

## Milutinović - What did Rastko Petrović learn in Africa?

## Oh, to be a European! What did Rastko Petrović learn in Africa?<sup>1</sup>

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Africa has no end and is bereft of people, thought Rastko Petrović while travelling through Libya in 1928. One can travel through it for days on end and never meet a single living soul. Nevertheless, at every moment somewhere in the endlessness of people-less Africa someone invisible and determined is trying to squeeze a drop of water from the parched ground. 'And one only has to realise', writes Petrović, 'how feverish and almost absurd the centuries-long struggle of that someone with nature is, all for a measly bite, to be proud or even conceited for belonging to a more rational race. Everything I thought could be reduced to: not being a European, what conceit! Not to be a European, what conceit! And still I know that only a European can fecundate such ground and whole continents! These hills will be covered with olive trees and palm trees, and their golden bunches of dates will sway towards the sky. Songs and dances will be heard from villages that will spring up here, and joy brought about by palm-wine will flow, as it did the other day in the oasis. Through the beauty of the wine I might have thought that by any means, to be the Earth among all heavenly bodies, and to be a European among all the races!'<sup>2</sup>

Rastko Petrović (1898-1949) was as European as one could be. He went to school in Nice, studied in Paris, served in Rome, Chicago, and Washington as a diplomat, and he travelled extensively not only throughout Europe, but in Africa, Turkey, Mexico, Cuba and Canada. Although he left a travelogue after almost every journey, there is nothing about his understanding of Europe to be found in his letters from Spain and Italy. There is a letter from Rome, for instance, in which he writes about a dinner party during which Marcel Proust had been discussed. What else could one write home about from Rome? Those who might have read his travelogue from Rome published in a Belgrade literary magazine had already seen Rome. Petrović wrote for a cosmopolitan generation which had its own memories of Toledo or Cordoba, whose members studied at European universities, served as diplomats in European capitals, reported from Europe as journalists, or simply travelled in Europe for the sake of their own pleasure. But not everybody might have heard of Proust, who in the twenties was not widely read even in Paris: this was something worth writing about from Rome. As with many other members of his literary generation, Petrović was at home in Europe. And, he was undoubtedly conceited for it.

### Just looking

In the same year in which he travelled to Libya, Petrović undertook a more ambitious and difficult journey: four thousand kilometres across Guinea, Sierra Leone, the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Upper Volta, Nigeria, Sudan and Senegal. *Africa* is the record of this journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis (eds.): *Under Eastern Eyes: Studies in East European Travel Writing*; Budapest: CEU Press, (expected publication date late 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Rastko Petrović, 'Libija', in idem, *Putopisi* (Belgrade, 1977), 137.

Much as every travel writer, Petrović legitimises his text in a traditional way: 'I am writing only what a traveller can conclude as a traveller: by observing.'<sup>3</sup> As a travel writer one is a witness, observer, registrar, archivist of the visible. One records only what can be seen, one does not add or subtract. How else could one demand the attention of a reader? A reader will grant his trust to a travel writer only under the condition that can be - paraphrasing Lejeune's autobiographical pact<sup>4</sup> - called the *travelogical pact*: you've been where I haven't, and probably never will, so tell me what you've seen, don't confabulate, don't skip anything, just register the visible.

Nevertheless, already at the beginning of *Africa*, in the description of Petrović's first day on African soil, it can be seen that this pact has been amended by a first annex. Petrović sees his 'first naked black woman' (202). This very formulation is indicative of his expectations to see naked African women, of his hope to see them, and here they are – this is the first one, and she really is naked, the first sign of visual pleasure that awaits him on the long journey, the first confirmation that this promised enjoyment as a compensation for thirst, danger and lack of comfort will not be denied him. And then comes the second naked woman, then the third... 'I am all the more excited by these women', writes the registrar, 'as they perfectly resemble the old engravings which I found as a boy reading old travelogues and novels' (203). The archivist has come straight out of the archive: he will observe with his eyes wide open, but these eyes already know what there is to be seen in Africa. They have learnt it reading old travelogues and novels in which everything Africa offers to be viewed has already been archived. His excitement is all the more stronger as it makes the recognition of what has not been seen before possible. Petrović has not arrived in Africa alone, his imaginary has accompanied him: partly personal, individual and psychological, partly collective and cultural, as a personal selection from a vast archive of existing representations whose origins are lost in the past. His imaginary travels with him or ahead of him, and covers African hills, rivers, plains, and villages as a huge shadow even before Petrović's arrival.

And Africa does indeed fulfil the promises of his imaginary. This traveller who traverses savannah and jungle with a white evening suit in his suitcase, in case he comes across a house of European colonists and receives an invitation to dinner, during long, hot days has the opportunity to enjoy observing *bodies*: naked bodies 'harmonic and muscular' (211), bodies of 'athletic young men, completely naked (...) with long backs, narrow hips, straight and strong legs' (212), 'with no fat at all, no overdeveloped muscles' (227), bodies 'almost filigree-like in their musculature' (241), girls' 'breasts cold and firm, straight and pear-like and heavy'(294)... It would be impossible to list all the monotonous descriptions of the most beautiful bodies Petrović had ever seen (335), for it would amount to repeating almost the whole of *Africa*, a text, which to a large extent is composed of descriptions of big and strong youths, their childish faces and slim gigantic bodies, which are completely naked (335), and girls who in a single move remove the cloths wrapped around their waists and stand still and shameless, as perfect as a single muscle covered with dark splendid skin (208). The bodies are so different from anything this traveller has seen in Europe: 'from an early age', writes Petrović, 'the European face is weary and tormented by the unending, often unhealthy task of thinking.

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<sup>3</sup> Rastko Petrović, 'Afrika', *Putopisi*, 333. All subsequent references to *Afrika* are to this edition and are given in brackets in the main text.

<sup>4</sup> Phillippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975).

