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"THE BOOTS' JOURNEY"

Introduction to "Vloga mojih škornjev v angolski revoluciji" by Mate Dolenc

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"But the true travellers are those, and those alone, who set out only for the journey's sake," wrote Baudelaire in the poem "The Voyage,"[1] thus poetically describing a special type of traveler that also fits Dolenc's travel prose. As with contemporary travel prose in general, it is no longer simply a matter of travel, but primarily the search for an answer to the classic travel question, Why do we travel at all? Connected to this question is also travel motivation, with which I will attempt to explain a fateful plot shift in Dolenc's "The Role of My Boots in the Angolan Revolution" in comparison with contemporary Slovene travelogues, casting light on the writer's unique travel perspective.

The 1980s—also the time postmodernism bloomed in Slovene literature, popular genres attracted attention, "high" and "low" styles mixed, and genre hybridization took place—brought an increase in travel writing. In the central travel novels of the 1980s (e.g., Evald Flisar's *Čarovnikov vajenec* [1986], Marko Uršič's *Romanje za Animo* [1988]), travel is connected with the philosophy of spiritual pilgrimage, in which the contact of Eastern and Western philosophies suggests the paradigm of the road as yearning for eternity, immortality, truth, and authentic life. However, the search for personal identity is in Dolenc's travel novella quite different; it reveals an ironic, cynical perspective, built on a special travel motive, rambling (*klateštvo*). The first-person narrator is a vagabond storyteller who observes difficult politico-economic conditions in an African country through the eyes of an uninformed sailor desirous of drink and entertainment, not metaphysical depths or individual spiritual transformations. This sceptical distance from travel, unanalyzed in the novella, Dolenc introduced in the story "Pot v Katmandu": "The road south, the road to Katmandu. Or to Macedonia or Greece or

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[1] "Mais les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent / Pour partir; cœur légers, semblables aux ballons..." Translation from Charles Baudelaire, "Le Voyage," *Baudelaire: Selected Verse*, ed. and trans. Francis Scarfe (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961) 183.

Turkey or wherever [...] As long as I get as far as I can, away from—you'll never know from what and why" (Dolenc 1973; 96, 101).[2]

Travel as conquering distances in space is in this novella restricted to dwelling in space (Luanda) and only contains the last phase of the classic travel scheme (departure-road-return). Thus the traveler's freighter moors outside Angola's main city, which at first interests the narrator only as a place of entertainment, and which he also becomes acquainted with in his vain search for beer as a post-revolutionary, anarchic harbor. In it the "black" variant of communism, defined by Russian and Cuban visions of the future, infuses the text with realistic features, which with the social motif of poverty are honed into a tragic message. Precisely the tragic plot turn, when the African Zeka is shot for theft of the writer's shoes, stands out from the established rogue's perspective in Dolenc's earlier travelogues These, in their non-chalance of naive hedonism, resemble Blaž Ogorevec's (1951) travel tales. Both travel writers observe the world unsentimentally and with grotesque criticalness.[3] In their ambivalence (inclination to travel and indifference towards it) the two are similar to the first-person narrator Fritz in Izidor Cankar's novel *S poti* (1913), only the latter built into his novel a moral debate between decadent reality and ethical consciousness. Dolenc's novella differs from these texts based on its absurd ending, which in a Poesque manner shocks the reader and poses ethical questions of guilt and punishment. Despite the fact that the reader becomes familiar with the poverty of Luanda's residents and the grotesqueness of their revolution, one is very deeply moved by the end of the novel, the moreso because the reader met the narrator's new acquaintance Zeka as an unobtrusive and pleasant conversationalist who wanted only some worn clothes and old shoes. Since the narrator declines to give him these (some

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2 "Pot na jug, pot v Katmandu. Ali Makedonijo ali Grčijo ali Turčijo ali kamorkoli. [...] Da pridem čim dlje, stran od – nikoli ne boste vedeli, od česa in zakaj."

3 I have explained Dolenc's travel credo; Ogorevec, in his novel *Tropska melanholija*, writes, "Then I go. It's not important where, and to be honest I don't care to broaden intellectual horizons or to become more noble by discovering difference, as other travelers usually do; it's enough for me to wander" (33). ("Potem pa grem. Ni pomembno, kam, in pravzaprav si sploh ne želim širiti intelektualnih obzorij ali prek spoznave drugačnosti postajati plemenitejši, kot to navadno počno drugi popotniki, dovolj mi je le, da se klatim.")

previously unknown possessive feeling is aroused in him), Zeka steals the boots from him. When fleeing from the ship he refuses to hand them over to the soldiers, and they shoot him in cold blood. This feature of Dolenc's novella, on account of which the tragic shift at the end of the story is the more shocking, is in fact humor: our smile at the narrator's possessive fear changes into terror at an absurd death and revalues the typical Dolenc perspective on the road—the vagabond's restlessness. This restlessness has become an essential travel guide in contemporary Slovene travel novels as well: *Noč v Evropi* (2001) by Polona Glavan (born 1974), *Vladarka* (1997) by Andrej Moroviš (born 1960), and *Tao ljubezni* (1996) by Andrej Blatnik (born 1963). In her novel, Polona Glavan added to the vagabond's restlessness young travelers' desire for new friendships. Andrej Morovič tied it to the lifestyle of his heroine, the outcast Sabijn. Of these novels, Andrej Blatnik's *Tao ljubezni* stands out for its nihilistic intensity of the vagabond's status, in which only travel or an adrenaline dose from it can shake bored and empty existence. Blatnik's work differs in its radicalness from Dolenc's, which is not very nihilistic for the 1990s. On the contrary, at the end of the twentieth century, Dolenc, with his symbol of the sea, counterposed to the world he describes a vitalistic and "neo-pantheistic" attitude that he developed into an adoration of the sea (e.g., in the novels *Pes z Atlantide* [1993], *Ozvezdje Jadran* [1998], and *Morje v času mrka* [2001]).

Vagabond restlessness also fundamentally changed the descriptions of Africa in Dolenc's novella.[4] The descriptions are antithetical: the novella's social background is poverty; its opposite are the genuiness, vitality, and happiness of the Africans. Sonja Porle (born 1960) develops a similar antithesis in her travelogues, whose sympathy for Africa distinguishes them from Dolenc's pronounced scepticism. Her inner attitude towards Africa brings her close to a so-called sentimental traveler who "views" lands she visits with her heart. The sense of humor that suffuses minor irritations in Dolenc's and Porle's travel prose is related to the journey impressions of the world traveler Alma Karlin[5]

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4 Mate Dolenc commented on his descriptions of Africa: "My stories of Africa are more or less realistic, except for in the cases of the darkest locales, there is nothing supernatural or mystical, the possibility of telepathy" (Hudolin 13).

5 The first Slovene travelogues are from the sixteenth century (e.g., Benedikt Kuripečič's "Itenerarium" [1513] and Žiga Herberstein's "Rerum Roscoviticarum Comentarii" [1549]); however, the Slovene-language

(1889–1950), who already at the beginning of the twentieth century (1918–28) acquainted Slovene readers with exotic lands. Her travel motifs were classic (middle-class), since the traveler described the world through an anthropologist's eyes, which seek primarily differences on the road.

Contemporary Slovene prose differs from Karlin's early notes on the basis of vagabond restlessness, which in Dolenc's novella assumes a bizarre form.

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travelogue begins to develop along with Slovene narrative prose in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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