

POST-89 MOLDOVA BY ANDRZEJ STASIUK

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Abstrakt: Anne-Marie Monluçon, MOŁDOWA PO ROKU 1989 WEDŁUG ANDRZEJA STASIUKA. „PORÓWNANIA” 14, 2014, T. XIV, s. 129–136. ISSN 1733-165X. Tekst poświęcony został sposobowi obrazowania mentalności i obyczajowości mieszkańców Mołdawii po 1989 roku, w zaproponowanym przez Andrzeja Stasiuka zbiorze wspomnieniowym z podróży po krajach byłego ZSRR, zatytułowanym *Jadąc do Babadag*. Autorkę interesuje tekst Stasiuka ze względu na odnotowane w nim reakcje ostalgiczne Mołdawian, którzy znajdują się na etapie poszukiwania i definiowania własnej tożsamości, przede wszystkim jednak zainteresowana jest wydobyciem z relacji pisarza sygnałów polskiej świadomości postkolonialnej.

Abstract: Anne-Marie Monluçon, POST-89 MOLDOVA BY ANDRZEJ STASIUK. „PORÓWNANIA” 14, 2014, Vol. XIV, p. 129–136. ISSN 1733-165X. The text is aimed at showing the way of portraying the mentality and customs of Moldovians after 1989 in Andrzej Stasiuk’s recollection travelogue from his travels to the countries of former USSR entitled *Jadąc do Babadag*. Stasiuk’s work is interesting to the author because of the ostalgitic reactions of Moldovians who are in the process of searching and defining their identities. However, the most important aspect for the author is to obtain evidence of the Polish postcolonial awareness from the work.

After his pamphlet *Moja Europa*, devoted to his first travels mainly in Carpathian Europe, Andrzej Stasiuk widened his field of observation from the “Baltic to the black Sea”, from Central Europe to the Balkans. He gathered the memoirs concerning the travels between 1996 and 2004 in a collection of texts that was greeted with well-deserved acclaim: *Jadąc do Babadag* In this book, chapter 10, under the title

“Moldova”, stands out as an exception. This country is one of the few, along with Albania (chapter 9) and Slovenia (chapter 8) where the author made one single trip lasting around fifteen days. Above all, it is the only country that used to be part of the USSR, if we exclude Ukraine which constitutes a very minor reference.

As usual, the reader is left to his own resources – no help from the author – to retrieve clues enabling him to put a date on the narrative. The recurring mention of the adjective “Post-Soviet” points to the period after 1991, and the existence of a “border” put in place by the Trans-Dniestrian separatists – albeit not internationally recognized – clearly shows that the trip took place after the 1991–1992 civil war. Finally, the use of the Euro as a currency dates the action between 2002 and 2004, the year the book was published. As he usually does, A. Stasiuk remains silent about political current issues, that is the election of communist President Voronine in 2001. His readers know how much he lacks interest for the political dimension of life. Sticking to his point, A. Stasiuk remains very elusive about his fellow travellers, sketchily identified very late in the trip at the Bender “checkpoint”. There are three characters besides the driver: A. Stasiuk, another man only known by his initial “A” and a third one. Someone simply identified as “W” joins them later only to travel north to Soroca, in Gipsy territory. The party of travellers hire the services of three different drivers: successively Micha, Kola and Valeri. Very grudgingly, they chauffeur their passengers to all the destinations including the two regions inhabited by the separatist Gagaouz and Trans-Dniestrian minorities.

A paper on this chapter could be titled “How to travel in a country torn by inter-ethnic conflicts without taking sides?” But to keep in line with the subject of this conference, I shall instead try to answer the following questions: Can the term “post-colonial” be used to describe the situation of Moldova between 2002 and 2004? As A. Stasiuk does not mention any meeting with a local artist, except, very quickly, Andrei Kopcza, the second question won’t be: how is the post-colonial situation reflected in Moldovan cultural life? But: how a Pole, as emancipated as possible from the Soviet past, can account for a situation that is more colonial than post-colonial? Are the artistic resources that he puts into practice limited to the devices intended to express his critical distance and his irony?

