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East-Central European Travel Writing of the Romantic Period: From Theories of Travel to Embodied Experience

A Review of *Romantyczni wojażerowie. Mickiewicza i Słowackiego listy z/o podróży* [Romantic wanderers: Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's letters from/on travel] and *Smak drogi. Podróże chorwackiego romantyzmu (1839–1860)* [Taste of the road: Journeys of Croatian Romanticism (1839–1860)]

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Abstract: This review examines two recent Polish contributions to travel writing studies, both focusing on Romantic-era authors from East-Central Europe. Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković's *Smak drogi. Podróże chorwackiego romantyzmu (1839–1860)* analyzes Croatian travel accounts (1839–1860), emphasizing the multisensory, embodied experience of travel. Through close readings of writers such as Ivan Trnski, Matija Mažuranić, and Adolf Veber Tkalčević, she shows how journeys to Dalmatia, Bosnia, Italy, and the Plitvice Lakes served nation-building projects, often engaging with Orientalism and autoethnography while correcting Western misrepresentations of the region. Magdalena Bąk's *Romantyczni wojażerowie. Mickiewicza i Słowackiego listy z/o podróży* focuses on the correspondence of Polish national poets Adam

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Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, reconstructing their personal theories of travel. Despite stylistic differences—Mickiewicz being more reserved in letters and Słowacki more performative—both poets privileged imagination and memory over direct sensory experience, treating travel as a philosophical and creative act. Pieniążek-Marković's and Bąk's books demonstrate that East-Central European travel writing offers distinctive perspectives: it is deeply shaped by political conditions such as foreign rule and exile, and it often produces more nuanced, locally informed representations than Western European counterparts. The authors' use of sensory analysis, anthropological theory, and Romantic concepts like irony and imagination enriches the broader field, suggesting that travel writing studies can be revitalised by engaging with non-English-language traditions and lesser-known regional corpora.

Keywords: Pieniążek-Marković; Magdalena Bąk; Romantic travel writing; Nation-building; imaginative

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In the introduction to *The Routledge Research Companion to Travel Writing*, Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs list the authors of what they call “foundational works”: Edward Said, Peter Hulme, Mary Louise Pratt, Sara Mills, Mary Baine Campbell, James Buzard, and Paul Fussell (Pettinger & Youngs, 2020, p. 2). Unsurprisingly, all these important scholars worked mostly on Western European, predominantly English-language sources. However, the expansion of travel writing studies means that the non-English-speaking world is engaging in a creative and innovative way with established lines of inquiry epitomized by the aforementioned foundational figures, thus demonstrating the potential of a creative dialogue between different scholarly traditions.

In this review, I would like to discuss two important contributions to travel writing studies by Polish scholars, who examine authors from Slavic nations of East-Central Europe of the Romantic period. The first is *Smak drogi. Podróże chorwackiego romantyzmu* [Taste of the Road: Journeys of Croatian Romanticism (1839–1860)] by Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković; the second is *Romantyczni wojażerowie. Mickiewicza i Słowackiego listy z/o podróży* [Romantic Wanderers: Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's Letters from/on Travel] by Magdalena Bąk. Both books are situated within the already established field of reflection on nineteenth-century Polish travel writing (Budrewicz & Sadlik, 2018; Burkot, 1988) and Croatian travel writing (Duda, 1998), but they take this reflection further than their predecessors. They are concerned with the first half of the nineteenth century, which was of crucial importance for both Polish and Croatian national culture, when both peoples were transforming into modern nations while remaining under foreign rule. The authors discuss not only the place of travel and travel writing in Romantic literature, but also their role in the process of nation-building and their function as a response to changing social and technological conditions. However, despite these similarities, both books do so in different ways.

As the title *Smak drogi* [*Taste of the Road*] suggests, Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković focuses on the embodied experience of travel. As indicated by the author herself in the introduction, she is interested in the multisensory savoring of being on the road and a multifaceted perception of the tasks set before a journey, analyzing how the texts under analysis treat traveling in all its manifestations: being on the road, stopovers, overnight stays, food or its absence, means of transport, the polysensory perception of places and their inhabitants, the quality of the roads traversed, etc. (p. 7). This program is realized through careful close reading of a number of Croatian travel accounts from the period 1839–1860. The book is divided into five chapters of varied length; the second, the longest, is in turn divided into four subchapters. The titles of the chapters refer to different geographical destinations of travelers, but a biographical key is also important. The first chapter takes us to Dalmatia with the pioneer of Croatian Romantic travel writing, Ivan Trnski, whose journeys mark the beginnings of Romantic and national

revival travel literature. The second, by far the longest, chapter turns to Bosnia, first through the lens of Illyrism: the outward-looking, espionage-adventure perspective of Matija Mažuranić, and the inward Franciscan perspectives of Grgo Martić and Ivan Frano Jukić. It then moves to the Bosnia of Yugoslavism, presenting Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski as a nobleman visiting the land of his ancestors, and Adolf Veber Tkalčević as a clergyman traveling to a “sick country” (referring to the popular concept of the Ottoman Empire as a “sick man of Europe”). The third chapter leads us to the “upper lands,” following Stanko Vraz on an ethnographic expedition through Styria, Carniola, and Carinthia. The fourth chapter heads to Italy, where Antun Nemčić Gostovinski journeys toward the Romantic South. Finally, the fifth chapter brings us to the now world-famous Plitvice Lakes, where Adolf Veber Tkalčević’s trip is framed as a broader project of cultural formation.

Pieniążek-Marković’s book thus offers a complex, multifaceted examination of various travel accounts that demonstrates both the variety of Croatian Romantic travel experiences and the function of journeying and writing about it in the national culture of that period. A great strength of the book is its constant dialogue with influential concepts from global travel writing studies and the humanities in general (Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Michel de Certeau’s *space practices*, Kenneth White’s *geopoetics*, Julia Kristeva’s *abject*, Paul Rodaway’s *sensuous geography*, to mention just a few), combined with careful attention to the particularities of Croatian sources and the Croatian cultural context. The journeys that are the subjects of analysis were often closely connected with national revival projects. Visiting provincial and rural areas meant reclaiming them as parts of the Croatian homeland. Crossing the nearby border into Bosnia, a country geographically very close and populated by Slavic peoples, but dominated by believers in Islam and then under Ottoman rule, meant an encounter with the Oriental Other and simultaneously with internal others. Going north, to Venice, somewhat paradoxically became a form of dialogue with the vision of the Romantic South. During their journeys, travellers assumed the roles of anthropologists, ethnographers, historians, and geographers, inscribing visited places into the Croatian

national imaginarium. Importantly, one characteristic aspect of Croatian travel writing was the “correcting” of Western representations of Southeastern Europe, assuming the mantle of so-called “autoethnography” (Pratt, 2008). As indicated by Pieniążek-Marković, especially in the case of Bosnia, Croatian travel accounts contain much detailed information about ethnic and religious differentiation that was difficult for foreigners to notice. Generally, the long chapter on Bosnia might be considered the most interesting part of the book. The liminal character of that country in the Croatian imagination made it an attractive subject for travel writers. It was a geographically close area populated by Slavs, but it also represented Oriental otherness. It was at the same time admired for its natural beauty, despised for its backwardness, perceived as dangerous, and pitied as “our lost land.” Additionally, this is the only chapter that engages with more than one author, and the juxtaposition of different travel experiences enables Pieniążek-Marković to vividly demonstrate various Croatian discourses of the first half of the nineteenth century. For example, Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski presented a positive image of Bosnia as a cradle of many Croatian noble houses, representing an aristocratic sensibility, whereas Franciscan religious authors described the country as a “devastated Arcadia,” where the beauty of nature was spoiled by absurd and oppressive foreign rule.

The second of the reviewed books, Magdalena Bąk’s *Romantyczni wojażerowie. Mickiewicza i Słowackiego listy z/o podróży* [*Romantic Wanderers: Mickiewicz’s and Słowacki’s Letters from/on Travel*], takes a different approach to the topic of Romantic travel, which is visible already in the title. First, while Pieniążek-Marković had a corpus of several writers, Magdalena Bąk focuses on just two, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki. However, these two are literary giants, national poets considered absolutely key figures not only in Polish literature of the Romantic period, but in the history of Polish culture in general, and who, especially Mickiewicz, also had a significant impact on world literature. Second, whereas Pieniążek-Marković analyzes multisensory experiences of being on the road and images of visited places, Bąk, though no stranger to this line of inquiry, pursues the original aim of reconstructing not the travels of

Słowacki and Mickiewicz themselves, but their personal theories of travel as expressed in their correspondence. As such, Bąk demonstrates that travel writing studies can offer a fresh perspective even on authors as well studied as Mickiewicz and Słowacki. Her book is divided into four chapters. The first examines the role of travel in the biographies of Mickiewicz and Słowacki, situating their journeys within Romantic ideas and practices of travel. The second chapter analyzes Mickiewicz's letters and reconstructs his distinctive understanding of travel. The third chapter explores Słowacki's correspondence and presents his vision of travel as self-fashioning and performance. The fourth chapter compares how the two poets perceived travel, highlighting both similarities and differences. The conclusion summarizes the findings and shows how travel experiences influenced the works and poetic imagination of both authors.

Due to the political situation, both Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki spent most of their adult lives outside the historical Polish lands. They often changed their places of residence (Switzerland, Italy, France) and undertook numerous shorter trips, often very important for their literary works (such as Słowacki's journey to Egypt and the Holy Land, and Mickiewicz's trip to Crimea); both also died abroad. To better understand what concepts of travel and travel writing may have resulted from such life conditions, Magdalena Bąk carefully discusses terms such as emigration, travel, displacement, exile, and expatriation, demonstrating the fuzzy boundaries between them and showing how, in the course of their lives, Mickiewicz and Słowacki changed their attitudes toward mobility and living abroad – for example, for both of them Paris eventually acquired the characteristics of a long-term place of residence. Her approach to this issue is very helpful for scholars studying other works by expatriate individuals.

Bąk's examination of Słowacki's and Mickiewicz's works is simultaneously very well supported by contemporary theories of travel writing and deeply grounded in familiarity with nineteenth-century historical and cultural contexts. The Polish scholar not only demonstrates how the political context influenced the two poets' lives and writings, but also refers to such fundamental phenomena as Romantic irony, the

Romantic concept of imagination, and the impact of technological changes. She interestingly locates the period under scrutiny in the transitional moment between the end of the Grand Tour and the birth of modern tourism. Her analysis reveals sharp contrasts between Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's styles of travel and travel writing, but also a similarity on a deeper level, in their philosophical ideas concerning the aims of journeying. Adam Mickiewicz, in his letters, did not write much about visited places; his usual strategy was to enumerate the names of monuments, peoples, and cities, leaving a trace of his travel exploits but not describing them elaborately. For him, the proper place for expressing travel impressions was poetry, based on metaphor and idealization. Juliusz Słowacki was different: he wrote much more about his travel activities and more openly theorized about traveling. He engaged in such practices as buying souvenirs, dressing in local clothes, and relishing descriptions of visited landscapes and conventional tourist behaviors. At the same time, he did not grant primacy to direct experience, but rather to the synthesizing and creative power of memory and imagination, which fashions from images and recollections the most beautiful vision of the world (p. 251). In his letters, Słowacki declared the necessity of cooperation between perception, imagination, and memory. He also repeatedly drew attention to the discrepancy between one's imagined vision of a place and its "real" appearance when encountered by the traveler. Consequently, and this is a very valuable result of Bąk's investigation, it can be noticed that despite the difference in style, both Mickiewicz and Słowacki considered imagination and memory fundamental factors in travel experience. Additionally, for both of them traveling did not mean simply moving from one place to another, nor was it merely a leisure practice, while writing about it did not mean the simple, direct transfer of impressions to paper. For Mickiewicz and Słowacki, fragments of travel events gradually came together to form an image of the human being in the full complexity and ambiguity of experiences and emotions (p. 248).

Obviously, the short summaries presented above do not exhaust the richness of the material and reflection presented in Pieniążek-Marković's and Bąk's works; however, they allow us to conclude this brief review with two important questions: What image

of East-Central European travel writing emerges from these two books? And what do they contribute to travel writing studies from a more general perspective? What is especially worth noticing is the importance of the local cultural, social, and political context for understanding Polish and Croatian travel practices, which also reveals many aspects absent from Western travel writing conventions. The political context directs our attention to the importance of travel writing as a patriotic activity, as pointed out by Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković, and to the particular condition of expatriation, as in the case of the writers analysed by Magdalena Bąk. However, the particularities of the East-Central European travel writings scrutinized in both books do not end with the political context. For example, Croatian travel writings about Bosnia, due to historical and cultural connections, offer a much richer variety of voices than many Western European travel writings (Jezernik, 2004; Todorova, 2009). Whereas Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki visited many destinations that were standard stops on nineteenth-century itineraries, their written responses, shaped by their poetic genius, were anything but conventional. Both reviewed books are also highly valuable because of their multipronged approach, involving sensory analysis, the use of anthropological theories, and the application of contemporary reflection on Romantic concepts such as irony and imagination. Especially in the case of Bąk's book, the main premise of her investigation—namely, using correspondence to reconstruct authors' theories of travel writing—is extremely inspiring and can fruitfully be applied to other authors and periods.

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