„THE COUNTRIES THAT I VISITED WILL WAGE THEIR FUTURE WARS ON THE BATTLEFIELD OF ECONOMY." ON BASIL G. ASSAN'S JOURNEY ROUND THE WORLD (1898)

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„Ţările pe care le-am vizitat își vor purta viitoarele războaie pe câmpul de luptă al economiei." Despre călătoria în jurul lumii a lui Basil G. Assan (1898)

Abstract: Basil G. Assan (1860–1918) was the first Romanian circumnavigator and among the fearless trailblazers who paved the way to modernity. His travel lecture, held in front of the members of the Romanian Geographical Society (presided by the monarch Carol I) overviews the essentials of his round-the-world trip and the written report (March 6 (18) 1899) of Assan's journey retains elements of pre-travel accounts interspersed with self-reflexive passages which are more indicative of contemporary travel writings. Assan's 58 days on the sea and his continuous changing of ships (9), also facilitated his numerous exposés on vessels and presented him with an opportunity to discuss both the discomforts, hardships and pleasures of sailing round the world at the end of the 19th century and the shipboard communities forged by the voyage. Drawing on fresh research in the field of travel writing studies (Nandini Nas and Tim Youngs 2019, Pettinger and Youngs 2020, Carl Thompson 2015, Mircea Anghelescu 2018), I aim to show how the Romanian traveler's selection of means of transportation during his circumnavigation and the materiality of his journey played a crucial role in grasping and then in unpacking his voyage in his travel report and to the audiences back home.

Keywords: *journey; travel writing; the Far East; the 19th century; Eastern Europe.*

Rezumat: Basil G. Assan (1860–1918) a fost primul circumnavigator român şi unul dintre călătorii români care au deschis calea înspre modernitate. Prelegerea sa de călătorie, ținută în fața membrilor Societății Geografice Române (prezidată de monarhul Carol I) trece în revistă elementele esențiale ale călătoriei sale în jurul lumii, iar relatarea scrisă (6 (18) martie 1899) a călătoriei lui Assan păstrează elemente de „pre-travel" intercalate cu pasaje autoreflexive, care sunt mai degrabă reprezentative pentru scrierile de călătorie contemporane. Cele 58 de zile petrecute de Assan pe mare şi schimbarea continuă a vapoarelor (9), au facilitat, de asemenea, numeroasele sale expozeuri despre nave şi i-au oferit ocazia de a discuta atât despre disconforturile, greutățile şi plăcerile navigării în jurul lumii la sfârşitul secolului al XIX-lea, cât şi despre comunitățile de la bordul navelor, închegate prin intermediul călătoriei. Pornind de la cercetări recente în domeniul scrierilor de călătorie (Nandini Nas şi Tim Youngs 2019, Pettinger şi Youngs 2020, Carl Thompson 2015, Mircea Anghelescu 2018), îmi propun să arăt cum selecția mijloacelor de transport ale călătorului român în timpul circumnavigației sale şi materialitatea călătoriei sale au jucat un rol crucial în medierea înțelegerii călătoriei sale în raportul său de călătorie şi pentru publicul de acasă.

Cuvinte-cheie: *călătorie; scrieri de călătorie; Orientul Îndepărtat; secolul al XIX-lea; Europa de Est.*

1. Introduction

Little known and almost forgotten these days, Basil G. Assan was the first Romanian explorer to set out on a journey round the world in 1898. An intrepid Romanian engineer who studied mechanical engineering at the Polytechnic in Liège and economics in Montreux, and a highly successful entrepreneur with a powerful business acumen, Assan set off on two bold journeys at the end of the 19th century. His expeditions were put down as reports, which were later on presented to the Romanian Geographical Society (RGS) and in front of its honorary chair, His Royal Majesty Carol I.

In 1896, Assan was heading for the North Pole on behalf of the RGS in order to map the flora and fauna of the Artic region and to bring home data

about the geological strata of the Spitzbergen (Svalbard) Archipelago, but also to observe the total solar eclipse of August 9, 1896 and to bear witness to Salomon August Andrée's attempt to reach the Geographic North Pole by hydrogen balloon.

Assan's second expedition (1898), his five-month journey round the globe was recounted for and then recorded by the Romanian Geographical Society in its meeting on March 6 (18), 1899. Pushed by his own ambitions to broker economic deals and to further commercial ties between his native land and countries and entrepreneurs in the Far East, Assan studied in Singapore about the extractions of essential oils used in the production of stearin, whereas in Canton he collected information (via an interpreter) about the raw materials and the methods used in the production of the famous Chinese and Japanese varnishes that he had already planned to introduce in his own factory in Bucharest.

Despite the fact that Assan was the first intellectual who held public lectures and speeches about his travels at the Athenaeum in Bucharest and then throughout the country in an attempt to disseminate information about the people and the places he visited (Borda 1985, 35), in the absence of a travel memoir or journal, the pages of his report remain, to this day, the only repository of his journey. By a curious twist of fate, the echo of Assan's public lectures for the masses died down and he slowly fell into oblivion. As noted by Mircea Anghelescu (2015, 218) – an authority on Romanian travel writing – three decades down the line, Assan seems to have remained just a blur even to future Romanian travelers.

Assan's exploratory feats need to be placed in their appropriate context: they were projected upon a political and socio-cultural background conducive to such daring enterprises. The intellectual ferment of Assan's time and his contemporaries' growing appetite for journeys and travel writing are reflected in the publication of Luigi Cazzavillan's long-lived *Ziarul călătoriilor şi întâmplărilor de pe mare şi uscat* [*The Newspaper of Travels and Adventures on the Sea and on Land*] between 1897 and 1938. In time, the newspaper will undergo slight alterations in its title, its publication will cease during the war and then, from 1949, it will morph into *Ştiinţă şi tehnică pentru tineret* [*Science and Technology for the Youth*]. However, its wide circulation at the end of the 19th century is a testament in itself to the public's increasing demand for knowledge obtained and disseminated by means of voyages and travels. The popular newspaper was published twice a week,

under the auspices of *Universul* (the broadsheet of the era) and it circulated in the emerging feuilleton format the journeys and voyages undertaken by Romanian or foreign travelers and correspondents. It is telling how the first issue of the newspaper, from November 5th 1897 carries on its front page an illustration from Gervesis-Malissol's journey to the main Philippines island of Luçon [sic] and a recount of his trip (translated into Romanian). The heightened interest in the Philippines was triggered by the unfolding political upheaval, that is, the Philippine Revolution against the Spanish and most probably, that is the reason why this particular journey to Luzon was showcased in the first issue of the paper.

Four issues of *The Newspaper of Travels* (March and April 1900) carried passages from Assan's travels round the world. The selections focused on comparisons and contrasts between the Chinese and the Japanese cultures and on the Japanese theater (much adored by Assan). However, as noted by Anghelescu (2015, 220, my translation): "But when, in 1911, the first Japanese theatre company performed before a Romanian audience, no one remembered Assan's broad introduction to the subject".

That being said, if we take into consideration Assan's popularization of science and his keen interest in transmitting both information and personal stories about the visited lands (Bucharest-Istanbul – Athens-Alexandria-Cairo-Ismailia-Aden – Ceylon – Singapore-Hong Kong – Canton-Shanghai-Nagasaki, Kobe, Osaka, Yokohama, Tokyo – Yokohama-San Francisco-New York-Liverpool), and the fact that parts of his report were later on published in the newspapers of the time (Anghelescu 2015, 220), a close analysis of Assan's travels will reveal how the Romanian traveler unpacked his journey upon his return home.

2. Basil G. Assan: the explorer/traveler/tourist

Above all, Basil G. Assan dared to shape a league of his own. The urban folklore records a few interesting details: as an early automobile enthusiast, Assan registered the plate (1B) of the first car brought to Romania. However, the ego of Prince George Valentin Bibescu (1880–1941), another car aficionado (and an aviation pioneer) took great issue with this; more so as the Prince had already ordered a car from abroad, as well but then found no time to register it. So after he pulled a few strings, Prince Bibescu became the proud possessor of the driving plate 0B, a fact which made him the first car owner in the country. However, no grudge remained between these two

pioneers: The Romanian Automobile Association, founded in 1904, was presided by Prince Bibescu while Assan was among its vice-presidents. Drawing a parallel here, the same hunger for innovations and novelties was shared in Southeast Asia during the same period where "the first owner of an automobile in the Netherlands Indies was the susuhunan (emperor) of Surakarta, Pakubuwono X, in 1894, and by the 1930s more Indonesians and Chinese than Europeans had driving licenses in the colony." (Raben in Owen 2014, 25).

Modern in spirit and in action, the Assan brothers (Basil and Georges) were far ahead of their time. As noted by Anghelescu (2018:9), the Assans were among the generous patrons who offered prizes which honored outstanding achievements and groundbreaking research in geography in order to encourage more pioneering research and expeditions and to further a better understanding of the world.

In his seminal work *The Golden Fleece. Travelers and Travels in Romanian Literature* (2015), Mircea Anghelescu includes Basil G. Assan (together with Iuliu Popper and Emil Racoviță) in the chapter dedicated to the Romanian groundbreakers that path the way to modernity and who are the faithful embodiment of "the explorers", of the pioneers who never shied away from dreaming big and from journeying to exotic and faraway places. And such academic groupings may have their merits. While Iuliu Popper (1857–1893) delivered lectures at the Argentine Geographical Institute (March 1887) mapping his somewhat controversial exploration and gold exploitation of Tierra del Fuego, Emil Racoviță's name is synonymous with Arctic explorations aboard the ship Belgica (1897–1899) and his figure is ingrained in our national consciousness as the promoter of natural sciences in Romania. Hence, it may seem fitting to include Basil G. Assan among the archetypal Romanian explorers. However, there is a wider debate in the field of travel writing studies concerning the misleading conflation and confusion triggered by the use of the terms "explorers", "travelers" and "tourists". Accordingly, while Mircea Anghelescu would label Assan as an "explorer", Paul Fussell would more likely ticket Assan's journeying as a blending between genuine travel and tourism (*Abroad*, 1980).

Going further, the questions that inevitably arise are: to what extent can Assan's report be read as a daring feat of exploration and to what extent the innovations, mechanizations and the breakthroughs in science and technology of the late 19th century could relegate his journey to the category of tourism?

Published at end of the 19th century, Assan's report could arguably fall under the heading of "voyages and travels", a field far more esteemed than that the genre of travel writing would subsequently be. As noted by Carl Thompson, before the 20th century, there was no mentioning of 'travel literature' but of the all-encompassing field of "voyages and travels", which embraced a wide range of writings, at once diverse in form and in function (2011, 19). As a case in point, the Romanian Geographical Society was founded in 1875 in order to offer a platform to the Romanian travelers and explorers. Thus, the latter were able to disseminate their knowledge and observations of the visited lands in public meetings and gatherings and through official channels (the Bulletins of the RGS remain a faithful depository of such findings), and all these testify to the privileged position held by the field of "voyages and travels" in Romania especially at the end of the 19th century.

In the process of dispensing information, facts and data, the traveler's sources are at times divulged ("the data [on the quantity of fir wood planks exported from Transylvania to India] was passed on to me by a businessman from Ceylan" (sic, 1899, 121). However, sometimes they remain unnamed, attaining almost folklore-status. A short stop on Penang Island invites such a story about the founding of George Town (1786), the first British settlement in Southeast Asia, by Captain Francis Light:

A hundred years ago, when Captain Hight (sic, possibly a typo) turned the island into a British settlement, it is said that he resorted to an interesting method in order to clear and grub the landscape of the city to be founded of overgrown vegetation and surface debris. He loaded the cannons with silver coins and then fired them in the bushes, knowing fully well that the Malays will quicken to clear the land in order to find *the dollars* (his italics, 1899, 138, my translation).

The report also abounds in passages in which the traveler presents himself as an eyewitness to the narrated events or as a faithful communicator of information obtained first-hand but from unspecified sources. The rhetorical devices here are meant to cement his credibility and his relationship with his audience and readers. To exemplify, during Assan's stay in Singapore, he learnt about the Americans' ways of securing vital markets for their oil: the head of Standard Oil had already purchased all the Dutch oil storage tanks in Sumatra but then he insisted on keeping them empty in order to render impossible the sale of local oil whereas the American oil, transported via

the Suez Canal was sold for enormous sums of money (1899, 122). To add another example in which Assan (1899, 126) once more leaves his sources rather vague: "The Muslims' desire to travel to Mecca is so deeply rooted in them that a pepper plantation owner in Singapore came up with the idea of expanding his workforce by offering a free trip to Mecca to all his laborers as a form of incentive."

Assan first gave his travel lecture of his round-the-world trip to an audience comprised of the members of the Romanian Geographical Society, and which was presided by the German monarch, Karl of Hohenzollern (Prince Carol from 1866 to 1881 and our first king, Carol I of Romania from 1881 up to 1914). And it was in the 19th century that this form of public lectures "exerted its most powerful cultural influence, in the brief historical moment between the emergence of a mass performance culture and the rise of cinema" and the audiences reached by such public lectures were similar to, if not larger than those for written accounts of journeys. (Tom F. Wright in Pettinger and Youngs 2020, 179). Indicative of the polite conventions of the art of delivering public lectures (and probably reflective of his own admiration for the great monarch who modernized his country), Assan inserts polite bows to the monarch: "During my long journey, I was always approached by people who unfailingly ignited the conversation by talking to me admiringly and at length about Carmen Sylva and about His Royal Highness, the Chair of our Geographical Society." (1899, 145).

Moreover, the recount of his stay in Singapore opens another opportunity for Assan to once more figuratively bow before the king and to praise the monarch. Cape Romania in Johor (Tanjung Piai), the toponym of the geographical feature on the Malay Peninsula mentioned by Assan was marked on maps as early as 1708 up to 1906 (Durand & Curtis 2013, 20).

While on the peninsula, and inside the palace of the Sultan of Djohore, I had the pleasure to view the life-sized portrait of the grand Duke of Coburg, the father of Queen Marie of Romania. I also saw the portrait of His Royal Majesty, Carol I of Romania and I felt tremendous pleasure in admiring his portrait at Cape Romania, the southernmost point of mainland Asia. I could find neither the origin of its designation (Cape Romania) nor the provenance of these portraits, now adorning the walls of the residence of the Sultan of Djohore. The latter, independent as it may be, falls under the British sphere of influence and it also accepts the supremacy of the Sultan in Constantinople (1899, 140).

The comparisons that Assan makes between his homeland and the visited places are also reminiscent of how travelers usually look at and then make sense of a new place. These geographical and cultural analogies also entail a measuring unit (both helpful for grasping and thus, "taming" the unknown and faulty due to simplification and approximation) and a cultural lens for understanding the new and the unfamiliar: "Shanghai is located on the banks of the River Iant-tse-kiang [sic], which is twice longer and four times larger than the Danube" (1899, 145) or "Osaka, which is twice the size of Bucharest, has 480,000 inhabitants and it is nicknamed "Japan's Manchester" on the grounds of its many factories" (1899, 146).

3. Assan's ways of seeing: filling in the gaps

A critical issue that inevitably arises when unpacking Assan's travel report deals with the area of the world he zooms in on and hence, to the difficulty of applying "imperial-gaze models derived from Mary Louise Pratt" to a region that "had always contained many of the world's great urban centres" (Clark 2008, 3).

The second issue deals with the place of vision and senses within the field of travel writing studies. While "the eye" has been granted a privileged position in travelogues, more recent research has challenged "the gaze" as "the key model for understanding subject-object relations in nineteenth-century travel writing and tourism" and such fresh scholarly perspectives have sent a warning: we should not allow a focal point on the visual "to detract from the importance of other senses to the consumption of representations of travel." (Murray 2016, 11). Morever, after poststructuralism, as argued by Paul Smethurst, the eye/I becomes "a doubly contested site": the 'eye' loses its privileged position as an undisputed site of observation and "the 'I' is no longer a stable site of reflection and judgement." (2009, 4). However, while "the dominance of sight as the conventional guarantor of 'truth' in the travel experience" (Topping in Forsdick, Kinsley and Walchester 2019, 284) may have been critically challenged, it has yet remained in place and there is still an overreliance on "truth" acquired via the senses, and primarily the eye.

In order to unpack Assan's report, I started from Nandini Nas and Tim Youngs' theoretical scaffolding, which is meant "to plot a path through what on the face of it may seem wildly diverse texts across centuries and countries" (2019, 12–16). The two scholars "present some of the prominent features of travel writing" and what they bring into focus are: the type of travel, the

means of transportation employed by the traveler, the technologies of print reproduction, the influences exerted upon the travel text and the latter's relationship to earlier and contemporary literary models and the approach taken in the unpacking of the travel text (the degree to which the writing of travel is or can be objective). While this may be helpful in mapping Assan's journey, the traveler's report offers a richness of details that I plan to explore further on.

Assan's main means of transportation (by ship and by train) shaped his ways of seeing the visited lands. And as sights and vistas rolled by at a fast pace, these modern means of transportation fragmented his view of the places under scrutiny:

From Iokohama (sic) to San Francisco in California, I travelled for 16 days with no land in sight. The sea was choppy; the powerful waves brought damage to our ship but, fortunately for us, the ship could be repaired while running its course. […] Out of the five months of my journey, I spent 58 days on the sea, and I changed 9 different ships. The journey was exhausting but also interesting and filled with variation (1899, 167).

Circumnavigation at the end of the 19th century may have caused a certain level of discomfort to the traveler but the experience also facilitated Assan's short exposé on vessels:

We covered the distance from Colombo to Singapore in six days on a British ship belonging to the Peninsular and Oriental company (in short P and O) and I would advise no one to ever travel on British ships. The best ones are the German ships, followed by the French vessels; the Austrian ships are old and obsolete. Five years after its sale, a ship drops half in price due to rapid innovation in shipbuilding (1899, 138).

However, while these modern means of transportation may have proven useful at bridging the distance between far-away places, to intellectuals like Rebecca Solnit, it is primarily *walking* that holds the key to the understanding of a place, since "it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness." (2001, 21). On the other hand, a contemporary scholar such as Charles Forsdick deems that *walking* should not be hailed as the fundamental means of exploring places as this may lead to the exclusion, marginalization or discrimination of disabled travelers:

Recent evidence of a romanticized insistence on walking as an exemplary form of authentic, environmentally friendly, quintessentially human mobility

has, it might be argued, potentially devalorizing implications for those who are confined to a wheelchair or rely on prosthetics for movement, and who do not, as a result, conform to a normative sense of able-bodiedness (Forsdick 2019, 98).

Forsdick critiques the genre's implied disablist tendencies and biases ("one of the most body- focused of literary forms") and its overreliance on mobility and on the supremacy of vision and the senses and begs for the addition of the traveler's relative disability to the other categories ('variables") often discussed when assessing works of travel, "most notably class, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation" (2019, 99). While Assan's report includes no mentioning of any ailment, illness or impairment that the traveler might be suffering from before, during or after his long journey, the critical detour above sends a signal not only about the genre's overdependence on corporeality and the senses (with vision taking front stage) but also on how cultural encounters are mediated "in accounts of un- mechanized or semi-mechanized travel, on the variable and often fluctuating physical capabilities of the travelers undertaking the journeys described" (Forsdick 2019, 99).

What may distinguish Assan from other East-European travelers to the Far East from the end of the 19th century is his main purpose for journeying, so his type of travel. At the very beginning of his public lecture, Assan discloses the business and trade-oriented objectives of his voyage and the countries that he visited are primarily viewed as global economic players in their own right:

I will begin by talking about the pragmatic aspects of my journey and about the feasible commercial links that may be brokered between Romania and the Far East. I feel obliged to start with the economic component of my travels because, as less attractive as it may be, the countries that I visited will wage their future *wars on the battlefield of economy*. The commodities that we could successfully export to Asia are salt, bended wood, oil, flour and alcohol (sic, 1899, 119).

However, this practical outlook of Assan's journey is in keeping with the pervasive view on traveling in the Romanian Principalities during the 19th century. While there are a few noteworthy travelogues written before the 19th century – for example, the Moldavian Nicolae Milescu Spătaru wrote an account of a journey to China in 1675 and Dimitrie Cantemir authored *Descriptio Moldaviae* (c. 1716, first published 1771) while in exile in St Petersburg – it is during the 19th century that travel literature truly blossoms

and all the travel journals/diaries/memoirs published then pave the way for modern Romanian literature. Among the early travelers were Gheorghe Asachi (the offspring of a wealthy family), who traveled to Vienna and to Rome to further his studies in 1807 and the open-minded and well-off boyar Dinicu Golescu who journeyed to Germany and Switzerland. And while these may seem feeble beginnings:

at the beginning of the nineteenth century, most East European literary cultures still lacked the literary institutions and bourgeois readerships that were so central to the development of travel writing in western Europe. But efforts to develop elements of public culture and communication were beginning: newspapers were established, and vernacular languages began to be codified. […] Travel texts now appeared regularly in book form in many languages of the region, and often played a role in the impulse to build up national pride, frequently involving delicate operations of comparisons (Alex Drace-Francis 2019, 196).

In time, the very pragmatic goals (trade-related, educational, health-related etc.) that emboldened the first travelers and that were usually associated with "traditions of scholarly or elite travel" made room for "more spontaneous and experimental attempts." (Drace-Francis 2019, 199). Still, at the end of the 19th century, the Romanian travelers' main purposes for journeying remained largely practical. Therefore, it is understandable why, throughout his journey, Assan keeps a keen eye out both for business ventures since "the end of the 19th century breathes new life into the country's economy and into public life in general, and it encourages Romanians to believe that the future belongs to the entrepreneurial and enterprising spirits and that their country needs inclusion in the global circuit of progress, of worldwide cooperation and of commerce" (Anghelescu 2018, 8).

Moreover, Assan acted as an informal ambassador to the places that he visited: "My self-imposed but unofficial mission was similar to that of my fellow traveler [a Brazilian official who was sailing to Japan on an assignment] and the goal that I had in mind was to persuade the Japanese maritime companies to set anchor in The Port of Constanța." (1899, 131). The inserted footnote attests even further to Assan's eagerness to act as an official diplomat: "Over the last four years, the Japanese have sent three official diplomatic missions to Romania. I, the undersigned, requested to be sent on a similar mission to Japan – without imposing any financial obligation on the part of the Romanian government. However, I was not granted permission." (1899, 131).

Assan's emphasis on the imperative need to gain access to Asian markets and to establish a legation in Tokyo is quickly followed by a meticulous rationale which takes into consideration the geopolitical entanglements of the European powers in the region and their vested interests in the Asian economies. As an illustrative example, when discussing the main commodities that his country could export to Asia, the traveler starts with salt because "in India and in Birmania [Burma in Romanian], there is a great consumption of British salt." (Assan 1899, 120). And while he acknowledges a growing necessity and market for salt especially in India and Burma, Assan remarks that Romania would most likely miss this commercial opportunity due to its dearth of means of transportation, and a paucity of train wagons, engines, ships and complex systems of loading goods. However, this topic also opens an opportunity for Assan to make a pull-no-punches comment about the colonial interference in the economic affairs of the aforementioned countries:

And the growth in salt consumption is directly proportional to the growth in population. Ten years ago, the consumption of British salt in India was equivalent to 13,000 wagons (so thirteen times the salt we extract in Romania at the present moment). And every ten years, the salt consumption increases by 22 percent because God blesses the Indians with a decennial birth rate of 30 million people (so a birth rate equal to the population of Italy or of Spain and Portugal combined). On the other hand, the plague causes only an insignificant decline in demography. However, the British government goes to great lengths to inform the other colonizers on a weekly basis about the number of deaths brought by the plague, and the read-between-the-lines message is: "Steer clear of India, and let us have the absolute monopoly on the exploitation of the Indians" (1899, 120).

In the paragraph above, Assan minces no words and makes his thoughts clear on the issue of colonialism: places such as India are simply exploited and drained of their resources for the sheer benefit of the colonizers. This is one of the very few frontal challenges in Assan's report as the traveler seems more preoccupied with discovering business ventures and understanding the rich societal fabric and mores of the visited places. However, this is not to say that Assan does not pay great attention to international commerce and its flow of commodities. In a previous public lecture from 1897 ("Le rôle de la Roumanie dans le mouvement commercial de l'Europe avec l'Asie, l'Afrique, et l'Australie"), he draws attention to the fact that:

Romania carries massive trade deals with tropical countries which go unnoticed and are not recorded by any official statistics because all these colonial goods and raw materials reach Romania by means of go-betweens. And since we conduct all this trade not directly but we end up buying from British, French and German entrepôts, these commodities come attached to unnecessary extra costs (Assan in Anghelescu 2018, 14).

Hence, while visiting Southeast Asia, the trade-oriented traveler is interested in some of the major products that were in high demand from Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as tin from Malaya: "The tin deposits of Malaca [sic]are the oldest in the world. And the extraction and use of tin marked the onset of the Bronze Age as this alloy (bronze) was based on the tin extracted in Malaca. I visited a few foundries that manufacture half of the world's output of tin" (1899, 138).

To Milton Osborne (2002, 99), it was principal industries and commodities such as rubber, tin and rice (and then many more like tobacco, coffee, sugar and oil) that shaped the economy of the region and at the same time made it overwhelmingly dependent on capital investment and the use of paid labor:

Tin from Malaya and Indonesia helped meet the industrial nations' demand for cheap tinplate for use in the bearings essential for fast-running factory machinery. Rubber from Indonesia, Malaya and French Indochina, helped meet the needs of societies that expected constant improvement in a range of items from motor car tyres to surgical equipment. Copra from coconut palms played a part in the vast expansion of the soap industry as rising living standards in Europe and America made personal cleanliness the norm rather than the exception.

The visit to Singapore, (which stands for "the Lion City", quips Assan) is used by the traveler as an opportunity to study and expand his knowledge on the production of "coco, ilipes and mowra" (sic) oils, so necessary in the production of stearin as "tallow is in little use for making stearin these days." (1899, 140). Accordingly, Assan notes that he forged business ties with merchants in order to buy – for his oil refinery in Bucharest – "*gome de Manila, de Macassar and de New Zealand*" (sic, his italics) since Singapore was the main entrepôt for goods from the Philippines and the oceanic islands (1899, 140).