As if after a storm, a white face is destroyed by longings, worries, and abstractions. I am not saying that it makes a white face inferior to a black one; on the contrary, it is obvious that the white pay for their superiority with their beauty' (211). Careless and thought-free Africa appears as a huge naked body, young and firm, muscular and slim, offering itself calmly and shamelessly to the eye of a traveller.

Not only to the eye though: Africa's body offers itself freely and shamelessly to a traveller's hand as well. The European gentleman with the white evening suit in his suitcase welcomes non-Europeans sexual *moeurs*: as there is no sense of ownership (332), the relationship between men and women is also 'strange' (314). Any man can be with any other woman (314). A husband can offer his wife to someone, and 'refusing would be impolite' (313). 'It is notorious', writes Petrović, 'how much a black man, who does not know jealousy the way we do, is honoured when a white man turns his attention to his wife or daughter' (207). During an overnight stay in a village, while the men are already in their sleeping bags on the ground, the village women come to clean up what was left after dinner. 'They passed by so close, jumping over the sleepers, that we touched their bodies without getting up. Those bodies were smooth and firm, and tartly smelled of dried tropical fruit. For a moment they would stop and stand above us, obediently, without making a sound (...) There was no danger that someone would see what was happening, for no one would be either puzzled or enraged by it.' (305). On another occasion Petrović observes how a young man, as handsome as Michelangelo's *David*, during a mock boxing match with one of Petrović's fellow-travellers tries to protect a yellow-grayish spot on his chest whenever he believes that it could be hit. The curious traveller asks for an explanation, and learns that the youth is, just as many other Africans, sick with leprosy. If this spot gets hurt, it would turn into an open wound which would never heal, and his end would not be far. 'Never have I been so scared in my life', writes Petrović, 'for my hands have, forced by circumstances, touched these spots who knows how many times.' (284) What circumstances force one to touch naked bodies numberless times in Africa, and why these circumstances are not present in Paris or Belgrade, the author does not explain.

This is just a small part of the hospitality with which Africa receives a traveller. If he and his retinue were to arrive in a village in the dead of night, uninvited and unannounced, the villagers would wake up a whole family and hurry them out of their hut so that the unexpected guests could be comfortable. May, a young and successful African businessman, notices that Petrović sleeps without a pillow, much as everybody else, and offers him his own pillow, even though he needs it himself. The tribes Petrović visits speak languages which lack the possessive genitive, and even when they master French they keep expressing possession in a descriptive way: not 'my glass', but 'a glass for me'. If they happen to make any money, they either spend it on drink or leave it in the first village they pass through. African hosts give their European guests everything they own: their houses, their food, their beds, their only pillows, their women, even their own bodies, and do not ask for anything in return, they do not even ask for the name of the unexpected guest. This is the absolute, unconditional hospitality, which Derrida writes about in *Of Hospitality*: 'the absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.) but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I

offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.<sup>5</sup> Not to be a European, what conceit! If they could read, and if we gave them the Bible, they would recognize that they live in what our holy book describes as our idea of Heaven: in a place where one, although foreign, is always at home, where other beings, with everything they have 'for themselves', open themselves up for us in a festive reception and with absolute, unconditional hospitality. This is why Petrović claims that May, who brought him his pillow, is 'above species and sublime'(283). Above species: naked and handsome, free from possession, from white evening suits, from money, free from every prohibition, free for sex with anyone they want, anybody with everybody else, without puzzlement and anger, free and happy as before the Fall. Above species: for the species has fallen into slavery, into necessity to earn and save, to multiply what has been saved, to protect what has been earned, especially from foreigners, to give carefully and conditionally, to exchange for something else, into selective invitations into our houses, instead of receiving anyone who might turn up, into giving hospitality only to those who enter the pact of hospitality, into wearing suits, particularly white evening suits which get dirty so easily, into possessive genitive and 'my wife' and 'my pillow'. Above species: the species has fallen into what we call civilization, and one cannot have sex with just anybody. The species has a sexual protocol which regulates who, how and when one can touch and be touched: the first rule of this protocol forbids incest. Although it might be 'the most drastic mutilation which man's erotic life has in all time experienced'<sup>6</sup>, it is still one of the two pillars we have built our civilization on. The fall into civilization has been progressing for centuries: several years before Petrović's journey to African pre-civilizational Heaven, Freud proclaimed that this fall – he named it *die kulturelle Sexualmoral* - had reached its nadir and blamed it for the neurotic misery of his contemporary Europeans.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, this archivist of the visible, who records only what can be grasped by observing, has not actually witnessed this pre-cultural, liberating sexual morality among the Africans. When Petrović claimed that Africans are honoured when Europeans sleep with their women, he used the impersonal formula 'it is notorious'. He neither said that during his journey in Africa anyone had ever demanded to be honoured in that way, nor that he had met a European who had had first-hand experience in this matter. That any man can be with any woman, Petrović concluded while observing a wedding ceremony in a village. Soon the lights would go out, he foretold, and when plunged into darkness anyone would be with anyone else (314). But he did not wait for the lights to go out, let alone inspect what happened in the village afterwards. Even without that he knew that one can, better yet must achieve more in Africa than in Europe. He never saw anyone enjoying the pre-civilizational sexual liberties he finds so attractive. What he saw and can bear witness to is only his own visit to a brothel in Morocco, his own stay in a hut with girls whose skin smelled of dried fruit, where he had to wash his hands for a long time, for the smell was not to his taste, and his own countless touchings of handsome bodies - although forced by the circumstances.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of hospitality*, tr. R. Bowlby (Stanford, 2000), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Civilisation and its discontents', in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. J. Strachey et al. 24 vols. (London, 1953-74) 21:104.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, 'Civilised sexual morality and modern nervous illness', in *The standard edition*, 9:181-204.

