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Fragments from his diary in Iberia

Petre Popovăț

When, in 1998, I had the chance to take a one-month unexpected trip to Spain and Portugal, I had decided to keep a 'travel diary' for the first time in my life. At the beginning, I conceived it only for myself, in order to be able to remember after a while where I had been and what I had seen.

I used to write it on the spot, 'down on my knees', on a notebook or, at most, writing down my daily impressions during the evening. Hence, it was written while in action, without letting myself driven in the subsequent interventions of improving the style or of completing the information. It is presented as raw material, without having been submitted to montage.

Once in Bucharest, I read it to some of my friends. Now I shall reveal certain fragments of it. I hope that the impact felt by a Romanian (completely caught unaware) when in touch with the fascinating Iberia will be noticed.

Sunday, 3rd May, 1998. [...] I fell in love with Spain ever since in the plane. When, among clouds, the Spanish land finally appears, you cannot prevent yourself from having a shock. It is a really special landscape. The land, recently ploughed, has all colours: ochre (all shades), yellow, brick-red, up to Pompeian red. I don't know how the lots are divided, but the delineations have the most unusual shapes. They are not rect-

angular, but round and very irregular. Seen from above, you may think that is a copper plate with integrated circuits. [...]

Tuesday, 5th May, '98. A little more vernal. Walked through the city and seen the city centre (Plaza Mayor) which saved the reputation of the city a little bit because, between you and me, this is a bit nasty. New houses, facing brick, posh bad taste. I cannot say I am crazy for Benavente. I have barely seen two girls worthy of you turning your head after them. All the rest- dull and dressed like servants.

The bars- the same as up to now. For each glass of wine you are given (the price included in that of the wine) a 'pincho': a little bowl with 4-5 olives (incredibly tasty!) or some anchovies, or I don't know what else. Yet, there is hardly any ashtray in the entire bar! The cigarettes, paper napkins, olive pits are elegantly (this is a must if you don't want to make a complete fool of yourself!), thrown on the floor and next to the counter, there is a thick layer of filth. At the beginning I was shocked, but now I almost like the custom. There is certain voluptuousness in throwing everything on the floor...People are extremely friendly (especially with the Bavarian people we have just separated from).

After lunch, a *paseo en la ciudad*. A couple of Roman churches (one with a Spanish baroque

portal dated 1735). If the touch of time were still present and the facades weren't restored (99% with the obsessive facing brick), you would really feel like in a Spanish city, exactly the way you would have imagined it. Yet...Everything seems like fabric.

On our trips by car (about 10-15 kilometres) we find many dovecots down the fields. Specific countryside architecture made of pressed soil, with some high briquettes. I have seen only a dove, even if Alvaro says he is seeing thousands of them. Doves are edible and (Alvaro dixit as well) very good for fertilizing the soil. Yet, I wonder how they train them just to leave their droppings on the field without eating the grains.

The fields are opened (thousands of hectares mostly unproductive). They look weird and while among them, I keep on thinking that if I had been Don Quixote, I would have had exactly the same behaviour. It is difficult not to lose your mind and not to have hallucinations. Still, I have seen a very little and insignificant part of Spain. Will I ever see the rest? For the moment I have been promised a ten-day trip to Lisbon.

Friday, 8th May. [...] This part of Castilla reminds me of Dobrudja: in what concerns the light and the sound of silence (stupid figure of speech, but perfect if you want to render reality)

We have dinner in a fabulous restaurant, at Pobladura del Valle (12 km from Benavente). Outside there is a stone frontage and when you enter the restaurant you realize that you are in an old taphouse (wine cellar) carved in the bank of the ravine. The walls are made of clay. On one of the walls there is an engraving: 1851. This is a huge underground cave, something wonderful! High canopies and a projector at ground level (on the respective ravine). Some crazy foods are ordered: fried pig blood in onion, spice sausage boiled in wine, slices of a sort of a very dry *jamón* (apparently ass meat) and some other tomfoolery which now, after a few hours, burn my stomach and I dread to think of what they will burn tomorrow. But tomorrow is another day!

P.S. The wine cellar- is decorated with wooden ethnographic objects (winegrower and peasant tools) worthy of a museum. In the centre, an impressive winepress, with stones and a screw. Everything is authentic and denoting good-taste. Alvaro says that almost all peasants in the area used to have such wine cellars and that the one we see is not one of the biggest.

