

VENICE OF THE NORTH. THE POETRY OF THE NORDIC GEOGRAPHIES

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Abstract: A.E. Baconsky registers, from the position of the cult traveler, all the spiritual, ethical and aesthetical, historical, religious or philosophical acquisitions brought about by the crossing of some European spaces. A very good connoisseur of the great European cultures' history, A.E. Baconsky develops extensive analysis pages in the Scandinavian culture and civilization. During his trip from Hälsingborg to Stockholm, he is surprised to discover that this cultural geography, so far away from his country, is somehow very close to the Romanian culture through ancientness, symbols and profound meanings which the most common thing have. Therefore, if Stockholm is "more than a Venice of the North", A. E. Baconsky transformed it into a European myth, a kind of city with the core of a soul.

Keywords: traveler, Scandinavian, culture, Venice, A. E. Baconsky

Entering the experience of undertaking a journey means taking with you and displacing your whole identity into a temporary state: we take with us our entire personality and everything that makes it a unique and original part of a socio-cultural memory. We take on our journey the displacement history itself and the collective identity customs that we claim to be connected with. The invigorating and receptive attitude, the desire of soul-searching is capable of abolishing any distance between the cultural protagonists, be they guests or hosts. Eugen Simion points out this convention that organizes the correct functions of the journey, as an instrument of knowledge: "When you come from a different part of Europe, with different mentalities and a different value system in mind, the encounter with a big, occidental city fatally acquires the appearance of a passive and profound confrontation. (...) A radicalization of the spirit occurs, inevitably, but common sense must impede the spirit from embracing one of the two egos that are usually testing the intellectual arisen from a younger culture: the firm and arrogant refusal, stemming from misconception and a lack of interest towards everything that is unusual, «foreign» and the inverted vanity (the complex), characterized by a despicable abandonment of national pride"¹.

All Romanian writers and artists who have had the chance to travel to Sweden had the revelation to discover, in personal key, a unique geographical and cultural area. Among the Romanian men of culture who had access to the Swedish secrets, our attention was caught by a writer who enhances Stockholm's fame through his own perception finding it to be more than the city which was called the Venice of the North: the poet, prose writer, essayist, translator and art

¹Eugen Simion, *The time of living, the time of confessing*. Parisian Journal, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, p. 425.

historian A.E. Baconsky. In his traveling diary entitled *Remember. Fals jurnal de călătorie* ("Remember. False traveling diary") Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1977), A.E. Baconsky registers, from the position of the educated traveler, all the spiritual, ethical and aesthetical, historical, religious or philosophical acquisitions brought about by the crossing of some European spaces which, during the communist years, were for the large mass of Romanians utopian, unattainable realms.

In 1972, on the verge of his most desired trip (in the Scandinavian countries), A.E. Baconsky wrote to his friend Octavian Paler: "A path in Northern Europe: «I am writing a few lines right around the time of my departure towards Scandinavia, which makes me feel emotions I have never felt before on other trips: most likely, our Dacian ancestors must have truly been a people descended from the North and my only perception of the North will be an ancient message, unwavering as an urge for atonement»"². In late August 1972, A.E. Baconsky was in Sweden; the traveler has two attitudes that mark his special status and his inclination for experimenting the Scandinavian world in an original way; the sincere, undisguised mingling between wonder and admiration: *the sought solitude* and, complementary, *the confession tendency*. There are many acknowledgments, in Baconsky's entire work, regarding his symbolic affiliation to a northern ultra-mythological structure. The writer claims to belong to the archetypal shadow typology, to the nocturnal being's set of values, to a shadow shell which gives rise to the hidden inner lights constantly emerging. The fascination for the North may be considered a personal myth of Baconsky's creation, infused into the poetic matrix. His confession will be kept, thoroughly explained, in his travel journal, *Remember*: "*Just like a compass needle, I am forever engaged with the North – and towards the North lies the sea with its massive stone quays, with diverse ships and boats, which emit, through their perpetual swinging, an enveloping and cold music, a clear lament twisting up in the sky where the air is rarefied, over blue and green waters, streaked by the purple of awakened branches. I have dreamt for a long time to see this North Sea... (...) I wish I could forget everything I know about this sea, about its shores, about the people, the history, the thought, the art, in order to try to fashion, on my own, a new mythology of the North, with my childhood ingenuity, when, without knowing why, I used to love the winter, the snow, the frost with its flowers and I used to search in the nocturnal blizzard tones the most beautiful legends...*"³.

