

## OLD CZECH BOOKS OF TRAVEL

### I. DEFINING THE TRAVEL WRITING

When attempting to deal with travel writing, one notices from the very beginning how changeable, variable, and even Protean the representations of this literary genre can be, as the term ‘travel writing’ may be related to many works of various origin, form, structure, and composition. This is not that surprising and the fact has been pointed out by several scholars. Among Czech books of travel, for instance, there are travel diaries written by Czech noblemen, narratives written by pilgrims to the Holy Land, travel accounts of diplomats as well as letters from Jesuit missionaries. How can we then subsume all works under the term ‘travel writing’? Here are some clues.

Joan-Pau Rubiés gives the following definition of travel writing: “Travel literature is therefore best described as a ‘genre of genres’, since a variety of kinds of literature defined by a variety of purposes and conventions share travel as their essential condition of production<sup>1</sup>.” Other scholars, however, are reluctant to admit whether there exists an independent genre of travel writing as such. Jan Borm argues that “it is not a genre, but a collective term for a variety of texts...whose main theme is travel” and remarks that “travel writing or travel literature can be a useful heading under which to consider and to compare the multiple crossings from one form of writing into another<sup>2</sup>.”

My conception of travel writing is closer to that of Rubiés. I agree with his term a ‘genre of genres’ he used for travel writing and I accept it, even if I am fully aware of some of Borm’s legitimate objections. Following, then, both the above-mentioned definitions of travel writing I argue that it can be defined as ‘a literary depiction of travel’, since both travel and its literary depiction are the distinctive and key features of all travel writing and the components common and present in all of them.

Simplified though this may seem, we could hardly find a more appropriate definition which would apply to the whole corpus of these writings, at the same time giving us a solid point of departure for our research. A more appropriate one, because it is this particular theme of individual travel – set, of course, within the specific temporal, spatial, and social contexts, and depicted in many various ways – that constitutes the central and the main theme of the works in question, and thus the wealth and colourfulness of the texts examined (which makes

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Travel Writing as a Genre: Facts, Fictions and the Invention of a Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe.’ *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing* 1, no. 1-2 (2000), pp. 5-35

<sup>2</sup> ‘Defining Travel: On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology’, in *Perspectives on Travel Writing*, edd. Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs (Aldershot : Ashgate, 2004), p. 13.

Born so uneasy about the term ‘genre’). Admittedly, it may also seem to be a less appropriate definition, because from the point of methodology such a formulation – ‘travel writing is a literary depiction of travel’ – may seem to be, if a definition at all, somewhat inaccurate and vague.

Nevertheless, we will face up to these obstacles. The opening definition will serve us as a basis for a classification of travel writing.

## II. CLASSIFICATION OF TRAVEL WRITING (WITH REGARD TO THE CZECH OUTPUT)

There are several classifications of travel writing, some of them being more general and aspiring towards the universal validity within the genre, the others more specified, based rather on a particular situation within the specific literary output. The example of the former one is the dichotomy of Percy G. Adams, as set out in his *Travel literature and the evolution of the novel*<sup>3</sup>. Adams classifies travel literature according to content (a guidebook, an account of a journey by land/ sea) and according to form (notes, letter, diary or journal, the simple narrative, poem).

On the other hand, the classification produced by the Czech scholar Eduard Petruš<sup>4</sup> is an example of the latter one – within the Czech travel literature he distinguishes, predominantly referring to content and in a historic perspective, four main lines of development (travel accounts, travel reports, scientific book of travel and Humanistic travelogue). However, I do not consider these terms as exact since they combine the characteristics of travel books on different structure levels and from different points of view within one system. Yet, Petruš notices some of the fundamental features of old Czech books of travel here, and in this respect we will attempt to continue his efforts and try to make his typology more precise.

