

The “Elsewhere” as a Personal Semantic Matrix in Vasile Alecsandri’s Travel Writings

Ludmila Braniște*

Abstract:

A literary and spiritual document, Vasile Alecsandri’s travel writings constitute the subject of this paper. Apart from their value in terms of education and pleasure, they reveal the psychological structure of the traveler, his attitude towards life, as well as his capacity to artistically transform the real events he experienced. Moreover, travel writings attract interest from an esthetic point of view; thus, given that the pilgrim Alecsandri made the genre flourish, it marked an important sector in the literature of the 1848 revolutionary period. The present analytical-interpretative study of its most characteristic aspects highlights descriptions, portraits, the writer’s irony, lyricism, his talent and, even more importantly, his constant involvement in the national and social struggle of this agitated epoch – the involvement of a patriot devoted to his country. All the reasons stated above suggest that Alecsandri’s prose constitutes a major chapter in his creation, travel memoirs being the most significant part of this prose. Writing about Alecsandri as a prose writer means, first and foremost, considering the interpretations of memoir literature, on the one hand, and the constants of its subject matter, on the other.

Keywords: travel memoirs, pilgrim writer, reporting, ethnography, anecdote, sun, sea, picturesque, hazardous

“Alecsandri’s prose is more viable than his poetry.”

G. Ibrăileanu

To analyze and interpret the travel memoirs written by Vasile Alecsandri, which represent a cherished and valuable work, means to focus our attention on the prose written by the long acclaimed poet and playwright. Alecsandri was also a talented prose writer, not only “our greatest poet” (as Eminescu wrote in 1876) and the founder of the national theatre through his plays, where the truth of life becomes the truth of drama. His value as a poet and playwright has long overshadowed his real value as a prose writer.

* Associate Professor PhD, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, branisteludmila@yahoo.com

Only in 1919, in an article, *Vasile Alecsandri*, published in *Literary Notes* [*Însemnări literare*], Ibrăileanu opposes “the strong preconceived idea that Alecsandri is, above all, a poet”. Emphasizing qualities and skills such as “sprit of observation, objective view on life, wit, humour, clarity, etc.,” all these being “qualities of a prose writer and not at all of a poet writing epic poems and even less lyrical ones,” the critic concluded firmly: “Alecsandri’s prose is more viable than his poetry” (Ibrăileanu, 1968: 25–26).

G. Călinescu, in his *History of the Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present Day* [*Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*] (1982: 317) and in his monography of the writer (Călinescu, 1965: 111), adopts Ibrăileanu’s perspective in more detail: “perhaps from Alecsandri’s work more lasting is the one in prose”. Perpessicius, Zoe Dumitrescu-Buşulenga, Şerban Cioculescu, Al. Piru, Paul Cornea and a few more literary historians adopted the same position towards the traditional perspective.

What attitude towards Alecsandri’s work is, then, appropriate so as not to diminish the complexity of his vast and varied creation? The scientific approach was offered as early as 1886 by Titu Maiorescu, in his important study *Poets and Critics* [*Poeţi şi critici*]. Aware of the national calling of the forty-eighter writer, he wrote:

In Alecsandri’s work vibrates all the heart and feeling of his countrymen, that could take shape in a poetic form in the relative condition of our people today. The charm of the Romanian language in the folk poetry – appears in *his* poetry; human love and the longing for our country – were embodied by *his* creations the beauty of our land and of the air we breathe – were described by *him*. When the elite society could benefit from a theatre in Iasi and Bucharest – *he* was the one who answered its needs by writing comedies and dramas; when the people was called to arms – *he* alone warmed our soldiers’ hearts with his poems (Maiorescu, 1984: 487).

“What exactly” – the critic wondered “lies Alecsandri’s unique value in? It is in his *wholeness* (italics by L. B.) of his literary action” (*Ibidem*). Nobody can argue that. Alecsandri’s value and importance “lies” in the global meaning of his work, a work in which the spiritual freedom of the agitated century he lived in found its aesthetic expression.

Out of his literary creation we will choose to focus on his prose affirming our belief that, like his poetry and theatre – and maybe to a greater extent than them – his prose is the result of his intellect and feeling, the result of his inner life. Out of a psychological base a lifestyle takes shape and moreover a style of communication. For him, writing becomes a way of expressing his creative individuality.

