

“THE SLAVIC ON THE ROAD” — EASTERN EUROPEAN NEGATIVE NATIVISM IN ANDRZEJ STASIUK’S TRAVELOGUES.

Slavoj Žižek ventured a thesis in an article in the *New Left Review* in 1990 that the object of Western Europe’s fascination with recent revolutionary events in Eastern Europe was in fact the gaze with which Eastern Europe “stares back at the West, fascinated by its democracy” (Žižek, 1990, 50). It is not the content of the fascination, which Žižek immediately questions analyzing the upsurge of ethnic conflicts in the region through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but the structure of the relation that is at stake. The core of Žižek’s argument is that there is no other fascination but narcissistic (the East proves here the existence of the West by way of identifying with its ideal; in other words, the West proves its existence by locating it in the other’s belief in its existence). Our enjoyment is always ultimately enjoyment of the Other (imputed to the Other) (Žižek, 1990, 57). Thus, Western Europe’s fascination is primarily with its own, perhaps lost, enjoyment of democracy bursting out in Eastern Europe. However, the upsurge of “pathological fantasies” such as nationalisms or ethnic violence, broke, as Žižek argues, the narcissistic spell of Western Europe’s recognition of itself in Eastern Europe, and reiterated the image of Eastern Europe as “menace” to the established democratic ideal of the West.

The turn from fascination to the sense of threat proves, as Žižek goes on, that the Other always returns in the Real as the “thief of enjoyment” — the fear that “our way of life” is threatened by alien negation, disruption, or mocking. The object of Žižek’s analysis are examples of the “theft of enjoyment” from Eastern Europe, one nationality accusing another of stealing the core of its being, the “Thing”, by negating the form of enjoyment that this community practices. But, Žižek claims, any national identification is constituted through a less or more latent (or openly operating) concept of menacing Other. I want to focus here on the implications of the “break of the narcissistic spell” in the wake of which Western Europe experiences the return of the Real as the threat from

Eastern Europe and what it stands for in its role of the Other. What is of interest here is not whether the fear has any basis in facts, but the very existence of this irreducible kernel of "the Real" — "that which always returns to its place, the kernel that persists unchanged" (Žižek, 1990, 58) — which Žižek seems to locate as the nativist element of all national/social identification.¹ According to this logic, the fear of nativistic sentiments unleashed in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism would betray Western Europe's own nativist kernel, manifested, for example, in a range of more or less overt political disavowals around the process of the European Union enlargement.

I propose to focus on the implications of the irreducibility of the nativist kernel in national identification — something Žižek defines as the "national thing", or even, typically of his style, "*cosa nostra*" (Žižek, 1990, 52). We can easily see how Eastern Europe can threaten the West with the theft of its enjoyment (the "stealing" would transpire by way of interacting with the West through features commonly attributed to Eastern Europe: unruliness, populist political discourses, deficient civic ethos etc). But of real interest here is how Eastern Europe takes pleasure in assuming the role of the "thief", self-consciously stepping into the stereotypical representation and turns it into a form of negative identification. I propose to take Žižek's theory of the "theft of enjoyment" a step further, away from the Eastern European context that is the object of Žižek's analysis, to the subsequent antagonism between Eastern/Western Europe. In this context the "national" Thing — something that can be defined only tautologically as "the Thing itself, the real Thing", — shifts subtly but significantly into nativism — a programmatic discourse operating to assert an assumed core identity of a community by way of disavowing the threat from outside against its core being (which Žižek substitutes with "enjoyment").

Since national identification is always antagonistic (the fear of the "theft of enjoyment" is its constitutive feature), such nativism can only be negative — it is realized as a discourse asserting one's difference from the Other's "Thing" contrastively. It becomes especially interesting in the context of Eastern Europe identifying itself not as an opposite substance to Western European substance, but as a lack of what Western

¹ Here Žižek stresses his fundamental difference from deconstructive theories which argue that any form of identification, from individual to collective including national is discursive.