If one pillar of civilization is in such a condition, then the other must be in bad shape too. The assumption that those who have not heard of the incest taboo, allowing instead unregulated sex, may not have heard of the prohibition of anthropophagia becomes true when Petrović brings on stage a cannibal. It is an African 'ill at his chest and incurable', 'with his head tired and collapsed' (255). That much can be seen: a travel writer who only records what can be seen should stop here. Nevertheless, Petrović knows that the man is an endo-cannibal who could cure himself only if he were allowed to tear apart 'his second sister-in-law, or his small brother-in-law, or any other member of his family' (255). The deductions that brought him to this conclusion would amuse William Arens, who holds that anthropologists' claims regarding the ubiquity of cannibalism were 'based on something less than a rational evidential process'.<sup>8</sup> How did the archivist of the visible come to the conclusion that the sick man is a violator of the second great taboo of our civilization? The interpreter told him that 'for a man like this one, who as many others has previously been accused to have been a panther, the cure would certainly be human flesh, for a man-panther cannot live if he is deprived of it' (255). The man ill at his chest was previously only accused of being a panther<sup>9</sup>, such accusations were frequent here, and for a sick panther the only medicine is human flesh, for the 'blood and body of a family member give the greatest strength' (255) – that much the interpreter said, but from there to Petrović's conclusion, that he sees a cannibal prevented from curing himself in the traditional manner by civilized French laws, should only have been made through several cautious and rational steps. To be a rational European, what conceit! To be different from Africans, 'who are incapable of any analytic and deductive effort' (205), and to make an analytic and deductive leap that would bridge the lack of proof!

Even more impressive is Petrović's second testimony on African cannibalism. This time Petrović retells the event of a man disappearing from a village, and the villagers finding 'traces of nails and some hair from a panther's fur' on the ground (262). They suspected that panthers might be involved and notified the French administrator, who came to the village, called the village shaman and threatened to sentence him to death if he did not betray the guilty ones. The shaman "brought out a cage with a small tiger, danced around it, sang songs, washed his face with water from a special well, and then walked in a circle around the villagers, observed them for a long time, and pointed at three of them' (262). They were immediately arrested. Two of them were poisoned that very night, and the third one was tortured the next day and eventually confessed to the crime, though 'in spite of the torture he did not want to reveal what sort of rite compelled them to kill and eat the victim' (263). So the rational French administrator who relied on songs sang around a cage, on water from a special well, and a confession obtained through torture was disappointed by the perpetrator's inability to explain the rite he admittedly took part in. But for Petrović even that was more than enough. After that story, the author of *Africa* concludes that even without proof 'it was enough to see the frightened convulsion of a black man when seeing a white; his almost wild, insane look' (263) in order to be sure that he spends his days lying in wait for his second sister-in-law and his small brother-in-law. That the frightened convulsion might be a result of his

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<sup>8</sup> William Arens, 'Rethinking anthropology', in *Cannibalism and the colonial world*, ed. F.Barker, P.Hulme & M. Iversen (Cambridge, 1998), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Panthers are cannibals who wear animal skin and claw during anthropophagic rites.

insight into European rational and deductive procedures obviously never occurred to Petrović.

This is Petrović's Africa: they are 'children' (124,134, 220), 'splendid mountain animals' (116), with beautiful naked bodies, long elegant muscles, no fat at all, with high and firm breasts, unable of analytic and deductive effort, free from possession, absolutely and unconditionally hospitable, and, last not least, free for sex with just anybody, and only through French administrators' prohibitions prevented from eating each other.

### How do they differ from us?

First of all, we are different, and the difference between us and them cannot be erased: a flower would start to resemble an insect, or an insect a flower, sooner than an African could resemble a European. Petrović has no second thoughts about that. His sympathies for the Africans, his hymns to the purity, innocence and youth of the human race turn into contempt, anger and sneering the moment he notices in them even a fleeting wish to emulate particular traits of European identity. Judging by the unrestrained anger which accompanies his descriptions of those rare attempts on the part of the Africans to substitute their own identity for a new one, or at least to open themselves up to another one, it seems Petrović regards it as something unbecoming, offensive and even dangerous.

Petrović arrives in Africa accompanied by Vouillet, an explorer and a brother of one of Petrović's Parisian friends. He 'led one of the most important exploring missions in Sudan thirty years ago, he founded whole towns in Upper Volta, and named many insects and plants after himself, he also collected pre-historical armoury, jewellery and precious stones from all ages' (197-8). Vouillet undoubtedly knew Africa well: he spent many years living there, and knew everything about its languages, flora, fauna, customs and geography. After many years he returned to Europe, and managed an African coffee farm from Marseille. Vouillet was only to introduce Petrović to Africa and to spend the first couple of weeks with him, leaving him on his own thereafter. While they were still aboard the ship, Vouillet told Petrović how, during many long years among the Africans, he had 'unconsciously forgotten that he wasn't one of them'. Vouillet says: 'I didn't imagine myself being black, but I felt as if I were, and I didn't mind seeing my white hand for days on end, until suddenly it occurred to me: Look, my hand is white! When after fourteen years of that life I suddenly married, out of love, I treated my wife very badly according to European standards, because I imported into my white marriage the mentality of a black one. I still admire my wife for understanding that instantly and for not interpreting my behaviour in a bad manner. Only after twenty years with the blacks, I subconsciously began – not separating myself from them – to return to European civilization. When I am with them today, I am a member of a different race as much as you are. Let's say that there was no genuine reason for me to return to Europeaness. I never perceived my wife and my children as different from the black: you might become so accustomed to the difference in skin colour that you won't notice it any more. Our way of life, under the circumstances, wasn't much different from the way of life of the black. When I say that I was black, I want to say that I felt no difference between myself and the natives. And then, all of a sudden, I began to feel it more and more. Was it fatigue, or

ageing, which erased everything new that my spirit had formed, or, on the contrary, an atavistic awakening of the primitive forces of my race, which had annihilated everything in me that was purely mimetic?’ (214-15)

