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European and National in Antun Gustav Matoš's Travel Notes

Abstract

The dichotomy European/national and its creative power has marked profoundly A. Matoš's worldly and artistic credo. Two distinguished features pervade his works and his travel notes: the French and the Croatian, the modern and the home-grown. The latter two tend to unite the Western taste with the Croatian propensity for sedition. Antun Matoš's long-term aspirations strive for a well-maintained balance of the two. His travel notes feature imagologic constructs – a realm of tableaux of every manifestation of the nation's life and mentality, of European culture and civilization, of domestic developments and human manners. It is precisely by means of his travel notes that Antun Matoš recreated the mythological perception of his life as a patriotically disposed bohemian and an exile, whose works were created solely for the sake of art and literature; a person who disregarded largely the rest of the world. It is lofty artistic ideals that make all disharmonies in life disappear. The dynamic relationship between European and national served as a catalyst for the mixed feelings, typical of his works. Their emblematic presence made them ascend as a categorical imperative, which determined the vitality of his creative capacity, and turned them into a basic guideline for his writings.

Keywords: travel notes; European/national; imagology; modernism.

Европейско и национално в пътеписите на Антун Густав Матош Резюме

Изследването е опит да се разбули многопластовата и противоречива творческа същност на модерната А. Матош, навигиращ между визията за една мултикултурна Европа и копнежа за национална еманципация. Акцентира се върху пъстрата мозайка от „другости“ в пътеписите му, водеща до болезненото преоткриване и преподреждане на идентичности на нивото на европейското и националното в контекста на пространствената и времева съгъстеност на културите. Статията разглежда неговите пътеписи като имаголожки конструкции – царство на картини от всички проявления на националния живот и менталитет, на европейската култура и цивилизация, на родните взаимоотношения и човешки нрави, отразяващи превъплъщенията на модерния дух в рамките на националната самобитност.

Ключови думи: пътеписи; европейско/национално; имагология; модернизъм.

The European-national dialogue performs its role of a structurizing force through which the Old Continent's ideas and identities are formed and its historical realities are set up. Garnered around

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the project of modernity, time and again identified with the notion of Europe they put forward the sophisticated architectonics of a modern national identity which dispels the ontological boundaries set by traditional society, with regard to what is own and what is assumed, guiding towards a more explicit mutual pervasion and free exchange in both directions.

The culture of dialogue largely recognized as a prerequisite for every discourse on modernism, strongly invigorates the space-time relation between European and national within the context of Southeast Europe's historical drama of the turn of XIX century. The collapse of the great narrative implies a replacement of the genealogical and religious homogeneity by pluralism and extreme changeability, by the ambivalence of the Ego, which steals away from the obligations imposed by the 'pedagogical ethnography' of nation, to incarnate in a 'superman' of modern times, the son of its nation who keeps on emulating the foreigners' 'otherness'. The hectic exchange of real and imaginary traditions which leads to distressing revelations and rearrangement of European and Balkan identities is an assignment for the new generation which is doomed to be in a scramble for bridging the gap to overcome its 'intermediation' by parting from the syncretism of the national revival's identity code and finding a key to the construction of a modern cultural autoreflexion.

Situated at the turning point of two ages, the spiritual atmosphere of Croatia bears the stamp of a despondency and the downfall of all national and social yearnings. In 1895, on the occasion of Emperor Franz Joseph's visit to Zagreb, the Hungarian flag was set afire – a fact that made the authorities expel two groups of students from the University of Zagreb. The liberal-minded young people would go to proceed with their studies in Prague and Vienna featuring the countenance of the new modern Croatian multifarious and heterogeneous aesthetic formation. The pages of *Hrvatska misal* and the newspaper *Mladost* – an exponent of the Viennese Secession, both give witness of the quest for a course for moving away from that 'uniformed' literature, accentuating a stronger individualization of art and creativeness as a response to the inherited artistic conventions of the past, and a perceived necessity of fulfilling artistic achievements. Antun Matoš, whose short story *The Power of Conscience* (1892, *Vienac*)², is the epitome of this new stylistic formation taking over the Croatian literature, is quite expressive: "Our art cannot be national unless it becomes European, i.e. when it embodies ingenious Croatian expressiveness, a special mode of the spirit, filled with European connotations".³ For him, the antinomy European – national has to be considered within a pattern discarding any kind of philistine narrow-mindedness, eulogizing the humanistic and anthropocentric

² Moć savjesti – *Vjenac*, Br. 33, 13. Kolovoz, God. XXIV, 1892, Zagreb.

³ Matoš, A. Umjetnost i nacionalizam. In: *Odabrani eseji i putopisi*. p. 39. All translations are mine – A.B. http://gimnazija-sb.com/portal/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/matos_odabraniesejiiputopisi.pdf (5.02.2017).

pathos for the intransigent values of the universal and the beautiful in art. The ‘patriotic drive’ is just a semibreve in the entire creative suggestion – “any creativeness which has only patriotic traits could barely satisfy more than a minimal, negligible part of our emotiveness”.⁴

Spiritual identity, being a fruit of the invigorating impulse to creativeness and re-creation, rather than the emanation of frozen forms, a heritage of the past, will be the root of Antun Matoš’s visionary project. It was Tin Ujević, who in 1911 threw light on the dichotomy European/national, its creative power, and the profound stamp it left on A. Matoš’s worldly and artistic credo.⁵ He further notes in the obituary „*Em smo Horvati*” (1914):

“Two distinguished features pervade his works – the French, and the Croatian, the modern and the home-grown. These are two factors, which would have tended to harmonize in consonance with the European and our own culture, uniting the Western taste with the Croatian propensity for sedition. Antun Matoš’s long-term aspirations strive for having them well balanced”.⁶

The dynamic relationship between European and national catalyze the mixed feelings typical of his works. Their emblematic presence makes them ascend as categorical imperative, which determines the vitality of his creative capacity, and turns them, as defined by Dubravka Oraic Tolic, into a basic guideline of his research.⁷ Synergy permeates his travel notes where the central and structurizing figure of the *flaneur* peeps in, all out to grasp the fugitive, the evanescent that features one of the aspects of modernity, attuning it to its other face – the invariable enjoyment of the self. For him, *flaneurie* is “an imaginary journey appeasing the most adventurous yearnings for everything new, for flying above our low-minded and mediocre milieu”.⁸

It is, therefore, quite easy to explain the apology of modern travelling, the one that A. Matoš suggests in his itinerary „*Ferije*” („*Festivities*”): “Life is *flaneurie*, ... the great souls are all *flaneurs*...”.⁹ It is travelling, which he refers to as a “poetry of the modern civilization” in touch with the permanent process of remodelling the ‘otherness’, and identifying with foreigner, what the Croat intellectuals, too much absorbed in their national discourse, would need. A critical glimpse of the Croatian culture of travelling makes A. Matoš stand up confronted with those intellectuals’ backwardness and apathy, ironically portraying them as ones “sitting by the stove, grunting and

⁴ Ibid., p.38.

⁵ Ujević, T. Barres i Oinobarres. In: *Sabrana djela, Sv.VII*, Zagreb: Znanje, 1965, p.72.

⁶ Ujević, T. *Sabrana djela, Sv.VII*, Zagreb: Znanje, 1965, p. 102.

⁷ Oraić, D. Europsko i nacionalno u djelu A.G. Matoša. In: *Hrvatska književnost u europskom kontekstu*. Ured. Al. Flaker, Krunoslav Pranjić. Zagreb: Sveucilišna naklada Liber, 1978, 445-447.

⁸ Matoš A.G. Pjesme. Pečalba. In: *Sabrana djela, sv. 5*, ur. D. Tadijanović, Zagreb, 1973, 202–203.

⁹ Matoš A.G. Ferije. In: *Sabrana djela, sv. XI (O likovnim umjetnostima, Putopisi)*, ur. Sl. Batusić i D. Jelčić, Zagreb: JAZU, 1973, 278-282.

intriguing in the manner of old peasant wives”.¹⁰ The village people, in contradistinction, are represented as the true authors of a “modern drama of the advancement”¹¹, travelling around the world, and reaching as far as America. Travelling for him is an immanent need that haunts human spirit. Travellings have produced colossuses as outstanding as Luis Camoes, James Cook, Wagner, Byron and Chateaubriand.

The spiritual pilgrimage of A. Matoš, which conventionally started in 1894 after his defection from the Austrian army and his escape to Belgrade (Serbia), has been embroiled in a deep existential crisis, which is sooner an antipode of ethnocentric self-conceit, rather than a cultural dislocation artefact. His cultural pilgrimage fed by a multiplicity of European sources which established secular standards of the Croatian literature of modern times, comprises Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Serbia, Slovenia, and the littoral area. A written statement of his impressions can be found in the travel notes *U Munchenu, krajem januara 1908* (*In Munich, at the end of January 1908*); *Od Pariza do Beograda* (*From Paris to Belgrade*); *Od Zagreba do Beograda* (*From Zagreb to Belgrade*); *Ferije* (*Festivities*); *Pod florentinskim sesinom* (*Under the Florentine Hat*); *Od Firenze do Zagreba* (*From Florence to Zagreb*), etc. Along with the regular Croatian theme, the Italian theme has been touched in three of them, the theme about Geneva – in a couple of them, and those concerning Paris, Belgrade and Sarajevo – in one of them.

The lofty aesthetic styles of the age of Modernism, Impressionism, Symbolism and the Secession go along with the grotesque, the cartoon, as well as the pre-vanguard aesthetics of ugliness. Unlike the realists, who tend to pursue strictly educational objectives largely streamlining the travel notes, Matoš approaches the Hypolite Taine’s sociologization of arts. His travelogues feature imagologic constructs – a realm of pictures of every manifestation of national life and mentality, of European culture and civilization, the homeland ongoings and the human manners.

The spiritual geography of Europe, as depicted by him, seems rather subjectified, the natural and the urban landscapes are profoundly related to the author, who remains strongly under their influence. The antitheses and the comparisons are often used, as in the travel note *Od Pariza do Beograda* (*From Paris to Belgrade*), for example. There, the Swiss countryside does not correlate to cheese making, neither to the natural history style observations typical of the J.W. Goethe’s travel notes; it sooner approximates to the music by Gioachino Rossini and the paintings of Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901). On this backcloth of emphatically cultural associations linking to the Habsburgs,

¹⁰ Matoš A.G. *Sabrana djela*, sv. XI (*O likovnim umjetnostima, Putopisi*), ur. Sl. Batusić i D. Jelčić, Zagreb: JAZU, 1973, p. 195.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

feudalism, the Jesuits and Catholicism on one hand, and Wilhelm Tell – the disaffected, the rebel, freedom and tolerance, on the other, he has managed to construct a richly layered network of literary signs borrowed from the passing economic and political situation in Switzerland and the Croatian lands. His picture is a sign system, an aesthetic code of the absolutized author's ego, far and away from the whimsical and individualized ego of Nemčić or Weber. It has come to lure him away from the inessential things, thus bringing the reader in a hypnotic infatuation, carried along by his own emotions and thoughts as the only way to art.

By means of his travel notes, precisely, Antun Matoš recreates the myth of his life – a patriotically disposed bohemian and exile whose works have been solely created for art and literature's sake, one who largely disregards the rest of the world. The lofty artistic ideals are what makes all disharmony in life disappear. In the aftermath of his seven years spent in Belgrade (1894-1898) and (1898-1899), and a couple of years in Geneva (1898-1899), it is now the turn to his sojourn in Paris (1899-1904) where his love for the arts and freedom has taken him, thus making him open a new page in the Croatian literature.