I shall start from the more superficial observations by the traveller, attempting at first part to describe the present of allegedly “post-Soviet” Moldova. But the Civil War of 1991–1992, as well as the “ostalgia” (to take up the German word) of the 2000 decade can only be explained by the past experience, that of a Soviet “colony” and previously an “Imperial province” of Tsarist Russia. This will constitute the second part of this paper. Nevertheless, the writer’s task is to make sure he is not deluded by appearances, which leads me to the third part, devoted to the quest of the genuine Moldavian identity, in connection with its gentle, eastern way of life.

I. THE PRESENT OF POST-SOVIET MOLDOVA

The beginning of the trip is placed under the auspices of displeasure. The Romanian customs officers do not understand the tourists' motivation, but on top of this, the Moldavians themselves keep telling them "there is nothing in this country" (140). This sentence provides the author with one of the recurring themes of this chapter: emptiness, void, desert, the nothing. The countryside offers the vision of a monotonous natural landscape – rolling green hills as far as the eye can see – ruined in places by the depressing architecture of grey concrete cubes. The common point between nature and human buildings is monotony. The rhetorical device best-suited for monotony is repetition "green once again, green, and some more green" (138).

The cities offer a disquieting sight. But it is hard to tell whether the model of the new elites is inspired by the West or by the Russian *nouveaux riches*. In a cultural centre in Gagaouz territory, the traveller spots a young woman who dances in a TV-show style to the sound of "a desperate imitation of the music from the corrupted West" (148-149). In Kagul and Kishinev, "a Moldovan middle class who has just started to emerge" (151) flaunts its ostentatious wealth: "golden chains"; „sunglasses, fashionable look", "cellular phones and big cars" whose engines are always running as in the play *Noc*. A. Stasiuk's vocabulary suggests that part of these *nouveaux riches* made their fortune in the underground economy: „nifty little scoundrels", „currency traffickers, pimps", „small-scale crooks" [*cwaniaki z miodem w uszach* (142), *cinkciarz, alfons* (152), *kolesie w land cruiserach* (152)]. At the end of *Jadąc do Babadag* and in his play *Noc*, A. Stasiuk goes back to a typical aspect of poor-country economies: organ trafficking. Thanks to variations on the same model, the writer draws our attention on the new social divide. The text shows the contrast between a former „King of high life" [*czuł się jak król życia*, (162)], namely Micha who used to be a rich tourist in Warsaw in the eighties, to the new kings, the petty thieves whom Stasiuk calls "the sad kings of low life" [*smutni królowie życia*, (142)] in Kogul. The only ones that were able to adjust while keeping their traditions are the Gypsies of Soroca. One foot in modernity, on the side of trade, computers and big cars, and the other in tradition, as Stasiuk shows when meeting one of their dignitaries he introduces as "Arthur was a king, that is a baron" [*Artur był królem, to znaczy baronem*, (166)].

But the portrait of those who "fear nothing" – the expression is used twice – reveals that the model is once again to be found in Moscow. These people have only travelled in the communist bloc: Ilia to Dresde and Moscow (172) and Valeri to Kiev and Moscow (178). Stasiuk's irony is perceptible when he evokes the monk from Orhi-the-Old who had "been acquainted with the world" since he takes the Polish travellers for Slovacs and even more when he recalls the waiters in Kichinev who prefer to answer in Russian whereas Stasiuk had made the effort to ask his

question in Rumanian. The traveller understands that, for these people, "Russian was a sign of good taste and upper-class manners" (152). Moldavia is the only former Eastern bloc country where travellers have to resort massively to the Russian language with their drivers, and not only with their Russian-trained Ukrainian hosts in Grigoriopol. In chapter 5 of *Jadąc do Babadag* Stasiuk wrote a purple patch where Polish and Hungarian travellers use all kinds of non-verbal communication gimmicks in an effort to avoid using Russian. The conclusion that is reached after the Kichinev leg of the journey is that Moldova seems to have missed its exit from communism, for the time being, and only mimicks independence. The travellers leave the country under "the impression that all of them just pretend, that they imitate their own representation of the world that exists elsewhere" (152).