Europe is believed to have, thus a lack of Western Europe's "Thing". Žižek frames this phenomenon in the paradox of paranoia — the fear that the "Thing" that is felt primarily as lack will be stolen, although it logically cannot be. Žižek states at one point: "Eastern Europe's national paranoia stems precisely from the fact that Eastern European nations are not yet fully constituted as 'authentic states'" (Žižek, 1990, 55). Driven by the sense of inauthenticity, Eastern Europe posits itself vis-à-vis Western Europe as its lack, developing a form of negative nativism whose only effect can be a disavowal of one's impossible, albeit always retained as a possibility in the sphere of fantasizing, Thing materializing as substance. In this sense the obvious result of Eastern European negative nativism is the fear that Eastern Europe will overcome this condition of lack and inauthenticity and become one with the object of its desperate desire, the West. I want to probe this fascinating ambivalence on the example of Andrzej Stasiuk's travel writing.

Stasiuk's travelogues *Jadąc do Babadag* (2004) and *Fado* (2006) are premised on this logic of lack and incompleteness that Eastern Europe experiences in relation to its western counterpart. Traveling in the provincial regions of the Carpathians across several states, Stasiuk is on the lookout for a difference that, relying on Žižek's terms, constitutes the Eastern European "kernel". This "kernel" can only be relational, as Stasiuk and Žižek converge in one basic observation — Eastern Europe lacks first and foremost a sense of authenticity — of an authentic state identity for Žižek, and of an authentic sense of self for Stasiuk, which, at a certain level, comes down to the same lack of subjectivity. The provincial regions of the Carpathians represent for Stasiuk the ambivalent combination of the desire for the lacking self and the concurrent tarrying of its potential materialization. Eastern Europe wants to be like the West, but is trapped in its role of the Other that is forced to cherish what it utterly does not believe in — its national substance that can be experienced only as lacking, and mocks what it desires — the essence attributed to the West. Positing Eastern Europe as the negative of the West, a difference that necessarily bears on the "essence", or "substance" projected thus on Western Europe, Stasiuk traces how the "national thing" is carnivalized through playful reversals and negations.

In this sense Eastern European nativism looms large in Stasiuk's travelogues that develop as narratives of the "theft of enjoyment". He is, after all, in pursuit of the kernel that is unique only to Eastern Europe, and the provincial regions of the Carpathians

render this "Thing", that is more transnational than national, in a pure and unrefined form, as a nonsubstantial substance of the Real. These include: transnational trains connecting places that seem to exist only as forms of confused multinational, Euro-Asian bazaars, the visible tokens of triumph of individual and mass smuggling challenging corporate global market; international nomadic populations of such transborder traders, spontaneously united against the state encroaching on their laissez-faire contraband; provincial border railway and bus stations hosting both the itinerant traders from neighboring countries as well as robbers and pickpockets securing continuity of cash flow in the most literal sense; towns whose architecture reveals centuries of sedate history whose meaning, however, is lost together with populations that were removed by edicts of this or that nationalist fancy; the landscape clashing the modern and antiquated, like new cars lining up after a horse-drawn cart obliviously crawling on a fast lane; and, lastly but most significantly, the Gypsies — the most native Eastern Europeans, and yet the most alienated in any of the states they are nomadically and precariously settled.

Eastern European nativism can only be negative, as it is premised on the fundamental ambivalence: it is aimed to assert the "national cause" as the irreducible difference represented by the provincial parts of Eastern Europe, and, at the same time, working to negate the completeness attributed to the West (through negative identification with/against it), it cannot be anything but a fascination with the "essence" that Eastern Europe, as difference, lacks. In Stasiuk's travelogues Eastern Europe not only threatens the West with robbing it of its "enjoyment" — by negating and mocking its ideal image of itself — it also takes active pleasure in being the thief, a role, after all, attributed to it by the West in its fear of the Other. In this sense, Eastern Europe's sense of self can only be a form of negative identification — of seeing itself as the Other and playfully acting it out. Negative nativism, fully instantiated by the provincial region of the Carpathians, unravels as a self-contradictory program whose task is to expose the Eastern European desire for the West and, simultaneously, challenge Western stereotypical reduction of Eastern Europe to the menacing Other by mockingly stepping into this reductive framework. The double-edged effect of the program is obvious — it negates nativist sentiments on both sides, not in the least through the strategy of the theft of enjoyment — by stealing away the incipient joy of a nativist assertion which is ridiculed in exaggeration and mocking.