The defining traits of Alecsandri's personality, added to his intellect and his artistic talent led to the originality of his work. These are to be found in his prose as well. A prose which is calm, relaxed, cheerful, just like his own philosophy, optimistic and often ironic and moralizing, like the attitude of a man with strong ethical beliefs, a prose of serene and objective lyricism, like the Latin, Apollonian writer, always ready to explore the varied joy of life. Alecsandri's spirit of observation lies in the fact that his eye are like a painter's, able to capture and enjoy the show of life. The author had the gift to capture the beings and objects that surrounded him with their specific characteristics. Sometimes the writing appears plain but only to suggest the impression created. The writer introduces us into the details of real life "in a world that is palpable, not a projection of his imagination" (Cornea and Păcurariu, 1974: 114).

Due to this original mixture of characteristic traits, Alecsandri's prose can't be classified, remaining surprizingly original. Narrative wise, Alecsandri reminds us of Felix Aderca, who, in his novel, *The God of Love – Zeul iubirii*, surprises us by combining three narrative perspectives: first, second and third (Băiceanu, 2014). Vasile Alecsandri avoided classifying his work which was printed during his lifetime. Those who printed his work after his death tied various ways to systematize and classify his work but they were all conventional and arbitrary. In Alecsandri's prose, memories combine with direct observation, description with narrative, anecdote with irony and sarcasm, while romantic elements coexist with realistic and classicist ones, in a combination which characterizes his style in an original way, giving him a unique status in the literature of those times.

Not extensive in length and written at long intervals, Vasile Alecsandri's prose writings were published, as the author himself mentioned in the preface to *Literary necklace [Salba literară]*, in 1857: "Literary Dacia" ["Dacia literară"], "Propășirea", "Literary Romania" ["România literară"], "Bucovina", "Bison" ["Zimbrul"], "The Star of the Danube" ["Steaua Dunării"] and in several almanacs edited by his friend, Mihail Kogălniceanu. When in 1875, he begins to publish his *Complete Works [Operele complete]*, the volume *Prose [Proză]* follows after his three volumes of theatre in 1876, comprising the texts from *Literary necklace [Salba literară]*, to which he also adds *A Journey to Africa [Călătorie în Africa]* and several "studies" and "biographies". These are the only editions published during his lifetime. Others, such as the short story *Mărgărita*, fragment of a novel *Dridri*, the work entitled *Vasile Porojan*, his political memoirs appear later, in his posthumous volumes.

Heterogeneous in its expression, Alecsandri's prose ranges from: sketch, short story, novel, story, travel diary, political pamphlet, literary letter, etc.

This diversity is, however, only apparent as through reading and analysis it becomes obvious that as in the case of other Moldavian writers it has its source in the personal life of the writer and that of his time. Autobiography and evocation, his prose, original as it is, is based on memories and observation. His subjective memory and his naturally endowed creative personality are so strong and his power of observation so accurate that the use of imagination seems to lack entirely. Most of his narratives belong to the field of memoirs. The variety is more apparent than real, since most texts have their source more or less in the writer's experience. Both in the texts that rely on fiction and even more in the others the writer makes use of his life experience, the texts being mostly first person narratives.

His first short stories, *The Florist of Venice* [*Buchetiera din Florența*] and *Mount of Fire* [*Muntele de foc*] (published as *Souvenirs from Italy* [*Suvenire din Italia*]¹), *Dridri* and *Margărita*, and then the pages so full of his heart's warmth, dedicated to Negruzzi, Bălcescu, Russo, Lamartine, Prosper Mérimée, tens and tens of letters based on memories. "The Travel Diaries" ("Jurnalele de călătorie"), *A Walk in the Mountains* [*O plimbare la munți*], *Borsec*, *The White Lake* [*Balta Albă*], *A Journey to Africa* [*Călătorie în Africa*] are also memoirs. Even *The Town of Iasi in 1844* [*Iașii în 1844*], *The Story of a Gold Coin* [*Istoria unui galbân*], where he describes the simple, ordinary, daily life, appear as memoirs as well- those of everyday living. This living reality can't be put down to literary mimesis, as it is the pure expression of his own structure, of his authentic writer's calling. Alecsandri lives in an atmosphere dominated by memories, where the pleasure of telling and listening "write, write, make me relive again in the past represented by yesterday, which has all the characteristics of a century" he would tell a French friend (Alecsandri, 1911: 74), and he insisted by telling I. Ghica: "Tell me everything you know... Tell me... Tell me...", becomes a way of life, and his writing, as it so clearly was said "the imprint of memories on paper" (Ghica, 1976: 415), not only for the joy of telling

