

**LBRIS**

We know  
books

**GEORGIANA LOLEA**

**LOS ANGELES  
IN THE AMERICAN JOURNALS  
OF PETRU COMARNESCU  
AND STELIAN TĂNASE**



Editura Universității de Vest din Timișoara

2023

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>On “the Soul of the East”: An Introduction .....</b>   | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1: Unraveling the Layers of Travel Writing .....</b>   | <b>21</b> |
| 1.1. Travel Writing and Its Theory: Issues, Debates, and Controversies .....                                    | 21        |
| 1.2. Travel Writing: A Pariah among Genres? .....   | 26        |
| 1.3. Travel Writing – Orbiting Between Fictionality and Non-Fictionality.....                                   | 28        |
| 1.4. Definitions and Boundaries.....  | 37        |
| 1.5 Rejecting the Label of ‘Travel Writing’ .....   | 42        |
| 1.6 Types of Travel Writings.....   | 46        |
| 1.7. Travelers and/or Nomads .....  | 48        |
| 1.8. Travelers and/or Tourists.....   | 50        |
| 1.9. Writing up the Self.....   | 64        |
| 1.10. Reconciliation Travel .....   | 71        |
| <b>Chapter 2: Los Angeles in Petru Comarnescu’s American Travelogue<br/>    from 1934 .....</b>                 | <b>75</b> |
| 2.1. Introductory Notes on Comarnescu’s American Journal .....  | 75        |
| 2.2. Los Angeles: “the perfect harmony of solitary birds” .....   | 80        |
| 2.3 “The place is alive with illusions, and illusions are the stuff of art.” .....                              | 86        |
| 2.4. Translating Comarnescu’s Eurocentric Analogies, Distortions, and<br>Generalizations .....                  | 89        |
| 2.5. On Los Angeles: The ‘Unreal’ City Par Excellence .....   | 96        |
| 2.6. Comarnescu’s Version of L.A.’s History: On the Real and the<br>Manufactured .....                          | 106       |
| 2.7 The United States and Los Angeles in the 1920s.....   | 114       |
| 2.8. Religious Entertainment on the Path to Soul Salvation: Comarnescu<br>on Sister Aimee Semple McPherson..... | 129       |
| 2.9 L.A.Paradoxes.....  | 147       |
| 2.10. Cartographic Gems: Mapping the Streets of the Angels.....   | 151       |
| 2.11. ‘Few people, many extras’. Comarnescu’s Account of the Hollywood of<br>the Late 20s.....                  | 156       |

---

**Chapter 3: Stelian Tănase’s American Journal: L.A. vs. NY** .....179

    3.1. Tănase’s Perspective on Travel Writing and Its Challenges .....179

    3.2. Obsessive Analogies: Eastern Europe, Romania, and America .....184

    3.3. Parallels: Europe and the United States .....206

    3.4. Hollywood: The City, the Chimera .....208

    3.5. Writing up Los Angeles: the ephemeral, the nothingness, the indefinable .....210

    3.6. “The Strewn Shards of My Identity Scattered Like the Beads of Broken Glass” .....221

**Conclusion** .....227

**Works Cited** .....233

## ON “THE SOUL OF THE EAST”: AN INTRODUCTION

My doctoral project explores the ways in which two Romanian intellectuals—Petru Comarnescu and Stelian Tănase—mirror the city of Los Angeles in their US travelogues. By comparing Comarnescu’s *America as Seen by a Young Man of Today* (1934) and Tănase’s *LA vs. NY* (1998), my dissertation seeks to advance the conversations in the field by enriching them with travel accounts from the East European region, as well as counter the narratives that characterize the history of European travel as a history of the West (see Leed 1991), and in doing so, marginalize Eastern European travel writers and their travelogues. Leed’s generalizations are both baffling and exclusive, and they proclaim the unquestionable dominance of the West in the realm of travel writing. According to the aforementioned scholar:

If travel is, as the great African - American writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston observed, ‘the soul of civilization,’ then in the history of European travels we may find the soul of the West, its continuities, evolution, permutations. For the history of travel is in crucial ways a history of the West. It recounts the evolution from necessity to freedom, an evolution that gave rise to a new consciousness, the peculiar mentality of the modern traveler. (1992: 14)

I take issue with Leed’s generalization and claim that voices coming from the so-called “minor cultures” and/or from the European edges contribute to a deeper understanding of the field of travel writing studies and they also challenge the notion of “the center”. Even though these so-called marginal travelogues tend to remain in the shadow of more renowned ones – usually written in the languages of former empires – this certainly does not imply a lack in relevance, artistry or in intellectual sophistication.