Sweden, more than any other country, defined the perfectly suited geography for the Baconskyan character: especially in Stockholm, Baconsky has the obvious feeling he found himself again in the middle of symbolic spaces that he perceives with all his senses. The beautiful pages consecrated for this new experience of the cult traveler when meeting the Sweden's charm are enhanced by the thrill of being able to visit the poet Arthur Lundkvist in Solna, his home, and to meet here the poet, prose writer and essayist Lars Gyllensten.

Each place discovered by the traveler brings him the surprise of meeting a kind of mystery and myths as if sprung from the earth, lasting and possessive: "*...Sweden's landscape gradually conquered me... equal and of a solemn monotony, forests dominated by coniferous, crops still standing and large lakes of blue sharp colour which only the waters closed in stone have it... and the stone is everywhere... the fields of this country are old and horizontal mountains arising here and there among trees or grains, with their ridges like killed cetaceans giving the landscape an implausible character. The dull landscapes determine fatigue and*

² Octavian Paler, *A muri, a dormi... a visa, poate? (To die, to sleep... to dream, maybe?)*, in „România Literară”, X, no. 24, 16 June 1977, p. 11

³ A.E. Baconsky, *Remember. Fals jurnal de călătorie (Remember. False traveling diary)*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1977, pp. 57-58 (Helgoland)

sleepiness states when traveled by train, but in this Scandinavian monotony is still something that exalts the inner eye and suddenly you have the feeling that everything is animated by unseen presences, that you are part of an impenetrable ritual... ”⁴. Crossing the Northern lands is done, as always in Baconsky’s case, through self-acknowledgment, the travelling poet knows all too well to read between the lines, when it comes to spacial symbols, and he can identify his own symbols that confirm his claim of stemming from a distinct poetic geography: “...but perhaps I am still observing the illusory Lapland within myself, that is why everything seems so familiar so much so that in the frozen scenery, I am reediting spiritual states experienced many times before (...)(...)in such environments, the need to communicate is minimal, as is the need to think or create... an ideal land for neutralizing language... we, Europeans who know too many words, would need a long stay in Lapland...”⁵.

A very good connoisseur of the great European cultures’ history, A.E. Baconsky develops extensive analysis pages in the Scandinavian culture and civilization. During his trip from Hälsingborg to Stockholm, he is surprised to discover that this country, so far away from his country, is somehow very close to our own culture through ancientness, symbols and profound meanings which the most common thing have: “*The farmers’ brick houses have the elementary joint of the old huts which the Vikings rolled out of tree trunks, amplified and brought to a comfort that made them worthy of envy of almost all Europeans...they had nothing of the architectural coquetry of the German villages, simple forms and lapidary solutions seeking the beautiful in the world of primordial relations with the space, forests, light and perhaps with the loneliness that always has secret aesthetical values... for loneliness is absolute here... ”⁶.*

Stockholm, in particular, offers the writer extensive admiration exercises. The Romanian writer already knows that “*Many of the port cities north of Hamburg and Amsterdam are also called Venices of the north,*” but he will come to see that “*(...) if there is a city in the north capable of suggesting something of Venice’s atmosphere that is, above all, Stockholm although its greatness is another... ”* (p. 391). Moreover, after a stay of several days, when he has the time to discover step by step the inexplicable charm of Stockholm, A.E. Baconsky believes that this city is unique in the world through its elegance and friendly sobriety deserves a larger fame than Venice itself: “*No, the city ultimately is something else than a Venice of the North which seems to me only a useless metaphor, a conventional euphemism*”⁷.

