

East Looks West: East European Travel Writing on Europe

Wendy Bracewell

(Pub. in *Călători români in Occident (Romanian Travellers in the West)*, ed. by Nicolae Bocşan & Ioan Bolovan (Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Cultural Român, 2004, pp. 11-23.)

Travel and travel writing have recently emerged as important subjects of academic analysis in their own right. Historians have long used travel accounts as sources for the history of a particular area or period, while literary scholars have used travel writings as a way of illuminating the development of genres generally seen as having higher prestige, such as novels or poetry. More recently, though, attention to both travel and travel writing has engendered new areas of interest. Travel and travel texts seem to offer new ways of approaching questions of what we know, how we know it, and what we do with this knowledge – as well as asking who is included and who excluded by that apparently innocuous term: ‘we’. Some of the issues addressed include travel as cultural encounter, exchange or translation; the relative importance of textual and historical (social, political) determinants in travel writings; the relationship between knowledge and power in travel texts treating other cultures in an imperial or colonial context.

This last theme, influenced above all by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), and his discussion of the ways the West has represented, defined and asserted power over the Orient (simultaneously defining the Western self in relation to an oriental Other), has been influential well beyond the specific area of the Middle East treated in his work. A growing body of work has applied the perspectives of the Orientalist and colonial/post-colonial critique to the mental map of Europe. Important recent works have analysed the imaginative construction of Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the eyes of the West, relying heavily on travel writing by British and French authors. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe* (1994), Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania* (1998) and other writers have focused especially on the rhetorical tropes and stereotypical images found in travel texts and popular fiction in order to trace the ways ‘the West’ has defined Eastern Europe or the Balkans as ambiguously European or as an ‘internal other’ to Western Europe, in a process of Western *self*-definition as much as anything else.

This work has been tremendously useful, particularly in making us acknowledge the ways that concepts of Europe and its divisions have been constructed, and are not necessarily ‘natural’. This realization also raises questions about the cultural, social and political characteristics assumed to attach to Europe’s sub-units, and even more about the functions such assumptions serve, and their consequences. But this focus on Western imaginative geographies also has its problems. The concentration on Western perceptions tends to imply that ‘Eastern Europe’ (and indeed, Europe as a whole) is a by-product of Western self-imagining. Leaving aside the issue of whether these perceptions can be linked to concrete circumstances in particular places in the East of Europe (is there *anything* outside of the text?), the implication is that the people of Eastern Europe played no part in their own identity construction. More worryingly, perhaps, in political terms, such an approach implies that since they have had no agency in the way Europe (and their own relationship to it) has been defined, they also have no responsibility – a theme which has been present in some of the

discussions around the role of Europe and the Great Powers in Balkan conflicts (and especially in the Yugoslav wars).

Such critiques suggest the utility of a set of studies such as that initiated in this volume of studies, examining travellers from the Romanian lands to the Occident, or in the broader project at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, 'East Looks West', collating and analysing the writings of East European travellers to Western Europe. This shift in perspective raises any number of possible new topics, some of them explored in this volume. But in particular, it draws attention to the importance of local – East European -- understandings of Europe, and the many different ways in which such understandings have been used within these societies. 'Europe' emerges as something more complex, and East European relations to Europe as more creative and more diverse, than the Orientalist-inspired approach might suggest.

Having noted that the shift to 'East travelling West' offers new approaches and new insights, it's worth asking how we are to approach the subject. The 'East looks West' project has chosen to concentrate primarily upon travel writing, and on the ways East Europeans position themselves and their societies with reference to ideas of Europe and the West in and through these texts. In what follows, I'd like to sketch some of the assumptions that have structured our approach, sketch some preliminary generalizations about discourses of identity that appear in these texts, and suggest some of the advantages and disadvantages of going about the task in this particular way.

We have started from the assumption that research of this kind is best carried out on a comparative and interdisciplinary basis. In the first place, to compare travel writing across national and linguistic divisions, it's necessary to have a clear idea of what each separate tradition entails (and this underlines the utility of a volume such as this, exploring travel and travel writing from within the Romanian lands). But broader comparisons can help us decide whether there are common patterns in travel writing, or whether there is anything that is unusual or unique, whether to a specific writer or a particular society. Ideally, the framework for comparison would be much broader: would we get a different picture if we looked at writers from Scandinavia, or Portugal, or indeed any European periphery? Is there anything specific to Eastern Europe, particularly in its relations to Europe – as the structure of our project might imply? And is 'Eastern Europe' adequate as a category of analysis? Without comparison within and across the boundaries of the area, it's difficult to say.

Secondly, looking at travel writing involves *both* an understanding of literary genre and textual strategies *and* an analysis of the material circumstances (and particularly the relations of power) within which travel texts were produced. The particular character of travel writing seems to demand this sort of interdisciplinary approach particularly urgently since on the one hand travel writing often purports to represent observed reality straight-forwardly and objectively, and bases its claims to authority on first-hand experience; on the other hand, its 'literary' character is often quite close to the surface. This is evident in the ways that these writings are often as much about other texts as they are about the ostensible object being observed, and in the ways they make use of rhetorical strategies to achieve their effects. Travel writing is neither an unproblematic historical source (but what sources are? all historical

sources demand attention to their textuality), nor an autonomous, un-socially mediated creation (but again...attempts to understand any text benefit from historical contextualization). The problem is to see travel writing in terms of both text and context, while doing justice to both – and our solution has been to attempt this using the tools of both literary and historical analysis.

I've already hinted that the East European framework we have chosen might be problematic. We've found the notion useful as a heuristic device, though not a totally arbitrary one. It can be argued that there is a *degree* of coherence in the relation between Europe's East and West, both because of the way that the concept of 'Eastern Europe' has been present in Western accounts, and because of significant asymmetries of power between East and West, articulated in changing ways over the last 200 years or so. But at the same time, we need to be conscious of variation across the region and change over time. Is the relation to Europe always the same, for Greeks, Romanians, Hungarians, Poles? I doubt it. But this illustrates what I mean by saying that Eastern Europe is a useful heuristic device, in calling attention to these variations and in breaking up the notion of a single coherent entity through the process of comparison.

Larry Wolff has shown how the conventional imaginative division of Europe into West and East emerged in the eighteenth century, mapping both the shift from a North-South economic and political division of the continent and the West's economic takeoff in contrast to the East (and other peripheral regions); and how Enlightenment observers characterized the East's economic, social and political difference in temporal and moral terms as backwardness, primitivism, and irrationality. This reinforced Western self-perceptions, and at the same time helped underpin relations of Western (economic, political) domination and Eastern subordination. Whether these relations can be understood in terms of the historically specific notions of colonialism and imperialism is a matter of debate. For our purposes, it is perhaps more useful to think in terms of a core-periphery relationship, with our region more or less at the margins (and with very significant variations in their relations with the centre). The crucial point here is not so much the degree of subordination, but rather the fact that both East and West are conceptually part of the same system. Whatever its relations to the centre, or to ideas of modernity or progress understood as 'western', Eastern Europe is nonetheless geographically and imaginatively a part of Europe, not a separate entity. Scholars such as Maria Todorova have seen the resulting perceptions of Eastern ambiguity and liminality as important to Western discourses on the Balkans, but much less attention has been paid to what such ambiguities – European, but not always 'Western' -- have meant in Eastern Europe.

One of our assumptions has been that these asymmetrical relationships have influenced discourses of identity on Europe's Eastern margins – and that looking at travel writing on Europe might be a good way of teasing these out. Such travels confront our writers with the issue of their place in Europe and the world; such writings require them to represent themselves (whether as individuals or members of a collective) to an audience with a shared frame of reference. Their positions within Europe may be subaltern, and they may find themselves working with a pre-existing vocabulary of images and stereotypes, but they are far from voiceless. In their writings, we can see their response to the perceptions held by others and the ways that

they reject, adapt or ignore Western representations -- in short, the creative and dynamic construction of images of themselves and others. We can also begin to trace the uses to which their discourses of identity and difference are put for a domestic audience.

What textual patterns emerge from the historical context of asymmetry within the single geographical and imaginative framework of Europe? It is certainly possible to identify common themes that appear to relate to the conditions I've described.

One such set of patterns in East European travel writing mirrors Western constructions of the East, in the ways that aspects of modernity are singled out and are named 'Europe' or the West. This habit gives shape to the frequent musings on 'where does Europe begin and end?' The answer depends on a whole range of criteria according to the precise boundary being established, but the criteria are generally generally reducible to economic development, political institutions, and social forms. Modernity becomes the essence of Western Europe, in Eastern as well as Western eyes, in a logic that privileges origins and geography over process and history. Accepting this has consequences for the dependent economies and societies of Eastern Europe, in that it inevitably renders them dubiously European, in spite of their geography. The resulting sense of unease and ambivalence is apparent in a good deal of East European travel writing. But it should be noted that the theme of 'where Europe begins' appears not just in travels across the continent, but also in analyses of more local geographies. The language of spatial differentiation was also used for divisions at home: differences between the urban and the rural, differences of class, gender, religion, or nation. Characterizing these in terms of Europe/not-Europe could serve domestic political agendas – and could offer a different way of positioning yourself with reference to Europe. East European travel writing that equates modernization with the West may unsettle comfortable elite notions of a common Europeanness, but it can also confer authority on that same elite at home.

But the phenomena associated with modernity are not the only criteria of Europeanness found in these writings. At particular times, specific values are codified as both universal and as defining qualities of Europe. Travellers in Europe regularly assess themselves and their societies with reference to these qualities (rationality, authenticity, originality, cleanliness, and so on), with varying textual results (constructing accounts that imply, for instance, 'I/we are more European than they are'; or 'our efforts to be European are form without content, are inauthentic'). At the same time, they hold others, and particularly the lands they are travelling through, to the same standards. And here too the results can vary (producing such readily recognizable themes as: 'they say *we* are uncivilized, you should see how *they* live'; or 'they have declined, we are now the true heirs of European civilization'). If travels in Europe have provoked self-critique, they have also provided a means of self-affirmation in comparison to Western models, using Western criteria.

A second set of patterns deriving from Eastern Europe's problematic place within Europe has to do with the traveller's sense of being observed and categorized, as opposed to observing. A striking number of texts I've been reading describe a common experience in the course of European travels: that of not being recognized for what you are (or what you think you are), being seen as alien, or exotic, or as somehow fraudulent (not living up to a stereotype, especially not being exotic

enough); or worse, as incomplete (only 'semi-European', semi-civilized). In short, our travellers find themselves being treated in ways that don't correspond to their own self-image. This is not at all unique to East Europeans, of course: travellers are always being looked at, as well as looking, and they are frequently disconcerted at being mis-placed. But this consciousness of being mis-recognized in a Europe which at the same time is understood as *one's own world* seems to be a key issue in much East European travel writing. Some of the questions that arise include: What does it mean to belong, under these circumstances, or to be seen as being different? Who decides if we fit in, or not, according to what criteria? What does it mean that we know more about them, than they know about us? What should we do about it (if anything)?

It would be possible to go further in identifying other ways in which the particular circumstances of Eastern Europe contributed to the development of discursive patterns in travel writing the last two centuries, and distinguishing variations across the region as well as similarities and differences with the non-Western world.

.....belated, second-hand

...not really interested in finding exotic other in Europe, rather in placing self in relation to Europe (they-are-so-strange mostly English)

But here I'd like to try and use the material sketched so far to attempt some preliminary generalizations about some of the rhetorical strategies found in East European travel writing. The point is to simplify fairly drastically in order to try to establish general patterns as a way of eventually moving toward a more complex and nuanced understanding.

I think it's possible to identify three major, complementary strands in discourses of identity in East European travel writing over the last two hundred years or so. I'm going to label them Orientalism, Occidentalism and Cosmopolitanism. All of them are to some extent counter-discourses, in the sense that they are in part responses to Western images of the East (or European internal orientalism, if you like). They do not develop in isolation, but rather in relation to Western European perceptions of the rest of the world, including the East of Europe. And all of them are at the same time alteritist discourses of identity which operate dialectically, creating a Self in opposition to an Other, however that other might be defined.

The **Orientalist** strand follows the familiar pattern of Edward Said's discourse of Western Self and Oriental Other, operating with the usual set of polarities (progress/backwardness, reason/emotion, change/stasis, male/female) that produce essentialized notions of East and West defined in opposition to one another. East European travel writing about the further-East repeats many of these tropes, and to similar purposes: creating a (usually) self-congratulatory image of the East European self as uncontestedly European in contrast to the Orient. But, in addition, these East/West distinctions are appropriated to include or exclude groups closer to home (this strategy has been analysed as 'internal' or 'nesting orientalism' in a Balkan context).

There are two things about the uses of Orientalism as a way of talking about relations to Europe that are particularly interesting in the context of East European travel writing. The first is the way this strategy is used to set up a hierarchy of

'Europeanness' *within* the continent ('regardless of geography, we are more European than, say, the Italians, who are dirty, lazy, corrupt, and so on') or within the writer's own society (disenfranchising domestic others – women, minorities, social classes, political parties – by associating them with the East). The second is the way that it implies the writer's identification with a specific definition of the West, with characteristics that are both idealized and desired (and note that these characteristics can vary a great deal, depending on the circumstances, as with any Orientalism). [This second aspect can also be seen when EE Twers do discover an exotic other – usually the English – and use them to affirm their own Europeanness, though gen not using Orientalist polarities....]

Occidentalism is also a discourse on the West and one's relation to it. In East European travel writing it is not simply the reverse of Orientalism, though Orientalism certainly helps produce it (as implied above, every Orientalism implies a particular sort of Occident). Unlike Said's Orientalism, East European Occidentalism is not about having power or authority over the West, except to the extent that it is about knowing, describing, defining. This is largely because it's a matter of the writer representing the West to his own society – it's not a case of the Empire writing back, as is the case in post-colonial literature in English, addressed to the metropolis as much as to the colonized. (Though, as suggested above, characterizations of West and East might be used to assert control over *domestic* others.) Nor, I think, is it quite like full-blown Chinese Occidentalism, a straight-forward self-defining alteritist discourse about imputed opposition.

Because of the specific circumstances of Eastern Europe -- within a Europe that is shared, but not experienced equally – East European Occidentalism is not (or not always): 'the West is like this; we are the opposite'. Rather, it asks: 'if the West is like this, how do we stand in relation to it?'. East European Occidentalism permits answers covering a range of possibilities of defining the self. One of these might be opposition, and self-Orientalization, whether of the celebratory variety (e.g. 'our spiritual richness in contrast to soulless Western consumerism') or the lachrymose ('what hope is there for Orientals like us?'). The opposite pole might be complete alignment and self-Occidentalization, whether this is presented as a future that must be pursued ('we must overcome our backwardness and catch up'), assertions of equality, or of superiority ('we are the last bastion of true European values').

The proliferation of contradictory statements about the East European self in relation to the West raises the question of whether such Orientalism/Occidentalism allows more ambiguous and nuanced notions of belonging within a divided Europe? I think not: the very nature of alteritist discourse imposes dualism and a choice between two alternatives. Where you position yourself with reference to the East/West divide, and the positive or negative valence attached to either side, can vary quite a lot. But both Orientalism and Occidentalism take for granted the fundamental importance of the division in defining identity and difference.

This is not obviously the case with what I want to call **Cosmopolitanism**, where the apparent effect is to negate and deny the salience of an East-West difference (at least as far as one's self is concerned). At first sight this might seem quite different to Orientalism or Occidentalism – less a form of alteritist discourse than about

inclusiveness and disinterested humanism. But, oddly, cosmopolitanism as an identity discourse rarely operates on a cosmic scale or even a human-race one.

Though cosmopolitanism generally is set in opposition to national or civilizational divisions, the criteria by which it defines belonging have varied (and need to be treated historically). We might single out several examples:

--A religiously-based universalism (but more usually limited to Christians, or Catholics, or Protestants) which underpins not only the pilgrimage account, in which European space is understood as constructed according to a religiously shaded map, but also the anti-pilgrimage ('these Catholics, or Protestants, or whatever – are appalling, not at all like us'). Religious boundaries can of course reinforce the East/West divide, given the importance attached to the role of the Eastern and Western Churches in defining it in the first place, but can also erase it, when the emphasis is put on a common Christianity, or on any shared faith that crosses this notional frontier.

--The 'Republic of Letters', which assumes a community of culture and learning. Here the sites of pilgrimage are libraries, universities, writers and poets, and the prize is recognition and acceptance of the traveller by distinguished (Western) cultural figures on equal terms, suggesting that this cosmopolitanism of culture can hide a sort of covert Eurocentrism. This definition of inclusiveness operates by excluding the irrational and the barbaric (implying Eurocentrism once again) – but it can also exclude the uncultured and Philistine masses, or the materialist world of capitalism as opposed to the values of 'true culture';

--In contrast, what we might call a sort of Diners Club cosmopolitanism of economic power and *savoir faire* (what we think of as characterizing 'a man of the world'), used to draw a line between the traveller whose resources (a privileged mobility, experience, discernment) permit him to make his own choices and, for example, the *gastarbeiter*, doomed to remain in the Balkans wherever he actually is, because of his lack of money, experience, choice...

The point is that all these cosmopolitan criteria of inclusion and exclusion challenge the primacy of the East/West divide within Europe, and at the same time challenge definitions of belonging which exclude or disenfranchise the East European travel writer. At the same time, as with other discourses of identity, cosmopolitanism can act as a way of reinforcing or obscuring hierarchies *within* the writer's own society. This strategy isn't different in kind from other alteritist discourses of identity such as Orientalism or Occidentalism, and it doesn't ignore issues of power: it just draws the map in a different way – though, as I have suggested, it sometimes recreates East/West divisions under a different name.

What I've sketched out here is a preliminary attempt to understand the ways the imaginative structures of travel writing work, and to consider some of the ideological aspects of these texts. This is also a good way of getting us to think in comparative terms across national boundaries. But I want to make the point that this sort of approach, especially on its own, can be dangerously limited, and leaves out some important ways of thinking about travel writing on Europe and its functions.

One problem that I've already hinted at is that of change over time. I've been discussing the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because I've put the stress on the particular circumstances of an Eastern Europe located at the periphery of a divided

Europe, and because I've been concerned with the ways these circumstances underwrite particular themes in travel writing. I've ignored questions of when these motifs emerge, how have they altered, under what circumstances are they more or less important. This is not necessarily a conceptual problem – an analysis of rhetorical strategies, within a regional and chronological frame work, ought to be able to *identify* change and variation. *Accounting* for it may be a different matter, though. We need to be able to think about the ways the connections between material circumstances and literary expression work. Given the task we have set ourselves, of understanding East European discourses of identity through travel accounts, an autonomous literary history of travel writing will not be enough. But what sort of contextualization is appropriate?