Enshrouded in a veil of oblivion, Eastern European travelogues shed light both on the travel writers' homelands and on the cultures and societies under scrutiny. Hence, "the soul of the East" deserves as much consideration for a better comprehension of European travels and travel writing as "the soul of the West". As a passing note, though Leed's major goal is to map "the mind of the traveler", he completely leaves aside all travel writings by women while also openly asserting that: "Travel has been the medium of traditional male immortalities." (1991: 286)

Youngs and Forsdick (2012:13) put forward a far more balanced view since they readily acknowledge that "perhaps the most important work to be done is the circulation of scholarship on travel writing in the non-Anglophone tradition." And when it comes to travel theory on the East European space, the seminal work that anchored my thesis was the groundbreaking project *East Looks West* (2008), edited by Wendy Bracewell and by Alex Drace-Francis. This three-part set, which has swept the dust off a series of Eastern European travel writings (to Western Europe), stands as a laudatory research enterprise which has undoubtedly cast the East into a better light and stirred other scholars' and researchers' interest in travel writings coming from this European region. My two case studies - the American travelogues by Petru Comarnescu and by Stelian Tănase - closely follow in the footsteps of this newly-opened scholarly direction.

My initial interest in the field was ignited by the shiny promises that the genre of travel writing holds dear: to unravel new cultures and illuminate facets of near or far civilizations through personal encounters. However, this rosy-spectacle perspective quickly dissipates upon a close examination. The genre's entanglements with power and colonialism and its furthering of agendas meant to promote global hierarchies which would always shape the other as inferior has been criticized since the late 1970s, by leading scholars such as Said (1978), Mary Louise Pratt (1992) or Peter Hulme (1986/1992). Accordingly, a significant part of travel theory has been plugged to the idea of empire and later on, to feminist interests. And this, in itself, has encompassed one of the greatest research challenges: finding niches within the discipline and a framework for these travelogues from the East in order for me to unpack the two American travelogues (case studies) about Los Angeles. Ironically enough, this West/East push-and-pull is embedded in the genre of travel writing studies which has been, in its turn, marginalized within the academy (Youngs, 2012) and relegated

to the status of minor literature. What I attempt to prove is that there is a place for the study of travelogues coming from Eastern Europe and which mirror the American city (Los Angeles) of the late 1920s and respectively, of the mid-1990s.

As pointed out by Youngs and Forsdick (2012: 14), the genre of travel writing studies is capable of regenerating and of transgressing the limited boundaries of colonialism and conservatism and in doing so, it can also be “potentially profoundly radical”. Moreover, the two scholars stress that, instead of remaining caught in an impasse, travel theory has “traveled” and the shift in contemporary criticism of the genre is part of “a renewed awareness of the role of the travel narrative as a complex source document” which can bring forth “close readings of travelogues for the purpose of ethnographic recovery”. My thesis attempts to convey a similar research outcome: that is, to dust down and then to critically unpack two Romanian travel accounts and their respective contexts (cultural, social and historical) in the hope of rendering fresh perspectives on the Los Angeles of the 1920s and the 1990s. My two case studies also strive to catch the image of the American city as filtered through the sensitivities of two Romanian travelers – both males, both white, both intellectuals - who are extremely versatile at shaping cultural encounters. Their interests lie within a wide range of fields, running from literature, to philosophy, sociology, history and to psychology – and their travel narratives are molded during different decades: the 1920s respectively, the 1990s. Hence, they send to different socio-cultural and political settings that informed the travel writings.

I have deliberately chosen to focus only on travel journals written before and after the communist period (1947–1989). During the communist regime, the government’s mechanisms of control, distortion, and dissemination of information make the extent of their censorship in writings about the United States difficult to determine. Moreover, potential collaboration between writers and the Securitate make for a high probability of propaganda or bias. However, in its absence, the Romanian communist period determines the ways in which Petru Comarnescu and Stelian Tănase position themselves in relation to Europe, and it also reveals how they proclaim their European selfhood. On the one hand, Romania’s high level of pre-war cultural production triggers Comarnescu’s self-inclusion into the European mainstream, whereas Tănase’s obsessive analogies with Eastern Europe

are signs of a defeated self. In *the* American city celebrating joie de vivre and inviting one to oblivion, Tănase is trapped in an inescapable circle of permanent comparisons with the East European communist past. As such, his travelogue can be read as the testimony of an intellectual who enters Los Angeles carrying the burden of (post-socialist) East Europe. Consequently, I apply the lens of reconciliatory travel to Tănase's American journal to open up a journal that revisits and debates his/our communist past, fraught with mistakes, failures, cowardice, and disappointment.