¹ "In Alecsandri's work, Italy is the country of oranges and endless seas, of imposing palaces, of art galleries, and opera events, of heavenly landscapes, of love and love songs, of harmony between sky and earth, the sacred and profane, of real and imaginary, of good prevailing over evil, of delight, of dream and ecstasy" (Trifan, 2014). *The Image of Italy in Alecsandri's Work*. [*Imaginea Italiei în opera lui Vasile Alecsandri*.] http://confluente.ro/Elena_trifan_1395416667.html, accessed on 1 May, 2015.

them, or listening to them but also for their functionality for their value as a historic and human document. When “time destroys everything without mercy”, we need this “proof” which “reminds us of the past, bringing to life, through narratives, various periods with original characters and events in the history of the country” (see Doina Curticăpeanu’s detailed comments, 1977: 13–22). Facts of life and psychologically significant people, caught in the passing of time, are brought together in his prose pages, offering us, as he himself said, “a kind of museum which is worth visiting”.

Written over a long period of time and at long intervals, and heterogeneous in form, Alecsandri’s prose appears in front of our eyes in genetic periods and of successive ages, the process of growing being marked by the distance between the literary conventions of those times and the originality of the writer which is the result of self discovery. The writer frees himself from the conventions and clichés which characterized his work in a period of obedience towards the model of the times and as an answer to the reading public, as for him the truthfulness of the real world and the veracity of human activity are an essential trait of life. The observation made by T. Vianu in relation to C. Negruzzi’s work “an outer life more than an inner life” (1966: 59), is valid for many writers, contemporary with the author of the short story *Alexandru Lăpuşneanu*). With the passing of time Alecsandri offers more and more attention to the ordinary world, keeping fresh “all that his eyes could see and his ears could hear”. Turning towards the active life of the period, he discovers, with satisfaction, “various types of people, various types of character of great interest for the social and historical study” (Alecsandri, 1904: 25). The analysis of the contemporary environment becomes an artistic norm and the technique of observation a constant literary procedure.

These precious literary techniques can also be found in his travel memoirs, which are the focus of the present paper, which represents a good opportunity to prove the depth and the authenticity of the technique of observation and his priceless gift as a story teller.

We find them, first, in his collection of “physiologies” *The Town of Iasi in 1844* [*Iaşi în 1844*], *A Ballroom in Iasi* [*Un salon din Iaşi*], *Borsec* and *The White Lake* [*Balta Albă*]. The sketches were integrated into the travel stories for the purpose of creating a narrative as the one in *The Decameron*. Thus, the first part of *A Journey to Africa* [*Călătorie în Africa*] (1855), will comprise *Illusions Lost* [*Pierderea iluziilor*] (“The Romanian Bee” [“Albina românească”], 1841) and *Mount of Fire* [*Muntele de foc*] (“The Romanian Bee” [“Albina românească”], 1843), and the second version of *A Walk in the Mountains* [*Plimbare la munţi*],

contains *A Masquerade Intrigue* [*O intrigă la bal-masché*] (“Propășirea”, 30 January 1844) and *Toader and Mărința* (“Calendar for the Romanian People” [“Calendar pentru poporul român”], 1844). The first which appeared in “Calendarul Foaiei sătești” for the year 1845, an authentic image of the times ingeniously combines sociology and history, anecdote and humour and sarcasm, in a varied combination of “speech”: direct and indirect, etc. Like other forty-eighters who “painted” the social environment in Iași at the middle of the previous century our prose writer presents its two faces “one Oriental, the other European”. Back then the capital of Moldavia, was a junction between “tempting Oriental-Phanariot old habits and new times”. It is around this antithesis that all the memories and direct observations of the writer of the four sketches are organized, which all make up a real “social and historical study”. The contrast makes its presence felt from the very beginning of the description. Seen from above, from the top of the hill “Răpidea” the panoramic view of the town (“mountains rich with vineyards, orchards reaching down into the valleys... the white banks of the river Bahlui”), offers a breathtaking sight: “one of the most beautiful and most wonderful in our country, where there are so many wonderful and beautiful sights” (Alecsandri, 1983: 87)². The illusion disappears as soon as he reaches the town with its streets and houses. Scene after scene, we can see palaces, historical monuments, churches, expensive shops and stalls. With an eye for the significant detail and a feel for the authentic, the writer goes into people’s houses, notices their clothing, listens to their conversations, evaluates their manners, only to be surprised by the “charm” of the “two faces”. “Long and loose garments made way to tighter ones [au dat rând straielor] from Europe, Red and yellow boots made way to luxury footwear; wide sofas turned into elegant sofas” (*Ibidem*: 84–85). Yesterday people used to say “hojghioldum” and “telebimu”, today they say “bonjour and bonsoir”, yesterday they would eat “fruit preserve” and drink Turkish coffee, today – French pastry [“confeturi”] and English tea. The writer does not forget the inhabitants; all the social classes, all ages, all trades are analyzed from the same critical perspective. Romanians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, are all presented with their physical and moral characteristics with their reactions and speech, on the background of a period well established in time. Minute observer of the human being, Alecsandri is also a minute painter of the social environment, where colour does not