His stay in Paris was for many aspects marked by a pro-modernist penchant as displayed in his book *Ogledi (Essays, 1905)*: he admires the multicultural nature of the World Exhibition in 1900, the technical achievements, the industry of mining – every day, as he shares with us, he mounts the lift and goes up the top of the Eiffel tower, dreaming of aircrafts and balloons. He views the notion of beauty as a matter of universality, it spreads out even onto industry: “A Frenchman aestheticizes everything – even what seems to many an absurdity: the industry”.¹² Matoš drifts far away from the enlighteners' romantic paradigms and entirely subjectivizes the city attaching a post-Baudelairian significance as emanation of modernity thereto. Paris is the centre which introduces any aesthetic novelty, a focus of beauty, art and literature, its streets have seen “Strossmayer, Kvaternik, Starcević and Kumičić passing by – all of them disciples of the most human, most classic and most attractive Europe, just because she is the most aesthetically beautiful, and has contributed in the utmost degree to the principles of freedom throughout the world”.¹³ As if European and national fuse in this metropolis of spirit. There is a well-known quote by Matoš, that “a day in Paris means a life experience comparable to a century in Croatia”. Little, insignificant and narrow-minded is how the Croatian reality – the one he has left – looks like.

Matoš refers to France as to a new mother country, a motherland of spirit just like Italy, whom he dedicates his travelogues *Pod florentinskim sesirom (Under the Florentine Hat), Salve, Dea Roma!*,

¹² Matos, A. *Ogledi. Studije i impresije*. Zadar, 1905, p. 33.

¹³ Matoš, Antun Gustav. *Misli i pogledi*. Zagreb: Globus. Nikolajević, 1988. p. 290.

and *Rimski izleti* (*Roman excursions*). Along with historical actuality, he dwells upon the symbols of his own time. However, Matoš is not enticed by the deceitful flash of the limousines, the squash hats and the flower shops labelled Gainsborough, neither is he lost in admiration of the high speeds like Milan Begović – a younger travelogue author, and a vociferous high-speed fan. The Florentine travel notes which gradually turn into an essay-type narrative in prose, or look like a piece of writing about the art of painting, sculpture, architecture and theatre, or about the French-Italian relations. In Florence Matoš recognizes the Italy of distinctions and contrasts: happiness and anguish, holiness and evil, beauty and ugliness... In Rome, the Eternal city, he remains breathless, facing the Palatine hill palaces, the Quirinal, and the Colosseum. He treads his way on the ground keeping the footprints of the greatest triumphs, and the most deplorable degradation and disgrace to humankind. Matoš's unbending spirit spans the whole Roman history setting it in one place: saints, martyrs, wicked, heroes, tribunes, tyrants, philosophers, poets...

Approaching the European cultural standards requires the author to engage for a constant sweep of legitimation. Getting to know Italy, claims Matoš, would have meant getting to know oneself, to comprehend the Croatian psyche and its intellectuals who are cradled at the source of that culture. In *Salve, Dea Roma!* Matoš says with a touch of bitterness: "We, the Croats, although a classical example of Roman worshippers, a people of travellers... we are still missing a reputable travelogue literature similar to the Roman one".¹⁴ His profound analysis of travelling as a cultural phenomenon is a valuable contribution to a new imagology perusal of the European cultural peripheries. In the travel notes *Ferije* (*Festivities*, 1908) which was born in the aftermath of his fourteen years' exile, Matoš passes a severe judgment: the Croats do not tend to travel, and moreover, they are not familiar with Croatia, and he who does not know himself, will not be capable to gain a knowledge of the world.¹⁵