Saturday, 9th May [...] In what regards the style. I can see that the Portuguese have a very special type of humour. One says to the other: 'There is somebody looking for you...' - 'Who?' asks the fooled. - 'Un caralho!' (a penis) And the rest of them keep on laughing for half an hour. This would be nothing, but the joke keeps on being made on and on. *Caralho* is a word they use almost all the time. They must be obsessed. As a matter of fact, it keeps on appearing in the riffraff songs I keep on hearing. The word is respectfully uttered, almost in adoration. They are all mad as a March hares (and loud, on top of it all!)

I used to read in a French novel about the habit of the Portuguese males to caress their *caralho* in public, as if a natural gesture. I immediately connected this with one of Mario's gestures, which kept on driving me mad and Mario was Brazilian (another type of Portuguese). I could see the gesture in Carlos, when he came to Bucharest. Now Jorge also obeys the national gesture. I am surprised that Alvaro didn't take after them. Disgraceful, gross, idiotic.

At midnight, we all head towards Portugal in a full van, with three narrow seats in front. There are three of us and I am not small. Jorge is driving and in order not to fall asleep, he is singing (yelling) his lungs out 'Oh, meu caralho!etc etc.'It is cold in the car, it's not possible for me to fall asleep and we arrive at our destination around seven in the morning, on full rain. [...]

Sunday, 10th May. Today, after finishing eating, we stopped on the beach for a while, I en-

tered the ocean with my shoes on, had a drink of salty water (not like that in the Black Sea) and starred at the big and yet calm waves in awe. The water is silvery and the ocean looks like an old serious man who knows his power and sends controlled waves to the shore, until he gets mad and sends waves big as a house. Well and truly, this is terribly beautiful and impressive! [...]

Thursday, 14th May. I forgot the essential: I went to Cabo da Roca in the afternoon, the most occidental European place (latitude: 38° 47' North, longitude: 9° 30' east, altitude: 140 metres). 'This is where earth ends and the sea begins' (Camoës). The place is strange because winds blow from all directions. (The sea is wide open' – Tudor Mușatescu). The sky was cloudy and the sun (at its sunset, not at that of Europe) was sending three beams through the clouds. There were three light discs on the ocean (the beams reflected), which managed to make one think of something supernatural. Yet, that was the end of the world. Since it was late, Carlos promised me to come back tomorrow, to get my diploma. Actually, a certificate stating the fact that in such and such day I was present in the most Western European point.

Friday, 15th May. [...] I got the certificate which says: 'The undersigned certifies the fact that Petre Popovăț visited Cabo da Roca (Sintra-Portugal), the most occidental point of the European continent, 'where earth ends and the sea begins', 'where the spirit of Faith and Adventure lies, which pushed the Portuguese caravels towards searching for new worlds for the world' Sintra, 15th May, 1998 (ss) Undecipherable'. After that, they applied the wax seal with the insignia of the city hall. [...]

Thursday, 21st May. A few things about the Portuguese... (Research on 38 persons between 4 and 72 years old. Margin for error: \pm 99%). They are extremely hospitable. I found out that Carlos' family makes no exception. My heart

breaks when seeing them sleeping: Mariana and Marta in a cot and underneath, on a mattress, the lamp-post of Carlos. This, while I keep on staying comfortably in their double bed (hélas!)

They are friendly and open. The 18-19 year old kiddos, Rui's friends, call me 'Petre' and 'you' without being disrespectful. They are smiling most of the time and are quite generous. I recently met Antonio and he gave me a ride through the entire Lisbon and he didn't drop his bundle till feeding me the inevitable *bacalhão* (cod) at a certain inn. Jorge invites me over and then shows me Lisbon during the night and we don't enter any bar because I don't want to. (...)

The Portuguese are conceited. For them, in their country everything is 'the most': the biggest factory in the world, the eldest settlement in the world, the most expensive in Europe, the most beautiful in the world etc. There is no point in trying to get this out of their minds. They are so childish! But maybe this is their charm.

The Portuguese ladies are very fond of kissing (women with men). I am in a house and a couple shows up; the lady kisses me on both cheeks and afterwards she introduces herself. He hugs me as if being his best friend and after that he also introduces himself.

The Portuguese are lousy drivers. They love speed but they are completely uncivilised down the streets. They curse and stick the middle finger to each other and don't help those stuck in the traffic.

