evening he sees a ghost from another century in the mirror - a Venetian, whose image he saw twice - in a bust that disappeared from the museum, and in a portrait in the palace where the main character lived.

In the short story "The Short Life of Balthazar Aldramin," the numerous twists of the labyrinth lead a young Venetian towards love and death. The main character suddenly leaves Venice, tired of life spent in pleasure and enjoyment. He is oppressed by the atmosphere of the city-maze (Regnier, 1906):

I was greatly amused by the thought that I could go straight ahead without fear of coming back to the same place, as is too often the case in the streets and canals of Venice, the convolutions of which eventually lead us, in spite of our will, to the same place that we came from, so in the end it seems that you meet yourself (p. 182).

In the writer's short stories movement through the maze, in the unfathomable twists and turns of which one can get lost, lose one's identity and cease to be oneself, allegorically correlates with the characters' desire to find themselves, to escape from vain life. After killing the Minotaur the legendary hero comes out of the maze; however in Regnier's works, as a rule, there is no way out of the maze. The centre of the maze is the end of the path leading to the character's death and is usually the end of the story.

The centre of the maze is often a mirror room, where the characters come face to face with themselves. Thus, the monster waiting for the characters in the maze is a mirror. Seeing their multiple reflections in the mirrors the characters lose their identity, they seem to be depersonalized. It is as if the mirrors give them access to the phenomena of another world (the short stories "The Story of the Lady of the Seven Mirrors", "Hertulia").

In the story "Meeting" a mirror appears as an "illusory door" into another spatial plan, which is a fantastic refraction of the real: "It was like a door to another world and showed, in the reverse perspective, the same stucco hall with the same arabesques and figures, but transferred to the distant ages, into an inaccessible and mysteriously dark depth" (Regnier, 1919, p. 88).

The reflections in the old Venetian mirror seemed shrouded in "twilight mist", "everything in it seemed significant and distant as if coming from the depths of the other world" (Regnier, 1919, p. 111). The hero cannot tear himself away from the strange perspective in the marble frame, from the room reflected in the mirror. In his imagination, the mirror pushes the boundaries of the real world and indicates the presence of a new reality in which a ghost from the past appears - the image of a Venetian, the owner of the castle.

The motif of the mirror in Regnier's works is related to the idea of dvoemiriye (two worlds) as it was understood by the Romantics. In Regnier's short stories the mirror splits and multiplies faces, the characters lose their identity. The semantic variants of the mirror are portraits, statues and reflections in the water. The splitting of human personality, its constant presence on the brink between the world of reality and the world

of the soul is also typical of the consciousness of the writers' who worked at the end of the century.

The image of the mirror occupies an important place in the work of S. Mallarmé. It is associated with the poet's theme of death and non-existence. S. Mallarmé, like T. Gautier, shared the belief that a mirror is an entrance to the other world, through which a connection is established with the souls of the dead (Cellier, 1959, pp. 75-89). In the prose poem "Frisson d'hiver" ("Winter Shivers") in the deep "abysses" of the mirror, a woman turns into a shadow, into a disembodied ghost (Mallarmé, 1995) :

And your Venetian mirror, deep as the water of a cold pool bordered by the once gilded serpents - who looked in it? Oh, I am sure that many women have bathed the sin of their beauty in these depths, and perhaps, if you stay here longer, you can see more than one naked shadow (p. 171).

The image of Venice in Henri de Regnier's works shows the significance of the past as the eternal space of human culture glancing through the present. Beautiful statues of Venice are the legacy of the past. Works of decorative applied art caress the look of an aesthete, spiritualize daily life, returning to art its vitality. This is how Regnier, an artist of the transition period, solves the problem of correlation between art and life, which was fundamental to his contemporaries and still remains topical (Rusinova, 2011, p. 68).

Paul Moran, recalling the small French society in Venice, a kind of literary circle, to which Henri de Regnier belonged, writes: "For our guests, the past represented the present... <...> they plunged into the past as a patient clings to an oxygen cushion, as a trout jumps over the dam, rushing upstream " (Moran, 2002, p. 42). Further, the writer notes: "If we bear in mind the art of living, they clearly fell out of their time and could rightly repeat after Paul Bourget in *Corpésho* on November 11, 1918:" Now the catastrophe begins " (Moran, 2002, p. 68).

Modernity brought about not only technical progress, but also social disasters, engendered a feeling of insecurity, a sense of man's loneliness and powerlessness. Regnier's generation could not come to terms with the collapse of Europe, could not accept a new Europe, shrunk in size, sick and decrepit, divided into many worlds with conflicting interests. "Mr. Regnier hates reality and is afraid of it," wrote the writer's friend and biographer R. Honnert (Honnert, 1923, p. 32).

The imagination of the writer seeking to avoid the disharmony of reality, takes him to an idealized past, to Venice depicted without the cumbersome machine culture, to that picturesque place with majestic buildings protected from the destructive influence of progress. The palaces and castles of Venice that are the setting for his works connect the narrative with the past, testify to the writer's sensitivity to the aesthetic side of the outgoing old world. The fading beauty of Venice with its ancient monuments is associated by the writer with a decrepit Europe.

In Regnier's prose Venice appears as a large open-air museum facing the past. The appearance and spirit of Venice seem to be inseparable. The author uses the exact names of squares, streets, lanes, architectural monuments, taverns and water canals. The protagonist of the short story "Meeting" settles in the Palazzo Altinengo, strolls around the San Marco Square, comes to taste the Valpolicella (a local wine) in Piazzetta. The dilapidated palazzo, of which there are a huge number in Venice – are beautiful works of art themselves. The exemplary Venetian graphics - windows, arches, columns, portals, the rich furnishings of Venetian interiors are striking.