² Printed only in 1857, the text had been written 16 years after the writer’s first journey to Italy, when he returned from Paris, together with C. Negri and N. Docan.

exceed. The writer knows the complex dialectical relationship between the individual and the world around him, between character and circumstance. Portraying and recreating, he perceives everything in a critical manner, as beneath the picturesque and amusing apparent contrasts, lies their source: social inequality. After a long accumulation of kaleidoscopic images, coloured by feelings and nuanced by humour, irony, maliciousness, satire, the conclusion is drawn: “The town of Iasi is a theatre decorated with palaces and huts standing next to each other, where the actors being luxury and poverty” (*Ibidem*: 88) or: “The town of Iasi looks a lot like a nobleman dressed in expensive clothes, surrounded [încongiurat] by gypsies in rags [...]. The head is wearing a crown while the feet are bare” (*Ibidem*: 90).

Due to its semantic and artistic load, the sketch makes it easy for the reader nowadays to study and understand the older times in Romania.

The next stroll in Iasi, promised to M. Kogălniceanu (who this piece of prose is dedicated to) in the last lines of the text, is restricted to the presentation of a “ballroom in Iasi” [“salon de Iași”]³. Alecsandri gathers, in an ingenious and free manner, in an elegant ballroom in Iasi, under the “golden light of bronze candelabrum, men and women, young and old, all dressed up and makes them talk, play musical instruments, dance, tell unusual happenings, and gossip. The conversation – *causerie* – of the ones present serves as a pretext for the writer to stigmatize – in a polite way the shortcomings of the “high” society: the superficial and precious women, the stuck-up conservatory elderly, the demagogic youth. It is a valuable historical document of the times, which the writer manages to bring to life, creating the illusion of life, breaking the monotony of indirect narrative by introducing the dialogue and the piece of prose is full of dynamism. Alecsandri enriched indeed the literary style.

He met C. Negri’s sister, Elena, whom he loved and to whom he dedicated romantic, heart-breaking poems. Elena Negri suffered from tuberculosis and died in 1847, on a ship traveling to Constantinople. She was accompanied by Vasile Alecsandri, Costache Negri and Mihail Kogălniceanu. Alecsandri, wrote the poem *Little Star* [*Steluța*], in memory of Elena, which became well known during those times. The love

³ Part of the sketch appeared earlier, in 1853, in “Almanac for the Romanians” [“Almanahul pentru români”] (the scene presenting the sinking of the ship in the Danube); the first three scenes appeared in “Literary Romania” [“România literară”], 1855, and as a whole in *Literary necklace* [*Salba literară*], 1857, and *Prose* [*Proză*], 1876.

story between them took shape in *A Journey to Italy a Diary* [*Jurnal de călătorie în Italia*]. During the summer when Elena died, Vasile Alecsandri went to a health resort which later inspired the short story *The White Lake* [*Balta Albă*].

Travelling further, he reaches “feredeie”, the spas, *Borsec* and *The White Lake* [*Balta Albă*], writing two of the best pieces of observation in prose of the time. There is no hesitation in them, and although they seem at the beginning to be mere circumstantial writing, they place Alecsandri among the best representatives of observation prose of the middle of the previous century, together with Negruzzi and Kogălniceanu. Spontaneity seems to do him good, as it emphasizes more than other pieces of writing the characteristics of the writer: the verve of the conversations, friendly irony, the freshness and authenticity of the observation, the ability to create a coherent universe out of disparate social elements, a meaning that goes beyond the mere juxtaposition of what he notices.

“The first, *Borsec*⁴, is a physiology of the then small health resort, which he captures in its amusing, caricature-like details, worthy, the writer thinks, of the famous Gavarni” – a French caricaturist, famous in 1950s, from whom he received, as he did from Hogarth as well, suggestions for his physiologies.