What catches the Romanian writer so much that he mingles with this Scandinavian city? He is impressed with the open structures of the architecture and harmonies of the inner landscape of Stockholm (“*Here, the magnificence resides primarily in its unusual urban areas...the spaces, the waters springing from everywhere giving you the impression that you live in the unusual confluence of several large rivers, the docks, bridges, parks, various boats crossing the city in every direction are beautiful... ”⁸. He discovers the metropolis as being totally different from large European cities dominated by coldness and confusion; in Stockholm one can feel people’s warmth, always ready to be friendly to the traveler, protecting him from the panics and disorientations specific for straying in western capitals: “*...the city is not cold, nor distant, its elegance does not defy...I think it is one of the few western cities where you could afford the luxury of being poor and alone (...) for somewhere Stockholm has a warmth – that also belongs to people more than I had expected to see at a such latitude – it has a melancholy of the streets**

⁴ A.E.Baconsky, *Remember. Fals jurnal de călătorie*, I, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1977, p. 389.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 427-428.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 389.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 407.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 392.

*sprang perhaps from the weighted crystals of the northern sun, a melancholy neighbour with Kierkegaard's anxieties and with the suffocated spasms of the Scandinavian theatre"*⁹.

City of exemplary quietness and ancestral wisdom, Stockholm is revealed as an area where man has never collapsed under the burden of history. Visiting the museum of Vasa's sunken ship, the Royal Palace of Stockholm, a village museum and Storkyrkan – the city's cathedral, A.E. Baconsky has the revelation of this civilization's oldness and stability which he unconditionally admires: *"There is something very old in this city, the wooden spirit of the old Scandinavia which haunts in a stone metropolis, the age of the first settlements of fishermen and warriors present in memories and in the rarefied air that vibrates as a golden powder in September afternoons when the sun diffuses dissimilitude lights...there is something very old, perhaps the quietness of this city that long has not experienced war and its balance and isolation, here in the north, where the winter teaches all things to age..."*¹⁰.

Perhaps above other Swedish values, A.E. Baconsky admires a majore difference from other European nations: the consumerism is not dominant for the human being but a great care for inner values which embellishes even more the Scandinavian soul: *"Stockholm continues to live in the forest, here even the gold of jewelry has strange sparkles of steel, people talk like bells, the civilizations seems not to disturb them... old Europe that is always consuming is less sensitive here... the euphoria of products does not haunt and their behaviour has a rough, unsophisticated elegance"*¹¹.

A.E. Baconsky believes that maybe from here should start the deciphering of Stockholm's mystery *"a city of forests and sea with its countless blue eyes"*, a city that grows its own myth and keeps its tradition unaltered. Certainly, for the Romanian writer Stockholm is the mirror-city in which he could rediscover himself with all the sensitivity, need for balance and quietness, with the desire to cross the threshold from the outer contemplation and return towards himself, always in a different Self Story: *"...there are cities prompting you to escape from yourself, from the bed of your existence and sensitivity, to try to become another, to forget, to defy, rising or descending between ruin and exaltation, but Stockholm is part of those too rare, capable of concentrating you on your own universe..."*¹². Therefore, if Stockholm is **"more than a Venice of the North"**, A.E. Baconsky transformed it into a European myth, a kind of city with the core of a soul.

Paradoxically, the trip to the Arctic Circle and living in the hub of northern symbols does not create aesthetic satisfactions for the writer. He is caught up in a questioning awe, preferring not to identify the outer myth with the inner one and promoting here, too, the other myth that he takes with himself everywhere – the one of plural solitude: *"... I can finally ask myself, in this absolute solitude, if Lapland confirms my anticipated representations, if its landscape confirms my expectations...but, perhaps, I am still seeing the fictitious Lapland within myself, that is why everything seems so familiar, because, while the scenery is frozen, I am reediting spiritual states experienced many times before...and yet, there is more stagnation than I would have suspected.(...) in such environments, the need to communicate is minimal, as is the need to think or create... an ideal land for neutralizing language... we, Europeans who know too many words, would need a long stay in Lapland"*¹³. The misfortune of not being taken in a traditional yurt, guarded by reindeer horns and subterranean birds that the poet dreams of stimulates him to

⁹*Ibidem*, pp. 394.