In the novel "Meeting", the hero-narrator, arriving in Venice, settled in the "shattered and abandoned" (*branlant et déjeté*) palace of Altinengo, a 18th century building, which had not lost its former beauty and grandeur. The rooms of the neglected Venetian dwelling allotted to him bewitch him by their original decoration, colours and details of the ornament. He ceased to leave the palace, he was no longer interested in museums, in the architecture of his beloved city. He was prepared to sit motionless for hours and examine the things surrounding him. The setting, bearing the imprint of the past, causes bizarre fantasies, hallucinations. The narrator's imagination animates the image of the Venetian nobleman, the owner of the palace, whose portrait he once discovered in a dark, uninhabited room.

The water of Venice's lagoons doubles the beauty of the architectural monuments. Water is a unique background, lively, changeable and moving, on which a portrait of Venice emerges, in unexpected colours and chiaroscuro. Moisture coloured the walls of the palazzo. In this amazing city the first floors, where one cannot live because of dampness, look the most well-kept: they are washed white by the waves. Water is a mirror reflecting the beauty of the city.

Henri de Regnier's artistic consciousness is characterized by the aesthetics of decay, dying, and destruction. In this he is a follower of the French Symbolists - Ch. Baudelaire, A. Rimbaud and S. Mallarmé. In S.

Mallarme's work the role of home interior is great. In his prose poem "Winter Shivers" (*Frisson d'hiver*), home comfort is marred by the shadow of non-existence, things bear the stamp of death. The poet emphasizes the elegance of faded things, beginning with the old watch and ending with the leitmotif of the cobweb that covers the window frame (Mallarme, 1995):

This watch of Saxon porcelain with cupids and flowers is always slow and strikes thirteen times - who did it belong to before? Only to think that it was brought from Dresden in a long, ancient coach! <...>

(A cobweb hangs on the tall balcony window.)

Our pot-bellied chest of drawers is also very old: see how its sad wooden sides have faded from the fire. The draperies on the walls have faded - and what about the upholstery of the sagging armchairs, and the old prints and all our antiquities? Don't you think that the Bengal finches and the blue wagtail have also faded over time?

(Do not think about the cobweb trembling on the tall window) (pp. 171 – 173).

Regnier continues his teacher's tradition. In his novels, the motif of destruction significantly affects the organization of the artistic space, it is literally oversaturated with signs indicating the movement towards the end, towards decline. The dilapidated castles, the crumbling pavilions and halls of the Venetian palaces, the faded colours of the portraits pass as a leitmotif through all his novels. They serve as a reminder that everything is perishable and short-lived. Relentless time turns everything into eternal dust: creatures and things, and their shadows. Regnier depicted the endless process of the beautiful city's dying and resurrection in the green algae-flowering water of the canals, in the moss-covered rocks, in the blades of grass, sticking out of the cracks of the palazzo. The author emphasizes that what is disintegrating lives its own different life.

The idea of the destructive influence of time on everything around represents the interrelation between artistic time and space. Ruins, debris, dust, wrinkles are the result of the work of inexorable time, which spares no one and nothing; it destroys even what remains after a person as a memory (portraits, pieces of furniture).

In the short story "The Locked Pavilion", the main character sadly contemplates the dying of things in a pavilion built in the 18th century (Regnier, 1919):

The hall we entered was even more dilapidated with its rotten parquet, warped wall paneling and the heavily cracked ceiling. It was decorated with several pieces of fine antique furniture. But what a pitiful state of destruction they were in! The upholstery on the chairs was covered with mould and half decayed, the consoles were bent, the panels on the lacquered buffets were peeling off. All this, in the dim light coming in through the broken latticed shutters and the green window panels looked ghostly. And the silence of dead things in the stale damp air, the freshness of which reminded one of the grave! (p.189)

The main character is looking with emotion at the remains of the portrait executed by G. de La Tour and depicting the Countess de Nailly, for the sake of which he entered this closed pavilion (Regnier, 1919):

Under the dilapidated clouded glass it was possible to vaguely discern indefinite tones, vague contours, something like the shadow of a human image ... it was the beautiful Sabina de Nailly who had died twice, first died her mortal body and then the coloured dust, in which she had lived for a long time after that and which has now become the indistinguishable ashes of her form and beauty (p.190).

3. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, presenting Venice as a city-maze, a city-museum, Henri de Regnier writes about time, about the past glancing through modernity and possessing aesthetic superiority over modernity.

The palace interiors of Venice with winding corridors and mysterious enfilades, alleys that open up the inviting views of gardens and parks; the web of city streets, the bizarre configuration of lagoons and canals refer to the archetype of the maze - the symbolic image of Regnier's novelistic poetics. The maze, ending with a mirror room, an allegory of the life story of Regnier's typified hero, a place where he finds and at the same time loses himself, multiplied in countless reflections.

The image of Venice as a phenomenon of history and culture, which has an independent aesthetic

significance, can be regarded as the author's reminder to his troubled and disharmonious time of the triumph of eternal values. This is a manifestation of the writer's nostalgia for the past, for the harmony of classical culture and stability, which was a stamp of time, an insight into the ambiguity of technological progress; a feeling of man's loneliness and helplessness, of his insecurity and anxiety.

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