They speak a lot, fast, loudly but... in Portuguese. You look at them feeling like a bum and they keep on explaining something to you for half an hour and at the end they ask you: *entiendes?* What shall you do? You nod. But you got scratch. You tell them in Spanish (all Portuguese understand Spanish, but they feel amazed and indignant when the Spanish don't understand them) speaking slowly and using short sentences. They answer back in a verbal triad, in Portuguese, while you yawn, minding your own business. It's pointless to try to keep

the pace. It's true, those of them who have been to Romania complain about us doing the same thing. [...]

Saturday, 23rd May. A visit to Expo '98! The last world exhibition of the century! Yesterday they had the official opening. I expected to see quite a crowd, but many people had probably thought the same and didn't show up. The exhibition is big, perhaps huge. The entrance ticket costs 5000 escudos, around 30 USD. Very few places in the shade, no place to drink water for free. Official languages: Portuguese, English, Spanish. Why Spanish and not French? Any Spaniard can understand if he reads Portuguese, especially if looking for identically spelled words on the signposts.

I feel amazed when seeing a plan written in Braille. At the beginning, I praise the organizers who take care of our peers in need. Then, I ask myself: blind people are going to know how the pavilions are disposed in order to see WHAT? I would call it black humour if I didn't know that it is stupidity sans frontières.[...]

[...] I visit the Romanian pavilion. In a space a bit bigger than a bachelor flat in Berceni, the exhibition is dedicated to the Danube Delta. On the right side- a fishing boat, up on the left side- a screen with some dull, ugly, mute images. On the middle, about five or six ex-comrades. Pathetic. The personnel: three or four blondes who can speak Portuguese. On a wall- the Romanian Peasant Museum shop window! It comprises a horrible Lippovan costume, a Macedonian one (of the same quality), a Romanian one and the last one, a Tartar costume (the nations have been alphabetically grouped...) I had no idea that Romania is a multinational state. There is no explanation, either for the meaning of the word *Lippovans* or for the presence of the Macedonians when the pavilion of the Macedonian country is placed a few yards away. Next to the costumes, there is the 'Triumph' poster. If you are not an expert, you don't understand any-

thing. Or, even worse, you get it wrong.

A funerary stele from Histria, two coils of rope aimed at suggesting the fact that they pertain to the same époque (even if almost new). In a small shop window, the Hamangia replica with the following explanation: 'The Thinker and his woman (his wife). The Hamangia culture' It's clear, isn't it? What could a Swedish or an American have made of it? In the end, another small shop window with a few jewelleryes, Macedonian as well.

A CD Rom allows you to pick up images with about twenty Romanian personalities (Brâncuși, Enescu, Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Ilie Năstase, Palade, etc). They are all with their mouse on Nadia Comăneeci. I take a look as well: recent photos, together with Ion Iliescu, during the wedding etc. Everything is awkward if not outrageous!!!! [...]

[...] And...finally, the Utopia show! In a room of 10 000 places, a show like nothing I (or the others!) have ever seen. Lights, sounds, remarkable effects (directed by means of forty computers), people flying and dancing in the air without any visible sustaining cable, the ocean suggested by a huge cloth partially filled with air and which let dragons out or the statue of Liberty as a naked woman, lying, of whose sex a door opens and a character shows up. Not even the smallest obscenity! The folder I took with me explains everything better. I am speechless with enthusiasm. An absolutely grandiose show, organized by Canadians, Belgians, Frenchmen, Americans, Portuguese. [...]

Sunday, 24th May. [...] Deep in the mountains, right in the middle of the forest, Alvaro shows me the house which he inherited from an aunt. A complete wrack, also made of stone and on the frontal, the date: 1839. I liked the system they had for marking the borders of the property. An old neighbour showed us a hole in the stone next to the house threshold. From that hole, you had to measure a few metres. From the

house corner, also in a stone, a barely visible cross was carved. From then on you had to measure other meters, so and so forth. The signs were remembered by all neighbours so as to avoid conflicts.

Thursday, 28th May. [...] *Monasterio de San Lorenzo de Escorial*. A big building, a monastery and a palace pertaining to the one on whose kingdom 'the sun would never set'. A terribly austere building. In a hall, walls with old maps. I will stop to analyse the one representing Transylvania. For Valachia Pars, between Tergoviscia and Pitesi, there is Bocaretz (!) and Dâmbovița flows into the Danube in the same place with Olt... [...]

[...] This diary starts getting me mad!!! I entered the Gothic Cathedral in Toledo. I have never seen something more extraordinary. I feel angry for having to keep on inventing admiring epithets for each page and I don't know that many in Romanian. I think that nobody has ever made something more beautiful than this cathedral. Fernando Martin, my guide, says that I haven't yet seen the cathedral in Burgos, the most beautiful gothic monument. I will have to pay for the petrol (Alvaro has left me his car) and I have to see it no matter what. Till then, I have no words to express my admiration towards the one in Toledo. I simply lack the terms. I shall only bring into discussion the French gothic statue (13th century), made of painted wood, representing the Madonna (carrying her Child who caresses her chin), having the most beautiful smile in the world.

Friday, 29th May. [...] PRADO. A building which seems modest, cubic, painted in a dirty red. Pretty dirty inside as well. There is no normal circuit; the rooms intersect, you circle around and you kind of get in a tangle.

Goya. The painting with those shot persons looks like an amateur's work of art. Flat painting, a flaw which is not visible in reproductions. A bit vibrating here and there. A good drawer, a

good colourist, but that's about all. He was a good photographer.

Sagrada Familia. Saint Joseph has an extremely Semite looks, with a smile full of satisfaction (he will go down to history due to the Baby he is looking at).

Christ on the Cross. Sad, suffering looks. But the ephobe-like body seems like resting. As a matter of fact, the feet lean on a solid base. (...)

El Prendimiento. (Jesus' Catching). Spots of colour, it looks modern, vibrant. A very small but extremely suggestive painting. He can do it if he wants to!

Maja Vestida and especially the *desnuda* one: a gallery painting, with no further thing to comment upon. The fact that it is a Goya represents no excuse. How would some make themselves famous? But how could the snobs let themselves fooled?

If I hang a painting with melons and cherries in my living room, I am a lout; but if the painting is a Luiz Melendez (1716-1780), I am somebody! (...)

Murillo. A bit better, but colours used to be expensive in his times as well and he proved very parsimonious when combining them.

Velasquez. I like him the best. But it is obvious that he did the portraits for money. The Count of Olivarez is on a horse in a marry-ground. Yet, the jesters are masterpieces. They used to pay less (or nothing at all) and the painter was painting for his own pleasure. (...)

[...] I know I am a grumbler. But about masterpieces (acknowledged as such) I cannot add anything more than others, smatter than me, already have. But nobody can prevent me from seeing what others more stupid haven't. Snobbery and preconceived ideas, such as stupidity and arrogance should be left out.

Bartolomeus Strobl (1591-1642). 'The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist'. A huge painting, so dear to my Romanian peers who recognize Michael the Brave in Herod's face. It is true that the faces of those present in the painting ac-

tually pertain to famous people in the époque. In the foreground there is a citizen who, undoubtedly is Henry IV of France. But where would they have seen our Michael, who had died when the painter was 10? (19 when the French monarch died. That is tolerable.)

Salome, with her tits exposed, displays the saint's head as if a hasting. Herod-Michael sits at a table, continuously eating. Now, he has passed on to fruit. Salome shows him the head on the tray with an inquiring look on her face and the king makes a bored gesture with his hand, having the exact expression as if saying: 'Thank you, darling, but I am full and I cannot eat anything else. Please, bring me a coffee.' Who doesn't believe me, should at least see the photos!!! [...]

[...] I'll pass on to El Greco. This is a real painter! This is a real portraitist! This is a real genius! The covetous state it that he had astigmatism. I wonder why did the Spanish call Mr. Theotocupucus (the variant chosen by the organiser) El Greco and not El Griego (as it would have been correct)?

Dear God, this Japanese who passes me by is so beautiful! [...]

[...] In a shop window, a book: Doina Popa-Lisseanu, Panait Istrati: Una escritura encendida, published by Universidad de Educación a Distancia.

It is raining outside, I feel hungry, through the windows of the restaurants I can see people shovelling heartily and I remember the Charlie Chaplin movies. And all this in order to be able to see the Burgos Cathedral tomorrow because I wouldn't have enough money for petrol if spending it on food. Damned trips to the Occident, they are not for me! What a pity! I am still 57!

I enter a bar and take the cheapest thing: a *bocadillo de salchichas* (three sausages between two slices of warm bread) and a potato salad. The bartender asks me what I want to drink. Well, I haven't thought of that. I feel too ashamed to ask tap water (for the Spanish that would be a

sacrilege) and I ask for a glass of beer. When paying, I take the last 5000 Pts note with a hidalgo gesture. How should this guy know how hard it is for me to part with it! I wish he didn't have money for the change so that I could have my revenge because he was born in another country than I was and to tell him full of disgust that I don't carry change. Not only does he have change, but he also gives it to me in many coins. For me to learn the lesson. That cost me almost 600 Pts and I am still hungry. With about 900 I would have got a two-course menu with two very tasty dishes of my choice. In addition to that, bread, a cake and a bottle of wine. But I may have run the risk of discovering God knows what gastronomic wonder of Madrid. Moreover, the wine would have knocked me off (theirs is very strong) because I wouldn't have let it on the table.[...]

[...] It is nasty, I am tired, bored and I want to go back home. I am thinking that Alvaro is going to be there as well and that I will have to sleep in the basement. Yet, no matter the conditions in one's country... You know, whoever noticed this wasn't stupid, and I would have never believed I would end up missing my country so much. I think this is all about the country and not only about friends and familiar things. This is something more, but I don't want to think of it because I would have to use big words and I don't like it. I prefer mockery. That's that! [...]

Saturday, 30th May. I notice the Spaniards' lack of clothing elegance. Especially if compared to the Portuguese. You see the Spaniards dressed with the first thing they got their hands on. They all wear grey and white trainers. A certain kiddo looks niftier, as if coming from Dobrița and going down to Tg. Jiu, to the disco. Anyway, the Romanian ladies are better dressed (long live the second-hand shops!). In our country you can at least see a preoccupation for wearing nice clothes. I live in the city centre and I haven't seen anything remarkable in their shops.

There were some clothes in the shops in Lisbon that would have knocked your socks off! (honestly!)

There were Afro-Americans in Portugal as well (arrived from Mozambique or Angola, their citizens). The Afro-American ladies- absolutely gorgeous; the Afro-American men-black. Those in Spain (where on earth would they come from?) are ugly, dirty, ragged. And the women make you run as fast as you can.

In Madrid- lots of beggars (drunk, on drugs or simply idiotic). I don't remember seeing them in Lisbon.

[...] In the evening I go to Feria de Andalucía en Madrid, a sort of fair with games, raffles, candy floss and games at bo-peep, organized by some guys from Seville. As a matter of fact, around thirty huge tents (like our wedding tents), turned into pubs. Young or not-that-young men of Seville, some wearing specific costumes, are caught in a flamenco in almost every tent. More women than men, with *castañuelas* in their hands, dance like anything. If you watch them, you feel bemused. They look grandiose, as if Queen Sofia were doing their laundry on Thursdays. They don't give a damn about anything; they are more than queens. They are the women of Seville. They dance beautifully, undulating their bodies and the extremely delicate hands have their very suggestive language (each with its suggestion...). They are so elegant that you wonder where they may have got that elegance from and how it could be explained. It is the first time I see flamenco live. I think it is more beautiful than the one in pubs or during concerts. It is honest. I find out that each dance has four distinct beats. It is true. I can count them: 1...2...3...4. And the shoes are terribly noisy. (like the castanets). I like the dust coming from the platform. Well done, girls!

Sunday, 31st May. [...] There is a TV set in the bar and they broadcast the Madrid corrida live. The show completes the image I have had in my mind ever since seeing the dancers. The same snake-like movements of the matador. The same haughtiness, this time when facing danger. The matador has just been hit by a horn. I cannot tell where, but he doesn't seem to care. He is looking at the bovine full of despise, while recovering his feet and sticking another two *banderillas* in its back. The *banderillas* have the Spanish national colours (red, yellow, red). Patriots even when cruel. Since the corrida is, however, an 'art' full of cruelty, in spite of its being damned elegant. The today's matador is as handsome and macho as he is an idiot. He needs five blows to finish the poor animal. I hope the bull kicked him where I think of.

The second torero is an artist: he moulds the bull like wax. Less ballet, much more bull-hunting. And the animal is not butchered, but sacrificed.

By the way, in Benavente (between 8th and 14th June) a great annual feast takes place: Toro enmaromado: a bull, indeed pulled by a rope, is allowed to chase the crazy Benavente inhabitants. They say that the streets are full for a week; they all walk around stoned and they have a great time. They also let around five cows go loose, and they are worse than a bull. It's a pity I have to be on my way in a few days.

Wednesday, 3rd June. I'm in the plane heading to Milan (the place of call for Bucharest). After also seeing a sunrise (equally spectacular as the sunset) in Spain from the airport, I am sitting in the plane whose departure has already been delayed for a few minutes wetting my pants for fear.

Translated by Raluca Vîjăiac