¹⁰*Ibidem*, pp. 400.

¹¹*Ibidem*, pp. 407-408.

¹²*Ibidem*, p. 415.

¹³*Ibidem*, p. 428 (Lapland).

reiterate the inner vision, without a projection towards reality: “...only the relentless wind calls me randomly towards the world of strange resonances of these final northern latitudes, beyond joint streets, on crimson ridges where small, obstinate trees search vainly Absalom’s plaits at midnight...I am, too, a man of the wind... somewhere out there in his violent and bright world lies my home...out there is where the somber mystery of my wordless song lies, a murmur too often misunderstood, whose dullness is forever ruled by the floating black and silent wings of windmills that watch over my childhood...”¹⁴.

To Baconsky, the polar space is, quintessentially, not one of poetic *absence*, but one of poetic *camouflage*. The writer overestimates the fascination for the static, the inert and the mask, suggesting hermetic poetics in relation to the background, to the substance. Ultimately, the writer takes advantage of the opportunity of an ontology focused on its inner signs, shielded from the incongruities of superficial, external knowledge: “...total solitude...towards West, in the distance, one can catch a glimpse of Lapland’s mountains, a rough and brown country that I am examining more profoundly... the landscape becomes more and more abstract or primitive... singing an Icelandic song without lips as Lundkvist would say... yet here it is not the lips that are missing, but the features altogether, a face with features hidden inside, that does not display a smile, or a grimace, or an expression in spite of the violent wind and the massive, compact, impenetrable clouds moving on a calm, blue sky... or maybe a land in disguise, wearing a shaman’s mask, addicted to dark rituals, barbaric and refined at the same time... (...) the polar circle is a conventional landmark, but as I move farther away from it, advancing towards the center of Lapland, it flares up burning behind me as a phosphorus frontier and the universe becomes different just like my feeling of alienation and solitude”¹⁵. However, symbols collapse at the smallest attempt of adjusting the particularities to the practices of the modern world. “...everything is comfortable and ultramodern, life and death irreproachably managed... and the asphalt of the streets I roam by bus in multiple directions seems reinforced lead within the brown, red and yellow scenery... metal everywhere, even in Lindegren’s poems, who is a son of these laplander regions, obsessed with lead, bronze and iron, with fleeting autumns that fade into pale horizons, as ghosts do...”¹⁶.

The grand reunion is, nevertheless, one that takes place in the core: not with an abrupt, static and austere landscape, but with a certain type of spirituality bordering on the inherent ancestral background of the Romanian people: “...no, I haven’t forgotten anything, I have preserved my whole background of primitive nobility that no civilization can corrupt and maybe that is why I feel myself communicating on hidden channels with this people of vigorous peasants, equivalent, from a territorial perspective, to the sum of their previous conditions, dominating their brilliant civilization and managing to infuse it with the patina of their age... they know that cutting down a tree several centuries old is the same as destroying a splendid palazzo and that is the reason why, when the asphalt of alleys and sidewalks meets the tree, it goes around it or it embraces it without attacking its grandeur ...”¹⁷. The geographic distance is diminished by the symbiosis between the sensitive and the conscious aspect, beyond which the norm demands the tenderness and balance of marks in the dialog process.

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¹⁴*Ibidem*, p. 424 (Lapland).

¹⁵*Ibidem*, p. 423.

¹⁶*Ibidem*, p. 425.

¹⁷*Ibidem*, p. 411.

A.E. BACONSKY, *Remember. Fals jurnal de călătorie*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House, 1977.

Eugen SIMION, *Timpul trăirii, timpul mărturisirii. Jurnal parizian (The time of living, the time of confessing. Parisian Journal)*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishing House