

Travel Report

by Helena Koch

»There is nothing more tiresome in this world than reading the account of a journey to Italy – except for writing this very account oneself – and the only way for the writer to make it somewhat bearable is to speak as little as possible of Italy itself.«¹

Towards the end of his *Travel Pictures (Reisebilder)* (1826-1831), the German poet Heinrich Heine not only warns his readers of the lengthiness of his own work, he also advises them to skip a few pages from time to time, should they become weary of what he has to tell them, or even to shut the book entirely. Oh how he wishes he was able to do just the same!, Heine continues, and expresses his regret that he himself needs to be the author of such tiresome content. Something better shall follow soon, he promises. Yet despite his alleged reluctance to put pen to paper, Heine goes on to do just that – and produces one of the most remarkable accounts of 19th century Italy (which, personally, I find even more remarkable than Goethe's *Italian Journey*, even if it was partly Heine's model).

Thanks to the Stephen Instone Travel Award, I was able to follow in the footsteps of Heine (who is one of the two authors I am writing my dissertation on!) as well as a number of other poets and intellectuals who undertook an educational journey to Italy. Throughout my undergraduate degree in Classics and German, as well as my postgraduate degree in Classical Reception, I have come across so many Italian travelogues, relating their academic and cultural discoveries and epiphanies, that I felt almost obliged to see the places that these writers describe in the literary accounts of their journeys myself.

And now, I can proudly tell that I have been on my own *Italian Journey*! Since I was of course not able to follow an itinerary as extensive as that of Goethe (the author of *Italian Journey*) or Heine, I limited my journey to the three cities in Italy that are most relevant to my academic interests: Venice, Verona and Rome. So, here are my own *Travel Pictures*!

Venice

While I certainly wanted Italy experience to resemble that of Heine and other writers, I had hoped that my actual experiences of getting to Italy would be rather unlike theirs.

¹ Es gibt nichts Langweiligeres auf dieser Erde als die Lektüre einer italienischen Reisebeschreibung – außer etwa das Schreiben derselben – und nur dadurch kann der Verfasser sie einigermaßen erträglich machen, daß er von Italien selbst so wenig als möglich darin redet.

Thus, I had opted for a 7 am flight from London Gatwick to Venice, so that I would arrive at around 10 am, and would be able to make as much of my first day in Venice. In the end, I arrived at around 11 pm: The flight was cancelled while I was on the way to the airport, and I had to book a flight to Pisa instead, which left at noon. From there, I took a train to Florence, and then from Florence I finally went to Venice! So by the time I had made it to my hotel room, I was slightly exhausted, but happy nonetheless: With my unexpected 20 hours of travelling I felt just like one of those 19th centuries writers whom it had taken days to even reach their first destination in Italy. Also, during my stop in Florence, I had had 25 minutes to stroll through the beautiful streets and even catch a brief glimpse of the Dome (before I anxiously returned to the train station as I was running late).

Despite my tiredness, I still managed to go on a quick walk through night-time Venice, and was very glad I did so.

The next two days I kept my eyes open for Gustav von Aschenbach and Tadzio. These two are the protagonists from Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912), which featured very prominently in two of my coursework essays. One of them I wrote on the Apollonian and Dionysian forces and the downfall of literary artist figures in Mann's *Death in Venice*, and James Cahill's *Tiepolo Blue* (2022), as receptions of Euripides' *Bacchae*. The other one I wrote on the figure of Gradiva in Wilhelm Jensen's eponymous novella, its analysis by Freud, and the parallels that it exhibits to Mann's *Death in Venice*. Thus, I was thrilled to see Venice in real life, and to stroll through the narrow alleys, and along the mystical canals with their brightly green-ish water that inspired Mann to write his novella.

»So sah er ihn denn wieder, den erstaunlichsten Landungsplatz, jene blendende Komposition phantastischen Bauwerks, welche die Republik den ehrfürchtigen Blicken nahender Seefahrer entgegenstellte: die leichte Herrlichkeit des Palastes und die Seufzerbrücke, die Säulen mit Löw' und Heiligem am Ufer, die prunkend vortretende Flanke des Märchentempels, den Durchblick auf Torweg und Riesenuhr, und anschauend bedachte er, daß zu Lande, auf dem Bahnhof in Venedig anlangen, einen Palast durch eine Hintertür betreten heiße, und daß man nicht anders als wie nun er, als zu Schiffe, als über das hohe Meer die unwahrscheinlichste der Städte erreichen sollte.«

– Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig*

My most authentically Aschenbachian moment, however, must have been when it started to rain heavily, as this is exactly the weather in which Aschenbach arrives. The city does not welcome him with splendour, but rather with gloominess and mist:

Er hatte nicht anders gedacht, als daß dies geschehen müsse, denn stets hatte die Stadt ihn im Glanze empfangen. Aber Himmel und Meer blieben trüb und bleiern, zeitweilig ging neblichter Regen nieder, und er fand sich darein, auf dem Wasserwege ein anderes Venedig zu erreichen, als er, zu Lande sich nähernd, je angetroffen hatte.

- Thomas Mann, Der Tod in Venedig

I managed to find a café close to the Piazza San Marco, and was able to watch the facades of the old palace against the backdrop of a thundering sky.

My two highlights in Venice must have been the art galleries: I managed to go to two of them, the Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. The former exhibits pre-19th-century painting and sculpture, which I am highly interested in anyway – but on top of that, there was also a plethora of artworks depicting scenes from Classical mythology! I thus left the museum with many ideas for potential research topics.

Rather different from the Accademia, the Peggy Guggenheim contains European and North American art of the first half of the 20th century. The collection is not only fascinating in itself, but is also set in a beautiful villa in the heart of Venice with an almost magical sculpture garden and lovely view on the canal. I am a huge admirer of Peggy Guggenheim – after all, she was one of the most important art collectors of history! – and even found some artworks that appear to have been inspired by themes from Classical mythology. This part of Venice was less frequented than the area around San Marco, and therefore I was able to appreciate the beauty of this city even more around here.

It is always assumed that Venice is the ideal place for a honeymoon. This is a grave error. To live in Venice or even to visit it means that you fall in love with the city itself. There is nothing left over in your heart for anyone else.

- Peggy Guggenheim

Verona

Most people will know Verona as the city where Romeo and Juliet is set, and admittedly, for a long time this was also my only piece of information about Verona. However, ever since I read Heine's *Travel Pictures*, my view on this city has changed quite a bit.

This is because the city features prominently in the *Travel Pictures*: Heine's account of his Italian journey is full of descriptions of Italian towns, encounters people and tales of strange events. Most conspicuously, however, Heine questions the accounts of Italian journey that his literary predecessors have written, above all Goethe. He ironises and parodies the famous German poet's *Italienische Reise* wherever he can. More specifically, where Goethe emphasises the grandeur of the Classical heritage he encountered on his journey through Italy, Heine takes great pains to undermine this very grandeur of Classical antiquity by parodying it. One such instances is the poets' visit to the arena in Verona. Goethe is exalted by its beauty and sublimity:

The amphitheatre is the first remarkable monument of past times that I see, and how well-preserved it is! When I entered, but even more when I was walking along the top rows, it struck me as strange, to see something this great, and in fact nothing at the same time.²

- Goethe, Italian Journey

When Heine, however, enters the arena, he encounters the ghosts of Roman figures: Caesar and Brutus, walking hand in hand, laughing and reconciled, and the Gracchi, with their »keen martyr eyes« – but they are nothing more than ghosts to him. Heine himself does not enter the past, he remains in the »Christian Austrian« present, and announces the death of Roma.

And since this parodying and questioning of antiquity by Heine is precisely the topic of my MA dissertation, I was more than happy to have seen the arena in real life.

To end the day, I climbed up the Castel San Pietro, and was rewarded with a beautiful view on Verona.

² Das Amphitheater ist also das erste bedeutende Monument der alten Zeit, das ich sehe, und so gut erhalten! Als ich hineintrat, mehr noch aber, als ich oben auf dem Rande umherging, schien es mir seltsam, etwas Großes und doch eigentlich nichts zu sehen.

Rome

Even though I really loved Venice and Verona – I loved Rome even more. Walking through the beautiful streets, where there is a temple at every other corner and a statue on every other roof, I felt as if antiquity was actually coming to life. But there is something special about Rome that is hard to put into words.

While I was in Rome, I read a »Journey by Moonlight« by the Hungarian writer Antal Szerb, which is set in Italy, and found that Szerb comes close to capturing the special spirit of Rome, when he describes his protagonist Mihály's first impressions of the city:

»Everything he saw in Rome stood under the sign of fatefulness. He had encountered this feeling before: the sense, during a predawn stroll or an unusual late-summer afternoon, that everything is suffused with a rare, inexpressible significance; but here, the feeling never left him for so much as an instant. Streets and houses had awakened far-reaching presentiments before, but never to the extent that Rome's streets, palaces and gardens did.«

- Antal Szerb, *Journey by Moonlight*, translated by Peter V. Czipott

On my day of arrival, I simply wandered through the streets, marvelled at the temples and columns, and discovered a little vintage book shop, where I probably spent an hour browsing through translations of ancient plays and Italian classics. This turned out to be a great way to practise applying my Latin skills that to modern Italian (it actually worked quite well!).

I then went to the Circus Maximus, the biggest circus of ancient Rome, used for chariot races and gladiator fights. Nowadays, you can just walk through the entire circus, which, of course, I did. I was expecting the sound of a Roman race chariot any second.

The next day, I started off with a thorough tour through the city centre, and came by so many monumental sights: the Trevi Fountain, the Pantheon, the Spanish Steps. The highlight for this day, however, I had saved for the afternoon: the Galleria Borghese, one of the largest private art collections in the world. This was one of the main reason why I had wanted to come to Rome. When browsing through their online collection, I noticed how full of mythologically inspired pieces their selection of artworks was, and could barely contain my excitement.

The Galleria Borghese is located in the beautiful Villa Borghese park, the third-largest public park in Rome, and accordingly, it is already worth visiting just for the sake of enjoying the beautiful gardens.

Yet once you enter the Galleria itself, you quickly forget about the outside world – because you find yourself in a world of Classical mythology; there is just no better way to put it. When I walked through the villa, it felt like someone had created these rooms just for Classical reception students; wherever I turned to look, there was a scene from Classical mythology. I was particularly impressed by the sculpture group of Aeneas, Anchises and Ascanius, built by Bernini and inspired by the famous scene from Vergil's *Aeneid*, where Aeneas flees from burning Troy, taking his family with him.

Yet since Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is my main research interest, I was naturally most taken in by the artworks inspired by his *Metamorphoses* – and there were a lot. Every other artwork I saw was depicting a scene from Ovid's epic.

The next day, I went to look for Cicero, Caesar and Marcus Antonius. In other words: I went to the Forum Romanum, the famous site that is located in the heart of Rome, next to the Colosseum, and that contains multiple essential ancient (government) buildings. For a long time, the Forum Romanum used to be the centre of Roman city life. Everything important happened here: trials, elections etc. This is where Cicero gave his speech against the Catiline conspiracy, and where Marcus Antonius delivered his famous oration during the funeral of Caesar. As someone who did an entire Cicero module in her undergraduate degree, and who has read and seen Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* several times, I simply could not miss out on a visit to the Forum Romanum. I felt as if antiquity would come to life here.

One of the highlights of my visit was the spectacular view I got on Rome and on the Colosseum: I stayed at that viewpoint as long as I could – i.e. until closing time.

At this point, I was already very much in love with Rome. Yet the true highlight of my visit – the reason why I had originally applied for the travel grant! – was still to come. I had saved it for the very last day. I am referring to the Laocoön group in the Vatican. This particular sculpture was not just important to me because it is alluded to and mentioned in so many literary works, but also because it was quite essential for one of my coursework essays. I chose to write on the reception of Classically inspired artworks in ekphrases of the Decadent period. For this purpose, I drew quite heavily on ekphrases and art theory

treatises from different periods as objects of comparison, and the Laocoön turned out to be an object of crucial significance: Not only has it inspired quite a few poets, but the German dramatist Lessing also wrote a treatise titled *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerey und Poesie* (1756), in which he outlines what he considers the differences between painting and poetry, and the archaeologist and art historian Winckelmann discusses the sculpture extensively and rather famously in his *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764). All of these Laocoön receptions were of much interest to me when I was writing my essay on Decadent ekphrases, and thus I felt the need to finally see this sculpture group, that I had read so much about, in real life.

Laocoon is a character in utmost pain, crafted after the image of a man, who purposely tries to gather his strength of spirit to counteract the very same; and with his pain swelling the muscle and contracting the nerves, the spirit, armed with strength, shows itself on his raised forehead, and the breast rises through his anguished breath and through constraining his outburst of emotion, and to grasp the pain on the inside and to keep it concealed. (...) His face is plaintive, not agonised, his eyes are turned toward a higher power.«³

- History, Part II, Laokoon

I was mesmerised by the sculpture; and could clearly understand why it became such an important object of study for so many artists and academics. However, this was by far not the only artwork in the Vatican that was related to my degree. In fact, the museum halls were full of Classical mythology and its reception. Here are a few impressions:

The eight days that I spent in Italy were more academically stimulating than I could ever have imagined: Not only did I get to see so many elements of my degree in real life, but I also came across so many artworks I had not seen or heard of, and thus returned to London with a plethora of new research ideas. I would like to thank the Stephen Instone family very much for providing me with this fantastic and unique opportunity – I am incredibly grateful!

³ Laokoon ist eine Natur im höchsten Schmerze, nach dem Bilde eines Mannes gemacht, der die bewußte Stärke des Geistes gegen denselben zu sammeln sucht; und indem sein Leiden die Muskeln aufschwellt und die Nerven anzieht, tritt der mit Stärke bewaffnete Geist in der aufgetriebenen Stirn hervor, und die Brust erhebt sich durch den beklemmten Atem und durch Zurückhaltung des Ausbruchs der Empfindung, und den Schmerz in sich zu fassen und zu verschließen.