Taking into consideration also the findings of German scholars who have in great detail, as one might expect, classified functional and typological characteristics of travelogues (pilgrimages, travels of noblemen, diplomatic missions, travels of tradesmen, study trips etc.), and in the view of our definition above that ‘travel writing is a literary depiction of travel’ I propose the following classification of (old) Czech travel writing: I see this genre as a continuous spectrum which is differentiated and structured within by means of various literary forms, e.g. by form of letter, diary, report etc. Adjoining forms are closer to each other whereas more distant have less in common. It is necessary to say that these ideal and pure forms are theoretical constructs only, as their specific realisations are never absolute and they

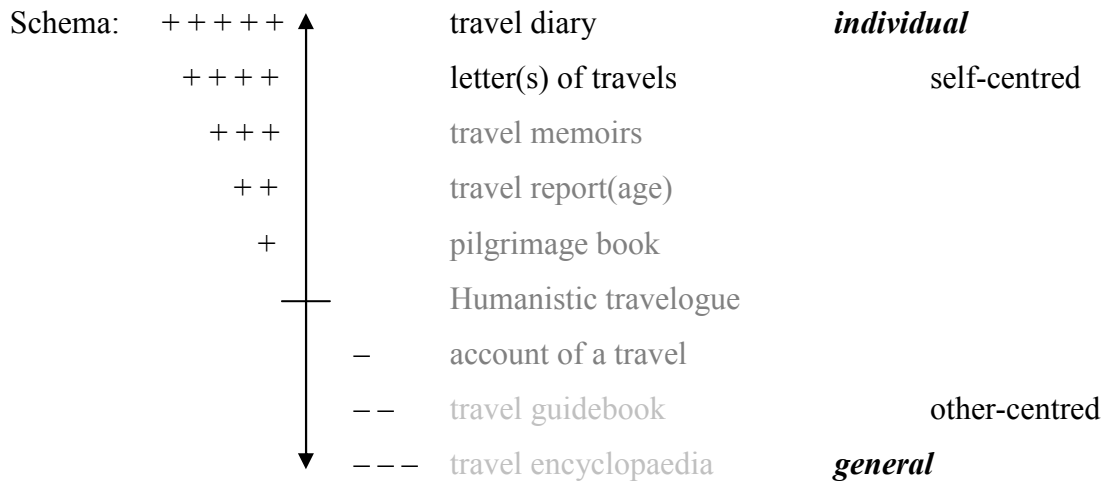
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<sup>3</sup> P. G. Adams: *Travel literature and the evolution of the novel*. Lexington (Ky), 1983.

<sup>4</sup> E. Petruš: *Vzrušující skutečnost: fakta a fantazie ve středověké a humanistické literatuře*. Ostrava, 1984.

include also distinctive features of other forms. Nevertheless, the predominant characteristics are principal.

What is, then, our classification like? At one extreme there is a travel diary. Then follow travel letter, travel memoirs, travel report (reportage), pilgrimage book, Humanistic travelogue, account of a travel, travel guidebook, and travel encyclopaedia at another extreme. Employing the starting definition of us, each of these literary forms can be defined as a ‘literary depiction of a travel in a form of...’ – a letter, for instance.



Travel diary and travel encyclopaedia are the extreme points of the spectrum stretching from ‘individual’ to ‘general’ depictions of reality. Let me explain this: the individual depiction (such as travel letter) is valid individually, and, in its representation, tends to be subjective, whereas the general one (such as travel guidebook) is valid generally, and thus tends to be objective. The former is self-centred (and written in the first person) while the latter is other-centred (and prefers the third person). In the middle, at rough estimate, I put the Humanistic travelogue the form of which I regard as ‘unmarked’, since it integrates distinctive features of both individual and general depiction. More fitting term, therefore, might rather be ‘all-marked’ form. This all-integrating universalistic form is, in my opinion, also the most difficult (and challenging) to be mastered, and that is why it is found at the very peak of the development of old Czech travelogues, namely in the late Renaissance period.