Vouillet is not a traveller who will, after only several weeks in Africa, return to Europe to write a travelogue in the peace and comfort of his study, the travelogue in which he would – following the law of the genre – describe the difference between us and them. This difference does constitute a true content of every interesting travelogue, and the only reason for writing it: travelogues are not written about the same, but about the different. Here, the travel writer who spends only several weeks in Africa is Petrović, it is his mission to notice the difference between Africans and Europeans, which might explain his nervousness and even embitterment upon noticing that some Africans try to blur the picture by imitating Europeans. Vouillet, on the contrary, did not write a travelogue: he instead spent long years living in Africa, and during that time slowly overcame the difference between us and them, annihilating it until it eventually disappeared. He became an African and lived an African way of life. Why did it not, then, stay that way? Why did the difference, once successfully overcome, begin to manifest its presence again? There is not a simple answer to this question. Even Vouillet himself cannot explain it. Nevertheless, whatever the reason may be – fatigue, old age, an ‘awakening of the primitive forces of his race’ – there is no doubt that both Vouillet and Petrović, consider that this lessening if not annihilation of the difference between the African and the European identity, is a process that can occur only temporarily and on the surface, or on the margins of an identity, while its core always remains unchanged and solid, always capable of reversing all the superficial changes and restoring the whole to its original state. This margin where the changes may occur, if only temporarily, can be isolated from that part of our identity which is solid and unchangeable, permanent and defining, that is to say, what actually is our identity. Thus isolated, the margin capable of changing can be named mimetism: the change occurred in what is ‘mimetic *in me*’, says Vouillet, which is not to be confused with *myself*. The mimetic margin *in me* and *myself* can be temporarily joined, the former can, for a while, cover the latter, as a new text written on a palimpsest. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that sooner or later the proper hierarchy between them will be restored: *myself* will overcome what was imposed on it as foreign and different – the palimpsest will re-emerge.

This theory might be new to the travel writer Petrović, even though he does not seem to object to it, but the scientist Vouillet had, in all probability, enough time not only to think about it, but to test it experimentally as well. ‘He discovered a new insect’, continues Petrović, ‘which mimics the flower of a tree on which it lives. Since the insect failed to mimic the flower perfectly, the flower on its part began to mimic the insect by acquiring some kind of small legs, in order to repel the butterflies which destroyed it. This mutual mimetism led to an absolute common outer identity’ (215). The margin of mimetism of every identity is limited: the insect failed to perfectly mimic the flower, the self of the insect prevailed and prevented its full metamorphosis. What was lacking in the identification of the insect with the flower, was supplemented by the flower’s margin of mimetism, so eventually the two different entities looked identical. Thus the flower became protected from the butterflies which destroyed it, and the insect safe from the birds that fed on it.

Petrović is impressed by the stories and does not imply that Vouillet should be reproached for his transformation into an African during his long stay on the continent. On the contrary, Petrović narrated the story of Vouillet's becoming an African and the story about the mutual mimetism of the insect and the flower in the same breath, so that both processes seem to be the result of the same natural law. But later, during his travels in Africa when he encountered similar attempts, which did not involve insects and flowers but human beings, Petrović reacted in a different manner. Only four pages after the story about the strange insect-flower mimetism, Petrović writes that in Africa one can see 'young men in white European trousers and pink shirts: the ones with tailcoats and bowler hats are rare. They dart here and there on their bicycles and look like chimpanzees paraded in a circus' (219). The key word in this description is chimpanzee: of all the animals chimpanzees are the most similar to humans, and the only ones with the ability to imitate them. Their imitating, aping, provokes laughter in us, but a laughter imbued with uneasiness: the similarity we see should not be there. There should not be any similarity between what we know is different; what must be different. And if it appears in such an imposing manner that it cannot be ignored, our confidence in difference is called into question. Thus the source of this uneasiness: what if the similarity has not been achieved on the surface only, in the margin of mimetism? What if it is the outcome of a certain likeness in that solid and unchangeable part of our identity, the part that Vouillet so confidently names *myself*? Would admitting to such an essential, and not only mimetic similarity undermine our confidence in difference, and thus our self-confidence which is its product? Moreover, this obtrusive mimetism, which achieves similarity but not a perfect sameness, reflects back on our image, it deforms our features, separating them from the solid core of ourselves, and shows us that what we held to be solid and integrated can be remodelled in a very unusual manner. That which is available to mimetism, that which can be aped, ought to be only on the surface, or in the margin of mimetism, but never in what we consider the core of our identity. But how are we to tell the difference between a part of the solid core and the margin? Aping is dangerous because it threatens to disrupt the border between the core and the margin, between Vouillet's 'margin in me' and 'myself': if we let it happen, we shall not be able to tell what is 'myself' any more, and the difference between us and them will disappear as well.

Respectful of Vouillet's story about almost becoming an African after many years in Africa, and impressed by the scientific discovery of the mutual mimetism of the insect and the flower, Rastko Petrović is appalled by Africans who attempt to look and behave like Europeans. On another occasion, while crossing a river in a small boat, he observes two women and a man who are trying to turn the little they know about European customs and manners into a performance: 'Almost by my side the natives, a man and two women, address each other in French as *Monsieur* and *Madame* in order to impress me. They screech and babble at the top of their voices. They imitate the gestures of white women who gossip, and look as if performing one of Sterija's<sup>10</sup> comedies: they slap themselves and shriek 'Tut, tut, don't say that!' One of the women excitedly squeaks: 'Madame, Madame, my husband is majuscule, and I am paroxysm; oh, no, Madame, you are not paroxysm, you are verbal!' They belong to the elite of converted Negroes who

