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The Series Travels edited by Paweł Hertz

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Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

The Series Travels edited by Paweł Hertz

In the human nature there is an inherent need to tame the surroundings. No wonder that travelling, which brings about not only numerous dangers but also the pleasure of discovering foreign lands, has always excited the human mind. Travelling plays an educative role, is a source of aesthetic sensations, helps to establish self-identity of an individual, treated as a representative of a given tradition, in relation to other cultures, and obviously teaches tolerance. Thus the social function of travelling changed over the ages, it was always connected with the pleasure of discovering "the new." "Travelling is a passion," wrote a Japanese author of aphorisms. Not everyone can provide for this specific need directly. This situation created the need for someone else's accounts of travels.

The character of such accounts was changing along with historical and literary periods. Before the 19th century travel literature consisted of accurate and detailed descriptions of the visited places. Later it became a much more personal account of an author's impressions and reflections caused by an encounter with unknown landscapes, customs and monuments. The journey became a pretext for general reflections.

In 1977 the National Editorial Institute (PIW) forwarded the interesting initiative of publishing in Poland travel accounts written by Polish and foreign authors of the 18th and 19th centuries. In the same year, the series Travels was created with Paweł Hertz as its chief editor. Up to now 17 titles have been published. The main criteria for their selection were the artistic and cultural interests of their authors. The editor emphasized particularly strongly this very aspect of the works published in the series.

For the modern reader these “notes”, “reminiscences”, “letters” from journeys are valuable not only as source materials from which he can learn about the culture of other nations. They also help people to imagine how this “passion for travelling” was fulfilled for 3 generations, they make readers realize how the attitudes towards certain analysed cultural phenomena were changed.

Among the published works there are republications and also books which have not been introduced to the Polish reader before. The series was started in 1977 (there is a rule to publish one title a year) with two-volume *Kartki z podróży (Notes from a Journey)* by J. I. Kraszewski. This is an account of a long journey to Italy (1858–1864) written from the point of view of a historian and art historian. 8 years later another Kraszewski’s diary was published—*Reminiscences from Odessa, Yedissan and Bujak*.

Not without a good reason in the same year 1977, the first edition of Iwaszkiewicz’s *Podróż do Włoch (A Trip to Italy)* was published. In this book the author focuses his interests primarily on the sociological and cultural aspects of travelling rather than on art.

A Journey to Spain by Theophile Gautier introduces us, in turn, to the romantic world of this poet, novelist and journalist. The descriptions of landscape, customs and objects of art constitute a great part of this work, in which the author combined the traveller’s passion with the romantic “unsettled spirit.” In one of his letters Gautier wrote:

My method is just like Lord Byron’s [...] I travel to live my dreams, to “change my face,” if you will. I went to Constantinople to become a muslim for as long as I could; to Greece for Phidias and the Parthenon; to Russia for the snow, caviar and art; to Egypt for the Nile and Cleopatra.

How different is Dickens’ view of reality in his *American Notes*. Dickens is primarily interested in social and legal institutions, the landscape and people are somewhere in the background, and there are virtually no observations concerning the American artistic scene. *American Notes*, published in 1978 in the series *Travels*, are the only case of unfavourable, and sometimes almost ill-disposed attitudes towards the visited country.

The republication of Iwaszkiewicz’s *Podróże do Polski (Journeys to Poland)* in the series apparently seems unjustified—they present

Poland seen by a Pole. But Iwaszkiewicz was a Pole brought up in the climate of three cultures: Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. Iwaszkiewicz himself explains away this perhaps slightly deceitful title:

It has so happened in my biography that "I was going to Poland" three times in my life, I was setting off to my homeland as if from the outside, I was approaching it—half-pilgrim, half-tourist—trying to guess what its essence and its beauty are, and having the opportunity of comparing it to the environment in which I had previously been rooted.

Thus we have to do here with a bit different kind of travelling.

Goethe wrote: "One does not travel to reach a destination, but to travel." The outcome of his passion for travelling are his *Travels through Italy* published in Polish translation in 1980. Goethe—a romantic and traveller—is obviously fascinated with Mediterranean culture which endows art, people, landscapes and customs with a specific character. In "rich in forms" Italy Goethe feels happy and he reluctantly comes to "formless Germany" with the "gloomy sky" over it.

