

## ROMANIAN PASSENGERS LOOKING OUT OF THE TRAIN WINDOW. AN ATTEMPT OF CULTURAL HISTORY (1830-1930). REVIEW

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*Călători români privind pe fereastra trenului. O încercare de istorie culturală (1830-1930) / Romanian Passengers Looking Out of the Train Window. An Attempt of Cultural History / Radu MÂRZA, Iași, Polirom, 2020, 214 p.*

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The book is a cultural and social research on the train journey written by the historian Radu Mârza, “a passionate traveller” (Mârza, 2020, p. 9), who documented himself carefully and passionately in relation to the topic of the landscape viewed by travellers of Romanian origin who travelled by train during the first century of railway history (1830-1930). The author not only likes to travel, but also to write about the others’ travels revealing that, during his book readings, he discovered “that behind a simple account of a train journey there is a whole world, made up of little landscape and from many people, caught in a complicated – and fascinating – network of social and cultural relationships. This is how things look from and on the train” (Mârza, 2020, p. 189; my translation). In order to restore the atmosphere of those times, but also to stimulate our appetite for reading, Radu Mârza reproduces within the volume, in extenso, various quotations from the studied period sources – the travel writings as the documentary foundation of this book (memorial works,

correspondence, reports published in the press, travel books).

The book begins with a *Foreword* signed by Ovidiu Ghitta, followed by *Introduction*, three chapters and *Conclusion*. A generous bibliography, with an index of names and places and with 16 reproductions of some images and postcards that circulated during the studied period are added to the coherent structure of the book.

Once with the *Introduction*, the author invites us to accompany him on an imaginary train journey through Western and Central Europe over a century. Sincerely, Radu Mârza is not shy to provide the reader with information on the motivation and context in which the idea of this book dedicated to railway history was launched. Initially it was just the documentation for a communication about the landscape seen from the train, as it appears in the travel stories of Romanians heading to the spa resort of Karlsbad (today Karlovy Vary, a spa resort in the Czech Republic), at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1930. Subsequently, the diversity of information found in the studied sources determined the author to vary the range of questions addressed to them and to gather the material studied in this book, the leitmotif of the volume being the question: “What does the passenger see when looking out of the train window?” (Mârza, 2020, p. 14; my translation).

To find the answer, Radu Mârza analyses the stories of some Romanian travellers (originally from Romania and Transylvania) who travel on the “railway” between 1830 and 1930. Of the asked authors, only one did not travel by train (Alexandru Vlahuță), but his testimony “is all the more interesting” (Mârza, 2020, p. 14; my translation). The author did not choose the trips exhaustively but made a selection of the most representative for the studied topic, the same criterion being applied in the case of their works. Radu Mârza explains the reasons why he chose the Romanian space, “because here the railway journey is an interesting topic from several points of view” (Mârza, 2020, p. 15; my translation) and the time interval 1830-1930. This is the period when the railway, the most dynamic sign of the Industrial Revolution, “radically changes the transport and communications in Europe and in the world and revolutionises the art of travel” (Mârza, 2020, p. 15; my translation).

Also, in the *Introduction*, we become familiarised with the key ideas of the volume, with the used sources and with the “somewhat chronological” structure (Mârza, 2020, p. 38; my translation) according to the author. The overarching theme of the book is the train, defined as “the terrible child of the Industrial Revolution and the engine of the human economy and society throughout the nineteenth century, the train that carries people, goods and ideas across countries and continents” (Mârza, 2020, p. 22; my translation). The author reviews the stages of the process of landscape “discovery” and its connection with the individual (an important idea that we find in the pages of the book is that the individual gives value to the landscape). He provides interesting information on how the railway has revolutionised society, with consequences for a wide range of aspects of human life. He mentions the station “which becomes a landmark of urban space and the sociability of modern times” (Mârza, 2020, p. 29; my translation). He writes about where it was placed, about the architectural style of the building, about the railway staff, etc. He also describes how the railway contributed fundamentally to the process of taking possession of the territory and transforming it into a “space-nation”.

Chapter I is dedicated both to the first Romanian passengers travelling by train and to the first Romanian theorists of railways (Ion Ghica and George Bariț). Through the analysis of the vintage sources, the author aimed to capture the topics of interest of the first Romanian travellers. Radu Mârza found that they were too little concerned with the landscape, instead they were interested in the operation of the steam engine, the impact of the railway on the society and the economy, the advantages of the railway, the technical challenges that it involved the building and operation of the railway, the railway station, seen as “a show” (Mârza, 2020, p. 38) and so on. Another interesting aspect that the author refers to in this chapter (he will return to this issue in the following chapters) is related to the specific terminology of the railways and the

way in which the particular terms of the railway field were approached in the Romanian language.

The selected gallery of the first train passengers is unveiled by Petrace Poenaru, “the first whose train journey is historically documented” (Mârza, 2020, p. 43; my translation). He travelled to England on the Manchester-Liverpool route in 1831. He was followed by Ion Codru Drăgușanu who travelled to France, Germany, Switzerland, and England between 1842 and 1843 and George Bariț who used the train to Buda and Bratislava in 1847 and from Pest to Belgium in 1852. The last mentioned is Nicolae Filimon who travels in 1858. He is considered both the first Romanian tourist, “literally” (Mârza, 2020, p. 81), and “the first Romanian author to pay attention to the landscape that the train crosses, thus bringing the first eminently positive answer to the question from which this book started” (Mârza, 2020, p. 84; my translation).