It is my belief that the idea of Renaissance encyclopaedism, which is very characteristic of thought of this period, succeeded in finding the adequate and corresponding all-integrating form also within the genre of travel literature.

### III. TWO CZECH PILGRIMS IN THE HOLY LAND

In the last decade of 15<sup>th</sup> century, two Czech pilgrims set out on a journey to the Holy Land. It is interesting, and for a scholar extremely fruitful, that these two pilgrims (and

journeys they undertook as well) were as much different as possible. The first of them, Martin Kabátník, was a tradesman from town Litomyšl in eastern Bohemia, a member of the Unity of the Brethren, a non-educated, but skilled and smart person. The second of them, Jan Hasištejnský z Lobkovic, was of different descent, faith, and education. A nobleman, a Catholic and brother of one of the most notable Czech Humanists, Bohuslav Hasištejnský. Strangely enough, even though there was the same aim of pilgrimage at both of them, their motivations in undertaking this journey were quite different.

**Martin Kabátník** was sent, in company with three other members of the Unity, to find out “whether there are still the people anywhere in the world who preserve the rules and order of the early Holy Church” since from its birth the Unity of the Brethren was determined to continue these old traditions seeking ‘the truth’ (which echoes one of the most essential ideas of the Hussite movement). Kabátník and his fellows set off on a journey on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1491 and after a year and eight months they returned safe and sound. They travelled on land, which is also quite unusual for that time, via Cracow, Lviv and Suceava in today’s Romania; then they crossed the Danube river and finally reached Constantinople-Istanbul in Turkey. Here they headed for different destinations – Kabátník headed for south to Palestine and Egypt.

Another interesting point is that Kabátník was an illiterate person and he dictated stories he had lived through to the scribe Adam Bachelor of Litomyšl about ten years after his travels. The book called *Cesta z Čech do Jeruzaléma a Egipta* was published in 1539<sup>5</sup> and then again several times. According to Adam Bachelor’s testimony Kabátník must have been very sincere and open-hearted person and, apparently, he must have had a very good memory. His narration is extremely valuable because of its colloquial features and an individual portrait of local reality, including his own experience. Within the classification we have proposed the travelogue of Martin Kabátník can be defined as a ‘travel report’ – its author narrates directly and naturally, he looks at things at close quarters, he comments on and compares the reality he has never seen before with the reality in Bohemia. Reading his travel book one feels to be in the middle of events which are being described at the moment of narration.

In view of a distinction between ‘home’ and ‘foreign’ or ‘known’ and ‘unknown’ that we have just mentioned it is possible – and inspiring – to analyse Kabátník’s account also within the framework of cultural and anthropological studies. As Czech scholar Lucie Storchová

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<sup>5</sup> Kabátník’s travel report(age) was written in 1500. The first new edition *Martina Kabátníka Cesta z Čech do Jeruzaléma a Kaira r. 1491-92* was edited and published by J. V. Prášek, Prague, 1894. The newest edition of a part of the text dealing with Egypt was published in *Mezi houfy lotrův se pustiti: české cestopisy o Egyptě 15. – 17. století*, Prague, 2005.

comments, “the narration of Kabátník is structured by a minimum of pre-texts<sup>6</sup>” as he had not most likely studied any specialised literature related to the region or pilgrimages before his journey, and references to the Bible or occasional hints at popular stories are the only traces of his literacy within this field. That is why this travelogue is so unique since it presents quite clear and impartial observation of life in the East which is not pre-structured or pre-formed by any contemporary literary text or other person’s experience. What is Martin Kabátník’s book actually like?

The whole journey from Litomyšl to Constantinople is condensed within one succinct paragraph in the beginning, and so the narration begins straight in this city which is, in words of Kabátník, “as large as three Pragues”. It is typical of his depiction that at first he usually describes the location of a town (frequently compared to some town in Bohemia), then comments on the religious situation and after that describes the most important sights in the place as well as trades, people, food and many other interesting things that drew his attention. Last but not least, he frequently makes his narration vivid and colourful (and thus real and trustworthy) by depicting his own stories.