Stasiuk provides only a late and partial explanation of the climate of inter-ethnic tension that prevails in the country, alluding briefly to the 1992 conflict between the Moldavians and the minority of Trans-Dniestria. Yet he delivers without any comment the attitude of their first driver, Micha, who shows great reluctance when asked to take them to Gagaouz territory. Only 50 kilometres from home (Kagul) he is lost and refuses to get out of his car. On the contrary, their Gagaouz hostess, Helena, alludes in a reproachful tone those who go to Kishinev. A. Stasiuk has chosen to frame the chapter between the opening and the closing scenes in which he crosses the Roumanian-Moldavian border comparing the "small lonely country" to an "island" [*wyspa*] (161). The metaphor of the island is paradoxical precisely because Moldavia has no access to the sea but was simply given by Ukraine a small stretch of territory on the Danube. Through this circular composition, the text duplicates the closure of the country.

II. THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

Those two border crossings is also intended to contrast with the crossing of the other "border" set up by the Transdnestrrian separatists. The three Poles and their driver cross the so-called border in three stages characterized by an increasing tension. The Moldavian customs officer is a young man, as benevolent as his Roumanian counterparts: "spying paranoia had not had time to poison his mind" (156). In sharp contrast, the trans-Dniestrian soldiers immediately see them as "enemies" and refer them to their senior officers at the Bender checkpoint. This is the beginning of a very suspenseful episode, worthy of a Cold War spy novel. The soldiers confiscate the passports of the foreigners and accuse them of having recorded the crossing on a camera. This scene is an exception in the Stasiuk book and is the only moment where there is danger and the author and his friends take sides whereas he has so far carefully kept the balance between the various communities of the

country. In the best tradition of Polish conspiracy the travellers turn to reflexes from the resistance: they had actually made a film but they lie and hide the cassette. But the driver knows the contradictions of their adversaries. Their intransigence is only matched by their corruption, and everything is solved at the end with a one-hundred Lei banknote.

The aftermath of the civil war is therefore perceptible in the relations between the Moldavian majority (that is Roumanian-speaking) and the minorities: the Gagauz who are Turkish-speaking Christians and the Trans-Dniestrans who are Slavs – Ukrainians or Russians – and use a Cyrillic alphabet. The troubles also resulted in a massive Russian military presence in Trans-Dniestria where the currency, revealingly, is not the lei anymore, but the Transdniestrian rouble. A. Stasiuk sums up his impressions during his stay in Tiraspol, the capital of the district of Trans-Dniestria, by means of a metaphor: “[...] almost all of them seemed to be superfluous, seemed to be *appendices* of other people’s murky and momentous business, *appendices* of the military, of weapons depots, of the XIVth Russian army stationed nearby, of the black four-wheel drives, and the omnipresent Sheriff company, which belonged to Smirnoff, the so-called president of this so-called state” (160). The *appendices* is the translation of *dodatek*. Yet Stasiuk mentions the presence of three Russian and Ukrainian “mirotvoriec” on a sight-seeing tour at the monastery of Orhei-the-Old. The word-for-word translation as “the peace-keeping forces” may possibly contain some irony. Therefore, the issue of the Russian empire is not limited to Trans-Dniestria.

To understand the current situation of Moldavia in 2002, and its recent past – that is the 1991–1992 civil war, one needs to go back to the end of the Second World War, when Stalin imposed a redrawing of the borders that contained all the seeds of future conflicts. He re-sized Roumania, shifted the Moldavians into the USSR, imposed the addition of Trans-Dniestria, a region with which they had no historical nor cultural affinity while making sure that industry would be developed only in Trans-Dniestria, probably more loyal to Moscow. The description of Moldavia, mainly rural and culturally Roumanian, suggests that the secession of Trans-Dniestria might not have posed a major problem if the conflicts had not been actually economic. Reading the map takes us back to this defining moment when Stalin re-drew the borders as if “using a ruler [*wykreślone przy linijce* (161)], with no frills, without the fleeting curves that characterize the territories where history gets mingled with geography, with the presence of men, the old disorder. Keeping the right proportions in mind, this border on the map was reminiscent of the Sahara borders in Africa. [*Z zachowaniem proporcji tutejsza granica na mapie przypominała nieco afrykańskie granice na Saharze* (161)]. This quotation is the extract where the comparison with the Western colonial empires is the most explicit.