Stasiuk complains in his two travelogues that he has no imagination, that is why he needs to travel and return to places he visited before to make sure they really exist and have not disappeared when not looked at and experienced. His relentless explorations of the provincial regions of the Carpathians are only ostensibly to confirm the factuality of the region. Traveling in those regions reveals the foundational unreality of Eastern Europe. He has to keep coming back to all those places, because they do not imprint a lasting memory and when not remembered may as well have vanished, leaving only a quaint trace on maps that are, after all, also fictions in their attempt to order space by borders. He writes: “A journey from the country of the Ubu king to the country of Dracula the vampire cannot contain memories that one can believe in like one believes in, e.g., Paris or Stonehenge” (Stasiuk, 2004, 18)². The author sets out on his journeys to experience a live fiction — an imaginary space of multi-level impossibility: here meanings dissipate into indeterminacy, history meets its inevitable other — the apocalypse, the continent faces its end and breathes its last sigh. Nationalities and ethnicities do not fit into borders of nation-states, in fact, they are rather a living proof of the absurdity of those artificial lines on the map. The writer-traveller would rather write a novel than a travelogue, but it seems the Carpathians, although a live fiction themselves, do not yield fictional material — the author is left with a random gathering of multiple voices of the rising day and nothing beyond that. In this sense, the travelogue develops as failed fiction, the failure having two basic sources: first, the region, lacking substantiality of the real, cannot be turned into fiction, because the logic of fiction is premised on at least a degree of difference from reality; second, because the region, defying any narrative ordering, and primarily that of history, posits the plot only as futile potential.

Several quotes will render the best the perspective of the fascinated traveller in the Eastern European provincial regions. The paramount feature of Eastern Europe’s peripherality is its tenuous hold on history’s mainstream narrative; history, the grand achievement of European modernity, is here upended in its own negation: “A long narrative of the spirit of the age seems here an idea that is as pathetic as it is pretentious, like a novel written according to rules. Paroxysm and boredom rule interchangeably in those parts” (Stasiuk, 2004, 59-60). The unifying perspective of the writing subject is

² This and subsequent fragments translated by Dorota Kołodziejczyk.

likewise lacking, because memory on which history should rely is as frail as the evanescent settlement of various populations: "In travel history constanly slips into legend. In addition, there was nobody to remember it all, not to say to write. Nobody will put it together" (Stasiuk, 2004, 127). The sense of Europe coming to an end is especially tenacious in places criss-crossed by borders of forgotten empires that stand for failed historical visions: "Somewhere on the right was Histria: the Greeks, ruins, marble columns, 7th century B.C., but I didn't care for that. ... The minaret in Babadag was austere and simple... I felt the continent end, I felt the quickened breath of the land that is giving up its duties" (Stasiuk, 2004, 186). In such oblivious geography of the non-historical (coming down to the non-touristic) Europe, the novel presents itself as an impossible genre, especially the novel written "according to rules", meaning, perhaps, complete with character development and narrative closure. Some form of unruly fiction is feasible, but chiefly as a notation of the unique polyphony of the borderland province: "lurking from behind fences are Germanized Poles, Romanized Germans, Polonized Ukrainians, this whole borderland hybrid, this golden dream of believers in multiculti. ... the dialog [in the novel] would start from all these morning sounds characteristic of those forgotten places" (Stasiuk, 2004, 22). But, since these scattered voices do not gather into action, the narrative remains latent and the author is left with an trans-generic and vaguely ethnic form he succinctly puts as "the Slavic on the road" (Stasiuk, 2004, 215).

The travelogue unfolds as a fantasy of indeterminate difference substantiated by the Carpathian transnational provinciality that can be represented only as self-ironical and self-pitying deficiency: "Again this lack, this incomplection, again the nostalgia for life that is elsewhere" (Stasiuk, 2004, 112). Eastern Europe is able to assert itself only relationally as lack — in a manner that is both earnest and mocking, it can only imitate the West and do so badly. Stasiuk develops this combination of self-denial and -absorption into a complicated architecture of oppositions compounding the Eastern European ethnopoetics of negative nativism. This mode of representation proceeds through chains of contradictions, because arguing a nativist case by way of escape from any assertion of a fixed identity, especially that specific cross of geographic and historical axes of belonging that structure national identity, looks like an exercise in some twisted dialectic. On the most apparent level Eastern European difference manifests itself, as I remarked above, in the performative negation of Western European positivity — its ordered

history, palpable historic sites rendering its historical narratives believable, or solidity of national centers and borders guarding them. However, as such negation can only iterate the initial lack that Eastern Europe feels in relation to the West, it at the same time manifests a desperate nostalgia for Europe that stands for the truth and actuality of existence. Negative nativism is a two-directional performance: it challenges the way by which Western Europe constructs its “enjoyment” through stereotyping Eastern Europe as its Other, and, concurrently, it confirms such stereotypical representations, often only implicit and acknowledged in the West, by exaggerating them until they become absurd. In this second move, by self-Othering that mocks Western European stereotyping, Eastern Europe takes an active role of the thief of enjoyment. In its pathetic desire to be like the West, Eastern Europe becomes an imperfect imitation that cunningly caricatures the original.

In *Fado*, in a chapter titled significantly “Parody as a way of continent’s survival”, Stasiuk speculates on the possibility of Eastern European inessential essence: “Maybe my part of the continent has an instinct which warns it against something like a benign apocalypse; it will disappear before it manages to come into existence, barely becoming a reflection or caricature of something bigger and stronger than itself” (Stasiuk, 2006, 68). This specifically Eastern European sense of its own derivativeness and peripherality, manifested in its tendency for apocalyptic condensation of history into premonitions of an inevitable end, becomes the chief force of Stasiuk’s nativist charge against the West. In a reversal characteristic of his offhand dialectic, Stasiuk reproaches cosmopolitanism attributed to the West for its self-centered provincialism and declares Eastern European provincialism cosmopolitan, insofar as it is understood, again, as parodic reappropriation of its Western universalist core:

The self-absorbed West perceives the rest of the continent as its bad copy. But the East takes from you³ only a mask, a disguise, so as to be able to pretend it is just like you. ... If the West is provincial, then we practised a kind of aberrant cosmopolitanism ... our real life happened elsewhere. We could never accept ourselves for what we were (Stasiuk, 2006, 72).

³ It is important to note that Stasiuk establishes at this point his position of an antagonist, addressing the West as “you”.

Eastern European cosmopolitan provincialism⁴, or, as it seems to be interchangeable, provincial cosmopolitanism — relative and locked in a vicious circle of derivativeness — is premised on the paradox of negative identification that pushes Eastern Europe into the sphere of unreality. The Carpathians comprise several countries whose history is mostly that of subjection to European empires and, later, to the communist system. Denied the full participation in history as the subject, the region vacillates between the overblown national pathos and sense of deficiency of the voice and place in larger European history. However, Stasiuk turns this condition of perennial deficiency which is in many ways incapacitating into some redemptive power for the rest of Europe: “This is a specialty of auxiliary countries, the second-rate nations and reserve peoples ... this is the self-irony which allows one to play with one’s fate, mock it, imitate it, turn the fall into a mock-heroic legend, and transform invention into something like redemption”. (Stasiuk, 2006, 20) And indeed the self-ironical and mockingly pathetic redemption is what Eastern Europe holds in store for the continent. Inspired by Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1904), Stasiuk draws a fantasy of an apocalypse that is realized as an ultimate “theft of enjoyment” — the conquest of the “old” Europe by the “new” one:

Albanians, Bulgarians, Bosnians, Belarussians, Croats, Czechs, Estonians, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Macedonians, Moldavians, Montenegrins, Poles, Romanians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenians, and Ukrainians — this is how, in brief, we can describe the map of territories inhabited by two hundred million new Europeans. Not to make it too easy, though, we should add to this belt of “mixed population” as Hannah Arendt once called the changeable and amorphous space lost somewhere between Germany and Russia, we could add, let’s say, the Gagauz, let’s add the mobile and transnational Gypsies, the Crimean Tatars and Turks, who did not manage to come back on time to their suddenly shrunk motherland on the Bosphorus. Yes, two hundred million new Europeans that’s a real challenge. It should keep one awake at night, evoke fear and joy, because the upcoming events resemble a discovery of a new continent. The plan for the forthcoming decades is the following: the Gypsies will camp in the middle of Champs-Elysees, the Bulgarian bear-tamers will show their art on the Kudam in Berlin, half-savage Ukrainians will set up their misogynist Cossack communities at the gates of Milan, the drunk Poles engrossed in prayer will ransack vineyards on the Rein and Mosel and will plant there bushes bearing fruit filled with pure spirit, and then they will set off again singing litanies and stop only at the edge of the continent at the

⁴ For the development of this concept see Dorota Kolodziejczyk: “Cosmopolitan provincialism in a comparative perspective”, in: Wilson, Lawson-Welsh, Sandru: *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, Routledge, 2009.

Catholic and miraculous Santiago de Compostella. It's difficult to say what the Romanians will do with their sheep herds amounting to millions — after all, their national feature is sheep farming as well as unpredictability. The Serbs, Croats and Bosnians will sail the English Channel in their Dalmatian pirogues and balkanize Great Britain ... The citizens of Latvia and Lithuania will cunningly change identity and mislead the public opinion used to clear division lines. Slovenians and Slovaks will claim to be citizens of Slavonia, which will desperately confuse the European computer systems. Moldavians, whose main national revenue comes from organ selling, will trade themselves wholesale as a nation and ruin the world market of organ transplantation. And what the Albanians will do is utterly beyond belief... (Stasiuk, 2006, 82-83)

Stasiuk hoards such stereotypes in sprees of exaggerated improvisation to underscore the fictional allure that Eastern Europe holds for Europe proper. Eastern Europe is unverifiable, that is why it can invent its own aberrations without limits.⁵ It is interested not so much in asserting its difference as in reinventing itself anew as some “refined fiction” that Stasiuk thinks of when looking at the map of the Carpathian ridge supporting Eastern Europe “like a spine” (Stasiuk, 2006, 60). It is the visible geographic proof that borders are only fanciful inventions put on the map, artificial markers of space whose task is to legitimize the center and to prove its gravity, but in those regions, where anachronism loses its meaning and sequential temporality dissolves into the eternal present, the borders likewise are only lines drawn arbitrariness into space that will undo them anyway: “To live in the Carpathians is to remember that citizenship and nationality had a minor significance here. Sometimes I see in my most extravagant and comopolitan dreams the Carpathian ridge. I leave home and set off east, then south, and I don't cross any borders... down below runs the noisy and anxious current of modernity, but the mountains themselves remain untouched” (Stasiuk, 2006, 66). To narrate the space, or movement in space, which, after all, is what travelogue seems to be, is a determinate oxymoron, because to travel means to defy chronology and experience simultaneity of temporal planes.

Stasiuk links Eastern European provincial cosmopolitanism with the eternal present of the continent's peripheries whose populations and communities were never allowed to

⁵ Stasiuk refers here to his friend, a Ukrainian writer Jurij Andruhovych, who admits that the Eastern European writer has to fight (or, mostly in his and Stasiuk's case, yield to) the temptation to self-exoticize to the point of the absurd, because the West is so ignorant about Eastern Europe that it does not even bother to verify the notorious “truths” written about it.

solidify into separate national entities convinced of their necessity. The peripheries of Eastern Europe are sustained by a continuous movement: "Central, Southern, Eastern — by all means, worse — Europe — was never able to stop, to experience a complete motionlessness. It was always too young for this and it could never comprehend that the world can all of a sudden get exhausted and stop" (Stasiuk, 2006, 25). All around, or, rather, since we are traversing the mountains here, down below, nationalisms clashed, national borders shifted, whole populations came and went, names on the map changed, but this spine of Eastern Europe remained a terrain of an incessant flow of people forwards and backwards that disseminated and mixed languages, and somehow, despite all the diversity of the region, rendered those people surprisingly alike one another. Old women in villages dress in the same black dresses and sit motionless in the evenings; men gather in cafes since early morning and seem to have world-important matters to discuss the whole day long, here and there the narrator will glimpse a beautiful young woman always unself-consciously gracing the world with her mere presence, but, above all, it will be the smell of shepherds that stands for Stasiuk for the eternal present of the region — compared to this trans-national, trans-historical smell, modernity, civilization etc. can offer only "mongrelized versions of the everyday ... trash multiplication" (Stasiuk, 2004, 16).

But these are the Gypsies who epitomize this special combination of provincial cosmopolitanism and the continuous present, geographically symbolized by the Carpathian ridge. The author, heading east (he writes "we were driving east. In fact, we were escaping the west" (Stasiuk, 2006, 63) keeps looking for the Gypsies who stand for the true, and probably the last, natives of Eastern Europe. Gypsies precede the modern idea of the nation, yet they are the most literally an "imagined community", in that they are kept together not by history and borders, but by legends, myths and travel. In their complete separateness from the "current of modernity", the Gypsies of Eastern Europe represent the most durable national/ethnic entity, and yet they defy the constitutive historicity of the nation, one would like to say, as narration, precisely in the same way as Eastern European fictionality cannot accumulate into a "novel properly written" or a history "collected together". Themselves deprived of any property — "pitting levity against gravity", to use a quote from Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* — the Gypsies appropriate space heavy with historical gravity that does not concern them:

At last I understood that they want to show the village to me, which means the ruins of the Saxon church. But the venerable site did not interest me in the least. I was looking at little Gypsies. That village and the whole space belonged to them. Most probably they were not even born there. Their parents took over houses left by the Germans who'd returned to the old country. ... What had been settled and fixed was yielding to the transient, temporary, even the non-existing. ... As to things, they owned as much as to be able to disappear in an instant without leaving a trace. ... With a sardonic smile, they looked at paroxysms of our civilization and if they took anything from it for themselves, this was only trash, refuse, ruined houses and alms. As if the rest did not have for them any value at all (Sasiuk, 2006, 96-97)

Traveling across the countries of the Carpathian ridge Stasiuk is fascinated with the Gypsies' "improvisational miraculousness" — with how they cling to an existence on the margins, largely impervious to the allure of Europe as civilizational value: "When I am looking at their marginal life, the seriousness of my "Europeanness" is radically questioned" (Sasiuk, 2006, 80). Stasiuk manages to combine in his two travelogues an attitude of a distanced, half-anthropologically, half-nostalgically inclined observer with a somewhat twisted, but by all means logical, identification with the Gypsies. "Perhaps I am related to them through some bastard connection — I have learnt to write, I somehow manage to put words together, but I am not able to compose out of those stories a sensible history, a history to believe in" (Stasiuk, 2004, 215). His stories will not make up a novel, which is, after all, an arch-European genre, but a digressive travelogue with only loose ends and history fading out into myth. And, ultimately, it is the Gypsies' utter otherness that fully allows the narrator to phrase out the "negative nativism" of Eastern Europe and secure the continent's redemption on the wave of the affective cosmopolitanism of the new barbarians of Europe, a mission slyly askance the Romantic Messianic projections:

I don't want to say that we here in the East are like the Gypsies — although the metaphor is very tempting indeed. Still, it's difficult for us to take Europe as our property, our motherland, our heritage. We are straglers here, coming from the outside, from countries of which Europe is little aware and perceives them as a threat rather than a part of itself. ... it's quite possible that our continental mission is the deformation of your achievements, their decomposition, their grotesque transformation and parody, which will, after all, prolong their life (Stasiuk, 2006, 80).

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