Added as a footnote remark and for further emphasis, Assan adds that "It is quite an erroneous idea that we cannot build stearin factories in Romania because we lack tallow. These days, the European producers of vegetable

oils manage to supply the stearin manufacturers and thus, animal fats are of little use for this purpose." (1899, 140). Assan's contact in Singapore, Mr. Schmidt, was the owner of such a factory specializing in the production of vegetable oils. The Romanian engineer and businessman had previously sold to Mr. Schmidt a piece of equipment that Assan himself invented and which allowed for rapeseed and flaxseed oil extraction by means of gasoline. Prior to the transaction, Assan had successfully equipped his own mill in Bucharest with the innovative system that he patented, and he was the first in Europe to pull such an engineering feat. Fast-forward to 2023, Assan's steam mill, the first in the country (built by Basil Assan's father in 1853 at a time when there was no other brick factory in Bucharest), is now completely devastated and in ruins.

Like in a corridor of mirrors, and about 75 years after Assan's journey round the world, the traveler's roaming through Singapore is recounted by V. Tebea for his readership that was living under the oppressive communist regime. The latter had already nationalized Assan's properties at the end of the 1940s:

In his free time, the Romanian traveler visits the city of Singapore. Divided in three large districts (the European, the Chinese and the Malay districts), Singapore opens itself as a vast field for ethnographic observations. Assan spends the night walking along Hylam, Malahar and Malay Streets, and their atmosphere remind him of the streets in Tokyo and Yokohama. He takes a keen interest in Wajang Malayu (sic) theatre which put on both local and European plays but with a Malay twist. While the European district, located in the west of the city or Tong Li (inhabited by rich Chinese merchants) abound in sumptuous villas and gardens, the other parts of the city are consumed by filth and darkness and the traveler walks down ill-lit streets filled with impoverished people sleeping on the ground. It is also in these parts of the city that Assan comes across the Coolies that spend their days pulling rickshaws in the pouring rain or under the blazing sun.

The traveler also visits the commercial areas of the city: Collyer Quay, Rafles Place (sic), Commercial Square and the Chamber of Commerce. And once his business dealings are sorted out, Assan makes a stop at the post office (adjacent to the Singapore Club), in order to send word back home that he is the first Romanian who has successfully brokered commercial ties with the Far East (Tebeica 1975, 184).

4. Ending remarks

The most fascinating feature of Assan's writing of travel – almost miraculous – is an immense appreciation and understanding of the Other. For example, while in Canton, the traveler notes:

Soon enough, one comes to the realization that he/she lives among a very hardworking and serious people, and they uphold opinions much different from ours. However, the Europeans and the Americans have no right to scorn these ideas in the manner that they far too often despise the people of color (1899, 143).

Then during his stay in Japan, he remarks: "If we wish to pass any judgment on the Japanese woman, we must obliterate all our ideas on morality that we come to pass around as perfect." (1899, 151). When discussing on the Japanese family and on the role of the man as paterfamilias, Assan opines on the customs of the land: "If the father is unable to sell his daughter, he resorts to renting her and he will not be considered evil for this, because for the Japanese, the practice lacks the odious character that our Occidental ideas confer upon it." (1899, 151). Even in food matters, the traveler-cum-writer keeps an open-mind when he observes: "The fish fat used in lieu of butter and the absence of bread prevented me from appreciating the Japanese cuisine at its true value." (1899, 149). Or "The Chinese civilization had been far greater than ours." and "The short time dedicated to this lecture will not allow me to talk about the United States, where I observed a relentless drive for hard work and the sort of intelligence that goes unparalleled in the disunited (sic.) states of Europe." (1899, 143, 168).

Interestingly enough, the Eurocentric views that usually tarnish a great number of travelogues implode in Assan's report and passages as the ones above are a testament in themselves to Assan's open-minded spirit and to the regenerative powers of travel writing studies.

Note. All the translations from Romanian sources are mine.

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