The second chapter captures a special era and atmosphere from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nationalised under the title “La Belle Époque”. It is the period when the train becomes part of the landscape, the railway joins the landscape. At the same time, it is the time interval in which, after the initial enthusiasm determined by the emergence of the “railway” calmed down, the voices of the opponents of railway development begin to be heard, voices that criticise human intervention in the natural landscape and show that admiration of the landscape becomes impossible due to the speed of the train, etc. (Mârza, 2020, pp. 114-115). For instance, A. D. Xenopol argued that “a chariot, horse, or walk would be more appropriate to come into intimate contact with places and people” (Mârza, 2020, p. 115; my translation).

The author discusses new topics that develop with the development and change of the railway network: thematic diversification of train travel (long-distance travel, day trips), the usual use of the travel guide (the so-called Baedeker), the emergence of stories about the natural landscape, the description of various human typologies, the “militant traveller” (Nicolae Iorga), etc.

In this chapter, we travel during a day or longer trips with A.D. Xenopol, Iosif Vulcan, Nicolae Iorga and Alexandru Vlahuță (the author who convincingly described the integration of the railway into the landscape, without having travelled by train). A.D. Xenopol makes the most spectacular description of a natural landscape crossed by train and admired from the train car window (Semmering mountain range located in the Austrian Alps), Iosif Vulcan finely narrates “the show of the station of the great spa resort” Karlsbad (Mârza, 2020, p. 101; my translation), and Nicolae Iorga “makes history out of the landscape and landscape out of the history” (Mârza, 2020, p. 122; my translation).

Due to the fact that Iorga was an avid traveller, including by train, Mârza analyses in detail two early travel writings (1905-1907) of the historian. The first is an interesting trip through Bulgaria to Constantinople, when Iorga makes several references from the perspective of the passenger from the train car window (for example he describes the poor landscape of border stations, nature, the urban landscape of Istanbul, the people met on the train, etc.). The second is the narration of a series of trips through Transylvania, rendering the natural landscape of the province, giving us the opportunity to know the historian as a “militant traveller” (Mârza, 2020, p. 121), his descriptions being passionate and biased towards Romanians.

The third chapter refers to the interwar period considered a period of development of the Romanian railway network and increase of the number of passengers by train, both in the country and abroad. It is the time interval when Radu Mârza decided to travel by train with the writers Mihail Sadoveanu – “the most interesting theorist of the slow and full of meaning journey” (Mârza, 2020, p. 116; my translation), Liviu Rebreanu – “a traveller careful not only to

the destinations of his travels [...], but also to the journey itself [...]" (Mârza, 2020, p. 149; my translation) and Demostene Botez – "[...] careful to people, to partners with whom he spends 35-41 hours by train" (Mârza, 2020, p. 183; my translation). According to the author, their travel stories are "of a thematic and cultural richness that would have deserved an independent research itself" (Mârza, 2020, p. 39; my translation). Mihail Sadoveanu wrote about the impressions of traveling through the country and the Netherlands, Liviu Rebreanu about the trips undertaken in Germany, Italy and France, and Demostene Botez about the trips to Karlsbad from where he sent reports published in the daily newspaper *Adevărul*. The writer and publicist Demostene Botez is considered one of the few Romanian authors who wrote not so much, but "complex and diverse about how a train trip actually takes place in the 1930s" (Mârza, 2020, p. 182; my translation). He was especially careful to the people in the train compartment, on the platform, in the train station, in the way they socialise.

Charmly written, this chapter presents a side of the writers Mihail Sadoveanu's and Liviu Rebreanu's personality, little known to the general public, that of passionate travellers careful to the natural landscape and the way people integrate into the landscape. Mârza considers that, together with A. D. Xenopol and Nicolae Iorga, the two writers "[...] are the best landscape painters and portrait painters from the train window from the first century of Romanian rail travel" (Mârza, 2020, p. 148; my translation).

Within this short chapter, Mârza dedicates a generous space to Liviu Rebreanu's three travel stories, which provided a rich documentary material for the research done for the book. Analysing the descriptions made by Rebreanu, the author states that one of the novelist's merits is that "they are signalling aspects that must be taken into account in an investigation of the cultural history of the railway journey: the mood, the atmosphere in which it takes place. They can considerably influence the way the passenger perceives the journey itself, but also the places crossed and viewed from the train car window" (Mârza, 2020, p. 159; my translation).

In conclusion, Radu Mârza builds the framework of this book, defined as "a train ride" (Mârza, 2020, p. 20), starting from the question: what does the traveller see from the train window? In order to find the answer, along the more than 200 pages of the book, the historian introduces us into the world of several Romanian authors, from various historical epochs who captured in their train journeys various social, cultural, technical, and economic aspects. Their answers, brief or detailed, paint in words the rural or urban landscape that is revealed from the window of the train car, draw the station as "a show" (Mârza, 2020, p. 38) and draw the contours of the human typologies which have in common the train journey throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is the period when people "travelled more, farther, more comfortably" (Mârza, 2020, p. 192; my translation). It is "the world in the middle of which the traveller sits comfortably on the train, with the Baedeker in his hand, and looks out the window. A show". (Mârza, 2020, p. 192; my translation). It is a world, a period and a journey where we hope that Radu Mârza will invite us again, along the pages of a new book dedicated to the same fascinating railway history.