In the series Travels there have been published 2 books which are accounts of peregrinations to the Holy Land: *An Account of a Journey from Paris to Jerusalem* (1980) by Chateaubriand and Lamartine's *Journey to the East* (1986). Paweł Hertz characterizes both journeys in the following way: "The first one is literary and erudite to the core, it harnesses the billow of history as if the course of a stony aqueduct, turns back to the past, its connections with the time when it was written are obscure [...] The other one, almost devoid of erudition, and unlike the first one, hardly makes any use of its predecessors, it is lengthy in parts [...] proves that its author was a shrewd observer, its links with the contemporary world, with history at work are unusually clear." Both outstanding works among European travel books are widely appreciated and not only because they can satisfy curiosity of foreign lands. These reflections on landscapes, people and customs, which come to the sources of European culture, are, as a matter of fact, as Hertz remarks, "philosophical works, in which the author's monologue is his dialogue with the reader."

Another Polish journal is Krystyn Lach Szyrma's *Anglia i Szkocja. Przypomnienia z podróży roku 1820–1824 odbytej (England and Scotland. Reminiscences from a Journey Made between 1820–24)*. The work takes us from the domain of the Mediterranean countries to

regions which were not only less familiar to Poles, but also very clearly culturally different. The editor emphasizes that Szyrma's book, which was republished after over a century, is one of the very few thorough works on Britain which appeared in Polish. He also stresses that Szyrma's journal is particularly interesting because it gives an account of the impressions of a Pole facing the culture which was at that time regarded from the Polish perspective as remote, unfamiliar, almost alien.

Michał Wiszniewski's *Podróż do Włoch, Sycylii i Malty (Travels through Italy, Sicily and Malta)* was also taken into account in the series. The author was a professor of history at the Jagellonian University and his work is one of the most superb examples of Polish travel books. The journal is written with great literary taste and makes use of literary means of expression (fragments of short story, quotations, colour and light in the descriptions of monuments). At the same time, it is a genuine encyclopaedia of Italy written according to the canons of romantic historiography.

The next publication offered within the frames of the series is Vasily Botkin's *Letters from Spain* written at the same time when Gautier wrote his book. Both works give accounts of the same places and events. The comparison of these two accounts leads to interesting conclusions, especially when one remembers that Botkin, a Russian merchant and intellectual, wrote his *Letters* with the intention to publish them, whereas Gautier, a romantic poet, wrote his out of the heart's desire.

The Institute's series did not leave out Victor Hugo's wonderful work *The Rhine*. Here is what the author himself wrote about it in the foreward:

Cet ouvrage, qui a un fleuve pour sujet, c'est, par une coïncidence bizzare, produit lui-même tout spontanément et tout naturellement à l'image d'un fleuve. Il commence comme un ruisseau: traverse un ravin près d'un groupe de chaumières, sous un petit pout d'une arche: côtoie l'auberge dans le village, le troupeau dans le près, la poule dans le brisson, le paysan dans le sentier; puis il s'éloigne; il touche un champ de bataille, une plaine illustre, une grande ville; il se développe, il s'enfonce dans les brumes de l'horizon, reflète des cathédrales, visite des capitales, franchit des frontières, et, après avoir reflechi les arbres, les champs, les étoiles, les églises, les ruines, les habitations, les braques et les voiles, les hommes et les idées, les pouts qui joignent deux villages et les pouts qui joignent deux nations, il rencontre enfin, comme le but de sa course et le terme de son élargissement, le double et profond océan du présent et du passé, la politique et l'histoire.

The last from already published works is Paul Muratov's *The Paintings of Italy*. This account can be described as the pure form of the artistic journey, not lacking, however, in historical and social reflection. Muratov, a historian of art enamoured with Italian art, presents frescos, paintings and mosaics in an interesting way and also delineates colourful profiles of their authors.

In the near future the following valuable works will be published in the series: *Travels through Italy* by Gregorovius, *Letters from Russia* by the Marquis de Custine, Edward Raczyński's *Journal of Travels through Turkey*, Pawiński's *Spain*.

It is worth mentioning that all books published in the series are carefully annotated, prefaced and often illustrated. All volumes have uniform covers and are arranged in a similar way.

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