On the other hand, Comarnescu's California becomes a synecdoche, standing for the whole of the United States, with all of its complexities and contradictions. The themes in Comarnescu's American journal are familiar territory to most travelers, exiles or writers of the City of Angels: the "unreal" city and the makeshift metropolis par excellence, the chimerical Hollywood of the 1920s (he visited Paramount Studios while the movie *An American Tragedy* was being shot and had close encounters with many Hollywood stars), and the religious fervor in the city - the recount of his visit to Sister Aimee Semple McPherson's Angelus Temple is on a par with Carey McWilliams', Mencken's or Ilf and Petrov's renditions. Indeed, these Romanian writers' works perfectly exemplify how travel writing is inextricably linked not only to the unraveling of the traveler's own self and of the cultural heritage which informs his or her reportage, but also to the international discursive network which surrounds the writer's specific national context. My project therefore stands as a three-fold endeavor, attempting to illuminate facets of the traveler's own self, of his homeland, and of the city gazed upon.

My thesis is structured in three parts, which add to the Introduction and the Conclusion. The first chapter offers a road map of the field of travel writing studies, which took clear shape in the 1990s as "a coherent and established area in its own right - that is, with its own institutional apparatus such as journals, centers, associations, regular conferences, discussion lists, and pedagogical materials" (Youngs and Forsdick, 2012: 3). Travel writing studies, however, was considered to be a "minor" subject of study when it first started to gain popularity as a discipline. As illustrated by Thompson (2011), the demotion of travel writing to the ranks of a minor genre had (at least in part) to do with its historical trajectory and with its entangled and complex relationships with other fields, such as ethnography, anthropology, or literature.

As I point out in my first subchapter, the relationship between the travel writings' readership and the literary critics is rather ironic: the two categories of readers are not in agreement (Thompson 2011, Youngs and Forsdick 2012). Accordingly, while the general public thoroughly enjoys travel books, a significant portion of the contemporary critique of the genre is either unapologetically biting (Lisle, 2006) or more nuanced and milder (Holland and Huggan 1998), Youngs and Forsdick 2012, Carl Thompson 2011). In the end, there may be only one ground unanimously shared by the vast majority of scholars on travel theory: their acceptance of the fact that travel writing is a complex genre and there is hardly a single definition that fully satisfies the scholars in the field. That is why putting down what travel writing is will prove as challenging a task as writing up the City of Angels, the main character of my two case studies.

The first chapter of my dissertation was written bearing in mind that there should be no prescriptive rules imposed on the field of travel writing. Setting fixed boundaries for such a diverse and loose genre falls, sooner or later, into the category of quixotic enterprises. Therefore, the theoretical chapter offers an overview of the major research paths followed by scholars in the field: an analysis of travel writing as a (potential) genre in itself and one that raises countless debates concerning its fictionality and non-fictionality; a bird's-eye view of the diverging, clashing, or even opposing definitions of travel writing; various categorizations of travel writings and of travelers; and perspectives on the writing of travel as inextricably linked to the unraveling of the traveler's self. The first chapter ends with a subchapter on reconciliation travel, which I will be using to open up Tănase's journal.

The heterogeneity of the field—which greedily borrows from adjacent or kin fields—triggers its multiple interpretations from different perspectives, and thus, it lends itself to “a methodological bricolage” (Youngs and Forsdick, 2012: 7). As I move on to show, the discussion is further complicated by issues such as the labeling of travel writing as inclusivist or exclusivist literature and then by the hot issue concerning the fictional or non-fictional nature of the genre. While most scholars perceive the genre as highly slippery in form and content and an in-betweenness, Peter Hulme forges a path of his own and adheres to the line of thought that holds the non-fictionality of travel writings. I contend that labeling travel accounts as “never fictional” exposes Hulme's position to vehement