Yet, the trauma of Moldavia actually has its roots in the imperial domination of Tsarist Russia from 1812 on. Stasiuk notices that most Orthodox monasteries date

back from the XIXth and XXth centuries and that they “look imported” [*wyglądały jak coś z importu* (154)]. Moldavia therefore has been a russified country since 1812 from the viewpoint of architecture and language. A. Stasiuk somehow distinguishes Trans-Dniestria from the rest of the country. But can we at this stage of the analysis that the situation is post-colonial in Moldavia, but still colonial or already neo-colonial in Trans-Dniestria?

Before we can proceed, we have to focus on the phenomenon that Stasiuk calls “nostalgia” [*tęsknotę* (149)], the French text taking up the German neologism *ostal-gia*. The nostalgia for the communist past seems indeed widespread in the Moldavia of 2002. A. Stasiuk often transcribes his interlocutors words through an indirect free style, or through quotations in the direct style. The first driver, Micha, regrets Stalin’s period, a time when, according to him, the firing squads took care of thieves, and denounces the inversion of values now prevailing: “at the moment, only the richest stole and made sure the poor did not” [...] (144). The same character later adds, “As for me, I am a Soviet being” [*Ja sowiecki człowiek* (146)]. The third driver, Valeri, is among those who lost their jobs and end up with a lower status in the new system. He used to be an engineer before he became a taxi driver.

The writer mixes empathy and irony. Confronted with the Gagaouz who have kept the busts of Lenin and the monuments to the soldiers killed in action in Afghanistan, he sits on a fence because he usually trusts his interlocutors to be sincere: “their hearts cannot lie when they feel nostalgia” (149) but he concedes that he cannot understand them. Welcomed by russified Ukrainians in Grigoriopol, a town of Trans-Dniestria, he resorts to self-derision, explaining that he has had so much to eat and drink, that he respects so much the “laws of hospitality” that, on the spot, he almost sees eye to eye with them. But, further down in the narrative, he rectifies Micha’s account. This other Micha (who bear the same name as their driver) has an idyllic memory of his stay in Warsaw whereas for the Polish writer, these were the “gloomy 80ies”. A. Stasiuk allows his hosts’ contradictions be glaringly exposed when they discuss Moldavian nationalism stopping short of down-right separatism: “Valeri defended the view that there was no such thing as what people call the Roumanian people” whereas their hostess happens to be a former teacher of Roumanian language! (163). In the end, the Polish traveller only avoids a clash only by hastily taking leave of his hosts.

In these pages, it is easy to take measure the distance separating A. Stasiuk from all those who look back on communism with nostalgia. If Stasiuk too is reputed to feel nostalgia, his feeling are rather in connection with the Austro-Hungarian-Empire, a multicultural state as he describes it in chapter 5 of *Jadąc do Babadag*. The other reason is that he takes a very critical attitude towards post-communism and the alienation by the Western model of consumer society, as shown in his intellectual biography *Jak zostałem pisarzem*. But we should above all pay attention to the fact that he is melancholic more than nostalgic.

Going back to the topic of Moldavia, two paradoxes stand out very clearly. The first one is that we wonder why the civil war broke out whereas in all communities in the country, communist-era nostalgia is to be encountered. The repetition of “things used to be much better” by the third driver, Valeri, and his family in Grigoriopol (163) conveys a feeling of unity. Only the Soroce gypsies express a different opinion. The second paradox is that in post-colonial situations, the former colonizers are usually nostalgic. They are the ones who cannot get over the demise of the empire, and the disappearance of the privileges they used to enjoy, like some present-day Russians, or some of the former colonial elites in Algeria or Indochina, in France. In Moldavia, on the contrary, the former “colonized” regret the passing of Soviet domination. Some Moldavian nationalists even go as far as asserting that the former colonial power was Roumania and not the USSR. Hence the polemical discussion to figure out if Moldavian schoolchildren must learn the history of Roumania as part of their own. To the other end of the spectrum, pro-Roumania Moldavians – not mentioned by Stasiuk – regard Moldavian nationalism and Roumanophobia as an artificial creation of Soviet propaganda.

III. THE TRUE IDENTITY OF MOLDAVIANS

With the phenomenon of *ostalgia*, the core of the problem is touched. The picture painted by Stasiuk is that of an alienated country, to such an extent that it believes it is something different from what it really is, a country that is wrong about its identity. And it appears to us that A. Stasiuk, surreptitiously, has set about disclosing the real Moldavian identity.

The first feature that emerges is the harmony with nature. Whether he writes about Kagul or Kishinev, Stasiuk describes cities whose old neighbourhoods look like villages, the countryside. The traveller may have been struck by this revelation when visiting the monastery of Orhei-the-Old, one of the few monuments predating 1812. It was implanted in natural caves, in a scenery reminiscent of the perfection of Genesis. This page, strongly influenced by the Bible echoes the theme of “Moldovian Eden” structuring the whole chapter. Yet A. Stasiuk is careful not to take entirely seriously this theme often exploited by the Moldavian nationalists. The two scenes of hospitality, the first in the home of Helena, the Gagaouz lady, and the second among the russified Ukrainians at Grigoriopol, confirm that the various communities are united by the civilization of the garden, in the same way as the Turkish minorities in the Balkans described by earlier travellers.

The second characteristic pointed out by the writer is the oriental component of this identity. The author repeatedly uses the term “bazaar” [*bazar*] to describe market scenes in Kagul (143) then Tiraspol (159). He notices the “oriental fastuousness” of the room where Helena welcomes him. But only the Gypsies of Soroca as-

sume this oriental identity in their architecture, for which Stasiuk coins a very amusing expression: “the metal-sheet roofs looked like a baroque-byzantine-Tatar-Turkish encampment” [*Dachy [...] jak barokowo-bizantyjsko-tatarsko-tureckie obozowisko* (164)]. Even if nothing is ever explicit, all these hints remind us that these regions spent a long time under Ottoman domination.

The third characteristic is the sense of hospitality, which reverses two of the initial themes of the chapter. The abundance of food and drink is mimicked by comic euphorical enumerations that counterbalance the theme of the desert, the emptiness, the nothing. The pattern of a gracious, confident and peaceful style of living emerges from the two hospitality scenes, pointing in a direction that would allow all the groups to live side by side instead of confronting one another.

To conclude, the difficulty to reach the deep undelying identity of that country is the mark of an alienation so potent that it is impossible to figure out if the situation is post-colonial or still colonial. The nationalisms, all claiming to defend a genuine identity, may have retained only the most recent and divisive elements, suppressing a more ancient strata, which might allow all of them to live in peace. Only the outsider’s glance by the Polish travellers can make out a kind of unity, a peaceful art of living, whose most concrete and moving element is the women “with their hands resting on their lap” [*z rękami złożonymi na podółku*] in Kagul market (143) and in the Gagaouz town of Baurci (148). Somewhere else, A. Stasiuk has written that his grandmother also took this type of posture. This detail confirms that, for Stasiuk, this stay in Moldavia is also a travel in time, a means to reconnect with childhood, as he explicitly writes it about the time spent in Helena’s home. Her room reminds him of “that of [his] aunts and grandmothers in the countryside” (147). This last element may help us understand why Stasiuk, dominated by melancholy rather than nostalgia, meditates on the loss and the mortality of all things. And this could bring us – to conclude on a hypothesis – that the poetic dimension of his style based on distant echoes and muted repetitions is the way he fights against the disappearance of things past.

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