A related issue, though maybe more problematic, is the *scale* of the comparative framework I've emphasized here, and the breadth of my generalizations. In identifying recurrent themes and analyzing figurative language, the tendency is to give what might be called an 'average' account of perceptions, to flatten out variation and specificity, to bundle together quite different circumstances and purposes. The answer here is the same: we need to contextualize more carefully. But again the question arises: what context will we emphasize? I have argued for the importance of the centre-periphery asymmetry of power that developed in Europe from the eighteenth century. However, there are many possible centres -- and the differences between them matter in terms of the literary expressions that result. There are also many different social positions. Particular positions can't always be forced into one preconceived pattern based on East/West dichotomies, even if this is what we take as an initial starting point. We must ask: is it the same for a writer from the nineteenth-century Habsburg periphery; or a late-Ottoman Bosnian or Albanian writer looking both east and west simultaneously; or a writer from one of the newly independent inter-war states facing a choice between French and German models? How is it different for a Hungarian countess and a Karlovac seamstress travelling in Europe? And how is the politics of location expressed their travel accounts?

In short, we need to ask much more carefully who is writing, and when, and why – to take seriously the conditions of the production of our texts. We also need to be aware that a concentration on travel *writing* and on a quite specific genre of writing (necessarily produced by an educated minority) imposes a rather limited field on our investigations. We must recognize that we are excluding the travels – and the perceptions – of a substantial proportion of the population, such as itinerant workers, refugees and, until comparatively recently, women. To claim that this is not an issue, since we have phrased our research into East European identities in terms of a particular body of texts is true, but also evades the larger question. How might their travels and their perceptions have contributed to perceptions of self in relation to Europe – and what tools can we use to pursue this question?

A rather different problem with the focus on themes and techniques in travel writing is that you can lose sight of their functions. I've tried to make some reference here to the uses characterizations of self and other with reference to Europe might have in a domestic context. But I'd also like to draw attention to the ways the same discursive patterns can have strikingly different political purposes, and can contribute to very different domestic agendas. One example might be the way an East/West dichotomy based on progress and backwardness might be used as *either* an argument for

modernization on a Western model and 'catching up'; *or* a critique of westernization and the basis for a nationalist programme based on 'indigenous' values. East European travel writings can use the language of spatial differentiation to talk about other things (consumption, relations between men and women, urban-rural tensions) when what is at issue is not necessarily the 'East' or the 'West' at all. We should not be so focused on the ways that Eastern Europe relates to the West that this is *all* we pick up. Other issues or agendas can be treated in the language of East/West divisions, and domestic politics need taking into account.

My final reservation about the approach to East European travel writing I've sketched out here has to do with our focus on identity and writing-as-means-to-power. Travel writing is excellent for analyzing these issues, because of the way that it is so concerned with place and difference, as well as because of its claim to be non-fiction and the authority that derives from that stance. But travel writing can also embody highly individual responses to circumstance and stimulus. Our approach tends to filter out the exceptional and the individual because it doesn't fit into the patterns we are tracing. What should we do with accounts that seem to ignore issues of European identity completely? One possibility might be to subject them to a process of 'contrapuntal' reading against the grain of the text, seeing this absence as significant - though we might question whether this adaptation of post-colonial deconstruction is necessary or even appropriate in a tradition in which the East European subject is hardly voiceless, and indeed speaks out about identity issues quite loudly and explicitly. It seems to me that this would be to do considerable violence to such texts. And what about travel accounts that are more concerned with form and with play, than with content and observation? The study of discourse is necessarily a study of collective representation. But this is not to say that the individual and ungeneralizable is not significant or interesting. The challenge is to find a way of embracing both the collective and the unique.

All these caveats lead to much the same conclusion: an approach to travel writing that concentrates on content and technique at the expense of context and function is inadequate for an understanding of the discourses of identity in these texts. But just as an autonomous literary history is not enough, neither is an approach in which literary expression is reduced to its social and political context.