The author's critical evaluation reveals the permanent contradiction between two types of sensitivity, synchronizing different diachronic aspects. On one hand, he corroborates the idea that every traveller is a precious little stone within the mosaic, which makes the texture of a national travelling culture – a part of the patriotic platform of the romanticists. On the other hand, Matoš represents the individualist of modern times, a man of exile, a pilgrim and a traveller, who cannot sever his ties with the imaginary community, and conjure away from the nightmarish embrace history / nation.¹⁶ Stretched between the European art and the situation in Croatia, Matoš has been inside the ethnocentric individualist's discourse, who dramatically endures his motherland's hardships. The

¹⁴ Matoš, A. G. *Salve, dea Roma*. In: *Sabrana djela, sv. XI*, ur. Sl. Batusić I D. Jelčić, Zagreb: JAZU, 1973, p. 276.

¹⁵ Matoš, A. G. *Oko Zagreba i po Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb: Dom i svijet, 1999, p. 90.

¹⁶ Dean Duda. *Kultura putovanja*. Zagreb: Ljevak, 2012, p. 203.

aesthetics (the so called art-ism), elevated to a supreme principle in his works, life and experience, is being over and over again discredited and bothered by the biographic and political realities. In his travelogue essays the absence of freedom, the exile and the penury in a personal aspect come across the national fortunes, personified by the woeful and wretched motherland Croatia. Such a biased concept of authorship is founded to a certain extent on the romanticist understanding of the genius-author, whose stewardship of beauty is committed to the representative (national) and the universal (worldly-minded) function of the author's work. According to Dubravka Oraic Tolic, A. Matoš during his sojourn in Paris has been in full consonance with the challenges of modernity and advancement, while upon his return to Croatia, he becomes more conservative, worried by the demographic decline of the Croatian lands, by the economic backwardness and foreign domination. While the 'European' Matoš seems to be more focused on the metropolis-city, the 'domestic' Matoš is attracted by tradition, natural landscape and the urban-rural topos.

The Croatian landscape is more than a nextdoor space for him, bound up together with his own memories, pictures, sounds, atmosphere, mood – all that refines and cherishes the national identity in every soul, in each of us, in every new generation. Matoš defines the meaning of his landscape, invigorates it, humanizes it. "Birthplaces are the best biographers..." will he share with us. For him, landscape is, on one hand, a metonymy of nature, a modern European absolute.¹⁷ At the same time, thematizing on it, he adduces therein his national context tied up with the moments of his own suffering, his "Starčević-ianism"¹⁸ and the idyllic Croatian literary tradition tracking it out from Ivan Gundulić through to Franjo Marković. In the travel notes *Kod kuće* (*At home*) and *Oko Lobora* (*Around Lobor*) nature and history fuse and merge, while geography is understood as a temporalized space, an exaltation of the natural and objective landscapes.¹⁹ In the opinion of Matoš, it is not only the human being that has a spiritual make-up, the Earth has it as well, and 'it sings just as our people and history, conversing in a loud voice'.²⁰ A. Matoš's idea of landscape is closest to the ethnic model of construction of national identity worked out by Anthony Smith (National Identity, 1991), whereby landscape is poetized and sacralised, endowing the individuals with the so called "moral geography".

The aesthetic profile of Antun Matoš has turned into a peculiar metaphor of time, in the search for a guiding line of the modern time incarnations of spirit within the frames of national originality.

¹⁷ Matoš, A. G. *Dojmovi i ogledi*. Samobor, 2003, p. 160.

¹⁸ Ante Starčević (1823–1896) was a Croatian politician and writer. He is often referred to as "Father of the Homeland" by Croats.

¹⁹ Matoš, A. G. *Kod kuće*. In: Duda, Dean. *Putopisi*. Vinkovci, 1999, p. 119.

²⁰ Matoš: *Putopisi*, Privlačica, Vinkovci, 1995, p. 73.

To him the destiny has allotted the part of leading the Croatian literature away from the idyllic and sterile childhood, laying the foundations of a truly modernist art. His travel notes are original synthesis between the European context and the ingenious contribution of the Croatian elite to its cultural diversity.