Kabátník tried to fulfil his religious mission, too, and from time to time he asked local people about the religious situation, but in this respect – in finding the successors of the early Church – he did not succeed. From Constantinople he continued inland journey via Damascus, Galilee, and Ramallah to Jerusalem. There he was, together with his Jewish companion, falsely accused of stealing money by his guide whom they travelled with from Constantinople. Fortunately, the truth came to light and Kabátník became a sort of celebrity. In the surroundings of Jewish minority he spent all his stay in Jerusalem, and when staying in Cairo he had also a Jewish companion “who was familiar with Egypt (strangely enough, Kabátník refers to Cairo as ‘Egypt’) and who spoke Russian, so that I could make myself understood”.

In Cairo, Kabátník was captured and charmed by the city, and in this respect it is not surprising that the narration of Cairo covers almost a half of the whole book. Let me finish this part with several extracts from his travelogue. Firstly a sort of snapshot from Damascus: “In Damascus there is bread, wine, meat and other things for living in abundance, but one is not allowed to buy wine freely, even though there is enough, because Moors rule Damascus and they do not drink wine, and that is why they are very angry at those who drink it, especially at guests and unknown people; because they regard us, Christians, as pagans being

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<sup>6</sup> In *‘Mezi houfy lotrův se pustiti’*, see above.

pagans themselves. So if I or someone else intended to drink wine, we had to visit a Christian, and he asked us to go to a pantry and he locked us in, and so we were allowed to drink wine. Otherwise you would get nothing.”

Secondly, an illustration of cross-cultural experience: “I stayed in Egypt for twenty days and during these days it never rained. And I asked some people: is there a rainfall in your country, or does it ever rain, and are there severe winters here? Regarding the winter that I was asking about they told me: what is it winter, tell us, and when I told them how soil freezes because of cold and how water and big rivers freeze so much that people can walk over it and go with wagons, they had a good laugh about it, and those who had never been abroad refused to believe it.”

And finally, how Martin Kabátník saw a giraffe in the streets of Cairo: “In Egypt I saw a very strange animal I had never seen before nor heard of it which they call ‘dyavant’. This animal is tall in front part: when I raised my hand as much as possible, I could hardly reach its breast. From breast up to its head, so I think, it is as long as from the ground to breast, since I watched them when they were feeding it through windows; as if it were four and a half yards from the ground, it could reach everything. It has very low and short rump; that is why in view of its height and the short rump it does not look well-proportioned. It has a very nice skin, like feathered, a bit similar to that of leopard as there are some parts in white and the others in dark colour, and it is like this on the whole body and legs as well; and its hair is very straight and its head is similar to the head of an aurochs. However, I have not heard if it was strong or doing anything peculiar, they led it along the streets showing it to the people.”

**Jan Hasištejnský** set out on a journey to the Holy Land, as many Christian pilgrims had done before him, in 1493 to see with his own eyes the places of Christ’s life. Not only was his journey a typical example of a late mediaeval pilgrimage, focused on the holy sites in Jerusalem and its surroundings, but it also included some features of the aristocratic journey because he travelled in company of his friend and nobleman Jindřich z Guttenštejna and during his pilgrimage he for the most part stayed in the company of aristocrats. In this respect it is worth stressing that the phenomenon of ‘aristocratic travels’ is not bound to one literary form only, but in different periods it permeates many various forms of travel literature from the travel account and the pilgrimage in the late Middle Ages to the travel diary and the travel letters in the Renaissance and the Baroque period.

Unlike his Czech predecessor two years ago, Jan Hasištejnský firstly travelled westwards via Pilsen, towns in Bavaria and Tyrol to Venice in Italy which was the most important

setting-off point for pilgrims of his time. Staying for more than three weeks in Venice waiting for a ship and making the necessary arrangements, he was, apart from other things, granted an audience with the doge of Venice. He also visited many churches and temples in Venice, commenting especially (and in detail) on remarkable pieces of art and relics they possessed. Such a description is a very characteristic feature of Hasištejnský's travelogue, and so his narration becomes a bit stereotyped sometimes, as in Jerusalem where he provides his reader with exact measurements of churches, altars, tombs etc. That is also why it is assumed that he must have kept a travel diary, as Zdeňka Tichá, a Czech scholar, believes<sup>7</sup>.

However, Hasištejnský knows how to draw the reader's attention by inserting short and attractive stories related to the site he visits, the bulk of them being – in contrast to Kabátník – not his personal experience. When comparing places, he makes a successful use of the same model as Kabátník, and so “the city of Venice is bigger than Prague, Old and New Town together” or the port Zadar “is almost as big as two towns of Žatec”. The most lively and lovely depiction, in my opinion, is his account of travelling in the Mediterranean and visiting its islands (Crete, Rhodos, and Cyprus). This text is very natural; our pilgrim is focused on the everyday life and its colours, smells, shapes and sizes. At some places in the text this depiction may also remind us of the fantastic narrations of John Mandeville and his fictitious book of travel.

The narration of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land and of the stay there covers about eighty per cent of the whole book, the rest being dedicated to the return journey and a kind of appendix providing factual information on the pilgrimage (a number of pilgrims, their names, nationality etc.). Hasištejnský's work remained in manuscript form and it was first published only at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century when works of old Czech travellers became very popular.

Here are several extracts to give you an idea of Hasištejnský's style and narration. Firstly, let's have a look at Hasištejnský as a critical observer: “In Pula...there is a very big and a very high palace (= a Roman amphitheatre) which could be clearly seen from the ship. Alexander of Macedon is said to have built it, and they say it has as many windows as there are the days in a year. And I was told about this palace for sure by some people, though it is most likely an untruth to say, that they had several times tried to quarry these stones willing to built their houses elsewhere, because all the palace is built from fine pieces of hewed stone,

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<sup>7</sup> Z. Tichá: *Jak staří Čechové poznávali svět: výběr ze starších českých cestopisů 14. – 17. století*. Prague, 1986.

but whatever they quarried and took away, it disappeared at night and in the next morning it was found in its proper place.”

Secondly, his observation of dolphins: “After all, we were sailing, and sailing we saw many dolphins which were jumping just next to the ship. These dolphins are sea fish, and they act courteously, as if they were tumbling.” I cannot omit the audience with the prince of Dubrovnik. This event is often quoted by scholars for its unintentional humour: “Then we went in the company of the same prince to another room, and there he gave a banquet for us in the Italian manner. Although the table was set very nicely, I hoped for more abundant food; there was nothing else but some sweets and some pretzels, and malmsey as a drink.”

And finally, a brief narration from Jerusalem: “They showed us also the St Veronica’s house in front of which the Lord wiped his face, and having impressed it on the garment he gave it back, and I saw this garment in Rome. Other people say that the genuine garment is the one which is kept at Karlštejn Castle and that it came there thanks to the king Charles who had borrowed the genuine garment from the Pope in Rome, had the new one painted after that borrowed one, then hid the genuine one and sent that fake one, which was very similar to the previous garment, back to the Pope. I have seen that one in Karlštejn, too, and dear God knows the best which one is genuine.”

#### **IV. SUMMARY**

To summarise briefly, I am pointing out the most significant conclusions: the genre of travel writing may be grasped and understood as a continuous spectrum which is differentiated and structured within by means of various literary forms, e.g. by form of letter, diary, report and so on. This methodological tool enables us to classify the concrete realizations of such forms, i.e. the individual travelogues, on the typological level, and then to analyse thoroughly their structure, narration, the specific discourse they are set in, artistic value, and impression on a reader. I tried to illustrate such an approach with examples in today’s lecture.