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<sup>10</sup> Jovan Sterija Popovic (1806-1856), the writer who introduced Molière's type of comedy into Serbian literature.



read propaganda brochures, and then joyfully and luxuriously decorate themselves with shiny meaningless words, as if with pearl necklaces made of sea foam. (...) After half an hour the Christians were completely exhausted by this aping of refinement. The women first ate dry fish and damp and hard bread, which resembled dirty bacon, and then scooped up some water in a chamber pot in order to refresh themselves by washing between their legs. The man, still struggling with his Europeaness, like someone who is just about to fall asleep, gallantly handed them his handkerchief to dry themselves between their legs' (224-5). For Petrović this is the point of no return, and one wonders which part annoyed him most – the image of gossiping women, the use of meaningless European words, or the attending to the needs of intimate hygiene in public? Had this small group of Africans known that the needs of intimate hygiene should be attended to only in private, and that a handkerchief is lent only in exceptional circumstances, what would have made them any different from a group of Europeans who gossip and use shiny meaningless words?

In order to preserve the border between the margin of mimetism and the solid, integrated identity of *myself*, and thus to reinforce the border between us and them, Petrović must not agree with their aping and circus performances. They are beautiful when they dive naked, but if they try to approach you as equals, you better keep them at a distance. The next time he met an African who had used his own margin of mimetism, Petrović behaved very cautiously: 'As I immediately realised that his kindness, smiles and winks had a purpose of convincing me how European he was, the kind called 'civilisé' and 'Creole' by the Negroes, which is to my taste the most repulsive possible representative of the black race, I totally restricted any cordiality I might have shown him'(328-9). How did this man deserve Petrović's punishment in the form of coldness and distance? Were his kindness and smiles such an unforgivable offence? Or is there a danger in them? 'As the word 'Creole' implies,' writes Robert Young, 'translation involves displacement, the carrying over and transformation of the dominant culture into new identities that take on material elements from the culture of their new location. Both sides of the exchange get creolized, transformed, as a result.'<sup>11</sup> Vouillet was not afraid of being creolized. Another European in *Africa*, whom we are to meet presently, was not nervous about his own identity either. Only Petrović is eager to see everybody in his proper place, and to make sure that they know the difference between them and us.

But, who are we?

In the middle of *Africa*, there begins a description of 'the strangest and most fantastic part' (266) of his journey. 'Something happened and I was involved (...) with the very core of African life', writes Petrović, something which prevented him from being 'a simple traveller' and transformed the character of his journey. Petrović met a Swiss who in the text is not referred to with a proper name, but with the initial N. 'This is one of the strangest men I have ever met. If I had not seen anything else in Africa, the journey would have been worth the trouble' (315). This fascination with a European in Africa has structured the second part of Petrović's travelogue. 'A hero of great novels of adventure'

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<sup>11</sup> Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism. A very short introduction* (Oxford, 2003), 142.

entered Petrović's text, and with it the shadow of Joseph Conrad (267): *Africa* has got its Kurtz. It ceased being a record of the visible and became something more complex. From that moment on Petrović travels in his company, and it changes his perspective significantly. No matter how unlikeable N. might be, sometimes at the very edge of disgusting, Petrović has to give him the place he has been occupying himself so far. Up until that moment the author was a European in Africa and wrote from that perspective. Now entering the stage is someone who has a higher right to Europe, a real European, and Petrović, an Europeanized *Balkanite*, a European from the margin, a European by virtue of his culture, language and education, only an aspiring European, has to take a step back before the very embodiment of Europe. Why is this so?

N. is a young Swiss nobleman, a Count, the direct descendent of the Duke of Berry and the French Marshal D. Petrović's grandfather was born a subject of the Sultan in the Ottoman Empire. His father, Mita Petrović, fought the Turks in the war for the liberation of southern Serbia. Rastko himself was born in a country 'so small, without a sea, weak; final death threatened it at any moment'.<sup>12</sup> N. speaks the language of Montaigne and Descartes as his mother tongue, Petrović had to learn it. In Montaigne's and Descartes' times, no one wrote in Petrović's mother tongue. This small and weak country of his barely survived the Great War: "thus they grow up together: he and his country (...)", writes Petrović about himself, 'one could not be separated from the other. He represented his country by himself'.<sup>13</sup> So here they are now, in the middle of Africa, the grandson of the Duke of Berry and the grandson of a subject of the Sultan, France and Serbia. The latter believes that he should pay an effort to be a European; the former does not, for he believes that he received his Europeaness by birth. Petrović has Picasso, Gide and Max Ernst for friends, he has read Bergson and Proust, N. has probably never heard of them. Petrović enters Europe by assimilating its culture, N. can afford to ignore it, precisely because he believes that it belongs to him. On the other hand, Petrović knows Europe in what he believes to be the essence of Europe, and *that* he knows a lot better than N. who is European by virtue of his family inheritance. For Petrović Europe is European culture, in which, and only in which, he can be an insider. The Europe of empires, colonies and conquests to him, who 'represents his country by himself', 'small and weak', is not his Europe, and in it he will always be an outsider. In this Europe he will never have a place. Since he has two languages – French, the central language of European culture, and Serbian, the language of European margin – this insider/outsider has a double perspective as well. Because he had to make an additional effort to buy his ticket to Europe, because belonging to Europe was not part of his family silver, but deserved and earned by intimate knowledge of what is the most European about Europe, and by devotion to it, he can see better than hereditary Europeans what is non-European, or even anti-European in Europe. Even if he wanted, he could not do otherwise: because he entered Europe via its culture he believes that Europe is only that which he knows and cherishes. Thus a half of reality always escapes him, and he does not see that Europe is still Europe even when it is at its least 'European'. Then he wonders: he wonders as Rastko Petrović wondered when a German bomb hit his Belgrade home in April 1941 and destroyed his family library in which generations stored the greatest works of European literature and philosophy. He wonders because he cannot believe that this is

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<sup>12</sup> Rastko Petrović, 'Opšti podaci i život pesnika', *Eseji i članci* (Belgrade, 1974), 462.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

## Milutinović - What did Rastko Petrović learn in Africa?

Europe destroying itself – while actually this is only the real Europe leading its complex and ambivalent existence. It is not in historical reality that the *idea* of Europe attains its purest embodiment, it is in the dreams of those like Rastko Petrović.

Young Count N. must once have been extraordinarily handsome, assumes Petrović, but now he is no more than ‘a ruin of a youth’ (267), all covered with scars, and keeps himself going only by his extraordinary toughness. Due to some foolishness committed in an affair with a Russian lady in Paris, his parents demanded that he leaves and disappears to the colonies. There he is, bitter, angry, compelled to struggle for every single bite he eats and every moment of sleep he gets. He does not travel with numerous servants, chefs and porters like other Europeans. N. eats what Africans eat, drinks the same water: ‘I have removed all barriers between them and myself’, he says, ‘I speak their language, eat their food, sleep with their women and cheat on them their way: hence they both like me and fear me more’ (270) - and they really fear him. ‘Twenty black, almost athletic men’, wonders Petrović, ‘in their own country, in the middle of nowhere, where wiping out a human life is so easy, fear him, terribly fear a man all broken, who has to bind his stomach in order not to fall apart, who cannot move his head and does not even carry any arms’(301). ‘Oh, I have no illusions’, says N., ‘I know how miserable and dirty-minded a creature a black is, and I despise him as much as other whites do, but I too know that the whites are equally disgusting and dirty-minded’. He does not try to hide his contempt for Africans, and admits that he wishes them evil (274). N. pursues his arduous trading business, he tries to cure his dysentery and many wounds earned in three traffic accidents on bad African roads, and dreams to build a house in the middle of the wilderness: ‘a big, magnificent house, with a real piano in it, with real portraits, real, robust furniture, books, dishes. (...) To build one’s own home, in the wildest part, by oneself, on one’s own steam, in the wilderness’. A real European house, ‘for after all, Europeans have best known how to build’ (273). This was, says Petrović, the only human feature to be seen in him: the desire to build his own home (281). In this country - of absolute and unconditional hospitality, where other beings open themselves up in festive reception and without a demand for reciprocity give place to an unknown, anonymous other - the foreigner and guest N. wants to build a big, strong European house: he wants to be at home among the hosts which he treats with hostility, to turn himself from a guest into a host, he wants the hosts in their own country to be guests who will not enter the big and strong European house the same way N. and Petrović enter their huts - freely and welcomed - but the way all European houses are entered – upon an invitation. This need of invitation would be a barrier, as much as the strong walls of the real European house, against an unwelcome presence at the dinner table. In this country of absolute and unconditional hospitality Mrs. J., ‘otherwise a very educated, nice and quiet lady, a doctor of medicine’ says that ‘she would never admit a black, no matter how cultured, to her dinner table, and that she never misses an opportunity to let him know that he belongs to a lower race. (...) Everyone who takes part in the conversation considers eating at the same table with the blacks as impossible’ (210). Thus the absolutely hospitable hosts in their own country will become guests who are never let in and led to the table. They should learn that they are no longer at home wherever a strong European house emerges. This mad builder, N., a foreigner and guest in the country of absolute hospitality, yells at his hosts: ‘Who is giving orders here, who is giving orders here! This is the land *for the*

*white*, this is the land *for the white*, don't you understand that! – This is a land for the white, confirm the frightened black, scared of his fist and his bites' (306).

Africans fear him, and he knows well how to frighten them. When he gets angry at his only boy servant, he beats and scares him – but if the boy starts crying, N. comforts him through soothing and caressing. This is his boy, 'the boy for him' (281), but the others receive much harsher treatment. If one of Petrović's servants 'does not obey immediately, or not enthusiastically enough, N. does not slap him as any other white would do, he bites him madly and abruptly on his arms or back' (285). 'The bitten one would always shriek so much and look at N. with such hate, and so fearfully run away from him ever after, that, without a doubt, the bite was quite serious', comments Petrović. N. has a fairly rational explanation: 'It hurts them and reminds them of beasts and cannibals' (285-6). N.'s bites leave 'bloody scars of teeth' (286) on the skin of one of Petrović's servants as proof of his seriousness. While cleaning and binding the wound Petrović thinks: 'He didn't have the right to become a cannibal, or at least something akin to a cannibal, even though his life is difficult and bitter' (286). He didn't *have the right*, says Petrović: it is the Africans who are cannibals, they live in the pre-civilizational state of incest and cannibalism, but we have built our strong European house of civilization on those two taboos. This is how we define ourselves, this is how we draw a borderline between what we are, and what they are. We do not have sex with just anybody and do not eat other people, and if we want to preserve this border we have to respect these two prohibitions. We do not have the right to cannibalism: the most we can allow ourselves is to be *tempted*: we can freely watch naked 'harmonic and muscular' bodies (211), the bodies of 'athletic young men, completely naked (...) with long backs, narrow hips, straight and strong legs' (212), 'almost filigree-like in their musculature' (241), girls' 'breasts cold and firm, straight and pear-like and heavy' (294), 'with no fat at all, no overdeveloped muscles' (227), one would almost say lean meat, bodies whose smell reminds us of 'wild fruit' (294), 'rounded shoulders (...) like firm apples' (228), eyes 'the colour of dark plums' (294), we have the right to be 'most excited (...) by the wonderfully moist pinkness of their tongues' (294), although we know that 'there is something blasphemous in the pinkness of this tongue' and in 'the moist redness of the interior of her mouth' (228). We do not have the right to succumb to this temptation, we must resist this *blasphemy of the moist redness of the human interior*, of the wild fruit smell and lean meat – for we know that one does not eat it, or at least that we do not eat it. This is what we touch, kiss, lick, suck, we penetrate this moist redness with our tongues, or whatever else, but we do not bite it off. We know, though, how porous and unstable the border between those two actions is. The most influential interpreter of the European soul has explained to us that both actions derive from the same root, but he also stressed that their division is a sign of a successful sexual development: we leave behind the cannibalistic, oral phase, no matter how much we might have enjoyed the feeling of being at one with the world represented by mothers' breasts that can be taken inside ourselves and thus become part of ourselves<sup>14</sup>. No matter how much we might feel this lack for the rest of our lives and try to find comfort in other, sometimes hopelessly fruitless attempts to find a substitute for it, we are not allowed to regress to the stage we have successfully

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<sup>14</sup> See Freud, 'Three essays on the theory of sexuality', in vol. 7 of *The standard edition*; on association of the satisfaction of the erotogenic zones and the need for nourishment (7:181-2); on the connection of the pregenital sexual organization and cannibalism (7:198).

overcome. This success is the fundament of both our becoming a subject and of our European civilization. This is why we react to cannibalism with loathing and fascination, for a cannibal can and may satisfy the desire for symbiotic unity with the world, and not only symbolic unity, but the original one from which we are forever expelled by our individual and civilizational development, as if from the heavens, and sentenced to putting up with the lack.

Nevertheless, N., although a hereditary European and the grandson of the Duke of Berry and Marshal D., who should be the very embodiment of European civilization, and who should be the barrier against the uncivilized, against psychological and historical regression, can and may. He has been living in a cannibal tribe for more than a year, and instead of being afraid of them he 'has been abusing them as only he can' (282). This evil, sick and unkempt man with disgusting habits, the ruin of youth which keeps living only by virtue of his enormous toughness, covered all over with wounds and scars, still pursues his trading business in Africa, bosses around twenty athletic men unarmed, beats and bites them, looks for a place for his big and strong European house, and 'simply devours; his appetite is something unimaginable' (297). Petrović's reaction to him is loathing and fascination: although he feels 'a certain loathing' (269) he cannot but 'admit that the bitterness, peculiarity and madness of this man, whom everybody is so afraid of, is something extraordinary' (292). Oh, to be a European, what conceit! Might it be that exactly because he is the grandson of the Duke of Berry and Marshal D. he can and may satisfy his desire, saturate his unimaginable appetite, devour, and do everything that Petrović cannot and must not do, this Europeanized *Balkanite*, a European from the margin, self-appointed guardian of European culture, of the idea of Europe stored in that family library turned into ashes by a German bomb in April 1941, a European insider only as long as he sticks to this culture and respects its prohibitions? Count N. can overstep the border and still remain a hereditary European: his Europe is not only that from Petrović's Belgrade library, his Europe is also this big, strong European house in the middle of wild Africa, with real portraits and massive furniture, in which not everybody who happens to come is admitted to the table, with a roof from which one can yell 'this is a land for the white! This is a land for the white!', and even if he overstepped the border between the civilized and uncivilized he will still have this other Europe, the one in which Petrović will always be an outsider, and sitting at his massive dinner table he will be able to announce that the new law of civilization is - biting. Petrović must not overstep the border, he must not succumb to the temptation, he must not let go of the idea of Europe from his Belgrade books, for if he did he would be no more than a grandson of a Sultan's subject, the son of Mita Petrović who fought the Turks to liberate southern Serbia, small and weak. He has to stick to these books and prohibitions, and when he sees that the books have been turned into ashes and that the prohibitions are being ignored, he must protest, he must ask, demand, beg for new books to be printed and prohibitions reinforced, for their existence is his only chance of being a European insider, having nowhere else to go, for only in such a Europe can he be at the dinner table, for the grandson of a sultan's subject is certainly never going to build a big, strong house in the middle of wild Africa. No matter how loathsome N. might be for breaking the law and ignoring the prohibitions, Petrović never parted from him during his journey in Africa: he stayed with him until the very end, as agreed at the beginning of the journey, because N., who can and may break the law and ignore the prohibition, is also fascinating.

## The town crier

Even if Petrović had not mentioned 'Józef Konrad' (267), a reader would probably recognize *Heart of Darkness* in Africa, and especially in N., as a hypotext. Petrović's travelogue, as a hypertext, invites the reader to a relational reading, the one described in *Palimpsest* by Genette: 'on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through. (...) The hypertext invites us to engage in a relational reading (...)'.<sup>15</sup>

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Kurtz is also a paradigmatic European in Africa. In addition to his German surname, he is introduced by the narrator Marlow as someone who studied in England, born to a half-English mother and a half-French father, and thus 'All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz'.<sup>16</sup> Europe expects much of its creation: 'Oh, he will go far, very far', says of him someone who knows him well. 'He will be somebody in the Administration before long. They, above – the Council in Europe, you know – mean him to be' (22). Kurtz is also instrumental in Europe's plan for Africa (28) so much so that the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, an organization that has civilising Africa as its aim, has entrusted him with writing a report (50). Kurtz is the embodiment of Christian mercy, European science and progress (28), European ideas of justice ('I want no more than justice', 72), and rights ('live rightly' 68), and of the modern ideal of business efficiency ('a first-class agent...Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together', 22). He also represents the best of great European artistic achievements: Kurtz is 'essentially a great musician', 'a painter' (71) and a poet (104). Briefly, 'a universal genius' (71). Nevertheless, of all his gifts 'the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating' (48). Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs 'was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence' (50), and his monologues were not only 'splendid', but also expressive of the highest European ideals of love and justice (59). It is, therefore, not a surprise that before coming to Africa Kurtz worked as a journalist. Writing for newspapers, taking part in the public sphere of democratic societies, really is the genuine domain of the just and the right, and what's more the enlighteningly eloquent. Here, where our most cherished ideals are shaped, where our most precious ideals are represented and defended, where our plans are exposed to public debate before becoming our policies, just and eloquent universal geniuses are most needed. And from it there is only a small step to politics, in which the advocates of justice and progress get a chance to make true their ideas. 'Kurtz's proper sphere', says one of those who had the honour of knowing him, 'ought to have been politics on the popular side. (...) He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party' (71).

Nevertheless, the sublimely expressed ideals of love, justice and progress, cannot conceal the truth of Kurtz's African engagement. Upon hearing what Kurtz's admirers have to say about him, Marlow is left with a simple conclusion: 'To speak plainly, he

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<sup>15</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in the second degree*, tr. C. Newman & C. Doubinsky (Lincoln, NE - London, 1997), 398-9.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of darkness* (New York - London, 1988), 50.

raided the country' (56). And upon seeing spiked heads surrounding Kurtz's hut, Marlow ought to have noticed that there is something in it that cannot be explained solely by business efficiency and Kurtz's need to accumulate as much ivory as possible. 'There was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts.' (57) Even if it would be understandable, Marlow thinks, for someone to surround his hut with spiked heads instead of flowers if profit is at stake, why would one do it if it were not profitable? From the point of view of business rationality, this is a pure surplus, irrational in the meaning of satisfying one's lusts. The immediate benefit or profit might demand the death of the bearers of the heads, but certainly does not demand that the latter be exposed to be viewed. That demand can be only a result of lust which derives great pleasure from death, and extends the pleasure by watching the spectacle of death, but is not the necessary result of a desire for profit or robbery. Taking pleasure from the spectacle of death is legitimised by robbery, but their relationship is different: it only takes advantage of the situation in which profit legitimises everything. Arriving at Kurtz's habitat at the heart of the Dark Continent, Conrad's Marlow discovers that the lust for death and pleasure in its spectacle is not a mere extra-profit of the colonial economy, but a motive equally as strong as profit: taking ivory and giving death go hand in hand, but the latter has its rights independently of the former. This is the secret discovered by Marlow in Africa, and it is cryptically expressed in the murmurs of the dying universal genius: 'Live rightly, die, die...' (68). Live rightly: widen the boundaries of civilization and suppress barbarity, represent progress, justice, science and business efficiency, create poetry and music, paint, and employ your splendid eloquence to articulate Christian ideals of love and pity. 'Die, die': the fascination with death which creates the 'lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief' (58). In the heart of this lightless region there is Kurtz's fascination with death, lust for death and pleasure taken from it. This is a European secret that confuses the savages.

Marlow, the Englishman, passes over this secret in silence and tells Kurtz's Intended that his last words were – her name. This false romanticism of love and devotion has to conceal the truth of Kurtz's final revelation, which cannot be expressed any other way than with the word 'horror!' The secret which is 'too dark' (76) is being repressed deep down, away from the sight of the ethically more sensitive gender. Too dark secrets are not revealed in bright rooms, 'in a lofty drawing-room with three long windows from floor to ceiling that were like three luminous and bedraped columns' (72). Dark secrets belong to the dark continent, and should stay there. To put it differently, they should be sent there: although they are *our* secrets, they should be expelled to the dark continent. Enormous power is needed for the operation by which a whole continent is transformed into a spoil area for our dark secrets, into a region for our repression, and thus into our unconsciousness, into our projection of what we do not want to be – into *our* 'lightless region of subtle horrors' in which we are allowed everything, even regression into a state that we have successfully left behind in both our individual and civilizational development. What conceit: discreetly keeping too dark a secret that one has the right to regression and the power to blame others for it.

The secret so well kept in London by the English Marlow, is revealed in *Heart of Darkness* by the town crier Jósef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski. He cries so loudly that it echoes even in Petrović's *Africa*: from the moment N. enters the travelogue 'there was an

invisible József Konrad too' (267), writes Petrović. Invisibly present, as a palimpsest beneath *Africa*, Conrad's short novel surfaces through Petrović's text and intensifies all the author's impressions, all people he had met, and most of all the main character of his travelogue – N. A reader who knows how to read relationally will in Petrović's travelogue recognize a transformation of a European literary genre and of a text written in English by an East European who has become a classic of English literature. The Ukrainian Pole Conrad revealed the secret about power, about keeping the dark European secret, in a *par excellence* European literary genre and in one of the West European languages. In order to recall his echo in a new text, Petrović had had to acquire both generic and linguistic competence which would have made it possible for him to transform and rewrite Conrad's writing gesture. 'In order to imitate a text', claims Genette, 'it is inevitably necessary to acquire at least a partial mastery of it, a mastery of that specific quality which one has chosen to imitate.'<sup>17</sup> By transforming Conrad's hypotext, Petrović too reveals the European secret about power and about keeping the secret by employing European means of cultural expression. What else could he have done this with? Even when he wants to confront Europe with what she would prefer to pass over in silence, Petrović, as much as Conrad, has no choice but to do it in a European way. For he has nothing else.

### Petrović learns fast

The mastery of European means of cultural expression, if it is the only mastery he had achieved, was not enough to relieve him from his nervousness about identity. Something else is needed there, and Petrović seems ready to learn. Could it be that Petrović stayed with N. because he wanted to learn something? Surely there is something to learn from N., the mad builder who though unarmed strikes fear in twenty athletic men. And Petrović learns fast: he is being carried in a palanquin, whose ends rely on the heads of two African men, in the terrible African heat, uphill. 'They lose their breath; the wood slips down from their heads, and their effort at first sight seems enormous', writes Petrović. 'I have a slightly guilty conscience, for weighing down on the heads of these poor devils, although they tell me that I shouldn't tire myself if I don't want to catch a tropical fever, that they are here through their own will, and that for them all that is not too much of an effort after all' (299). There he goes.

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<sup>17</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, 6.



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