The new decor is sketched – as in *The Town of Iasi in 1844* [*Iașii în 1844*] – in a panoramic manner. This convinces the writer that Borsec “can’t be called either a hamlet or a village, because it has no paths [uliți], no sheds, no inhabitants. It is just a group of 50 deserted wooden houses, and looks very much like flies that lie dead in winter to come back to life in spring (*Ibidem*: 192). People of all nationalities and walks of life gather here, brethren “if not in Christ” then in “Borvis” [“frați de nu-întru Hristos”], to drink health from the healing spring [“beie sănătate la izvorul tămăduirii”] and to bathe. In an amusing yet ironic way, the writer notices that “equality, which will never really strike roots on earth”, rules over Lobogo, “a cold bath where carbon gas boils ceaselessly” and where one “couldn’t tell the difference” between emperors and shoemakers [ciobotari] due to the way in which “the coldness of the water and the gas” wrinkles them “all alike”.

⁴ In 1844, Alecsandri was at Borsec for health reasons and, writing the first part of his Diary, printed it in “Propășirea,” nr. 42, on 29th October 1844. As a whole, it appears the following year in “Calendar for the Romanian People” [“Calendar pentru poporul românesc”]. It will later be included in the volume *Literary necklace* [*Salba literară*], 1857 and *Prose* [*Proză*], 1876.

The scenes, artistically drawn, capturing unexpected details, with consequences on characterization (lessons learnt from Balzac and La Bruyère being fruitfully used) describe, while alternating joke and irony, the ritual of the cues at “the wells and baths”, of the walks “glass in hand”, then people’s talks and ridiculous clothing, the ball in a “wooden hall” lit by “about twenty candles made of tallow”, etc. Out of the realism of the scenes depicted and the burlesque, which accompanies the scenes, takes shape an entertaining prose whose value also lies in the depth of the observation.

The same impression is made by the witty description of the other resort *The White Lake* [*Balta Albă*]⁵, which, according to all its commentators is one of the best pieces in prose by Alecsandri.

The freedom which characterizes his writing determines the writer to choose an ingenious way to organize the subject matter. In order to present his impressions which come from “kingdom of contrasts” in an objective manner, the writer imagines a young French painter who stops in Brăila, as the beauty of the Danube wins him over. His intention is to get to know Wallachia, “this unknown country”, his geography teacher had never said anything to him about.

The reactions of the unaware foreigner, who is telling his adventures to his friends, while facing a newly discovered reality, are some of the most unexpected. He is first surprised by the way people travel in Wallachia. “Instead of malpost or coach, a small box full of hay, on four wheels with broken spokes [spițele]. Four small horses, skinny and scarred by whip marks and a wild little man, bearded and in rags, armed with a long whip [stânjân]...” After a tormenting journey, shaken [hurducăturile] by the cart he reaches the *White Lake* [*Balta Albă*]. Here, instead of “a town like Marienbad or Ems or Baden”, he finds a “village made up of poor thatched huts [bordeie] with crown-like stork nests.” Instead of “beefsteak” [“biftec”] in a “pub” [“tractir”] and a “soft bed” – a night spent in a hut “on a wooden bed, without sheets or pillows or anything”. The young traveller’s impressions are totally reversed when, after going to bed convinced that he finds himself in a “wild country”, he wakes up in a world of “European carriages, full of

⁵ It was written in the summer of 1847, when Alecsandri was also in this town for treatment, and it was published in 1848, in “Calendar for the Romanians” [“Calendarul pentru români”] by Gh. Asachi, under the title *24 Hours at the White Lake* [*24 ceasuri la Balta Albă*]. It was republished in “Literary Romania” [“România literară”], 1855, no. 31–35 and then included in *Literary necklace* [*Salba literară*] and *Prose* [*Proză*], 1876. It should be mentioned that the author also published a French version in “Illustration”, no. 596–599, of 1854, under the title *Le lac blanc* – “traduit du Moldave”, which might have been done by Vasile Alecsandri himself. Also see Elena Rădulescu-Pogoneanu. 1940, *Alecsandri's Life* [*Viața lui Alecsandri*], Craiova, Editura Scrisul Românesc, p. 100.

European people dressed in European [evropienești] clothing” heading towards “the pond shining in the sunlight [steclea]” (*Ibidem*: 211). A ball he attends the same night, among “people who were dressed and behaved like Europeans”, and “Romanian ladies, young and beautiful” who spoke “French as if they had come from Paris” make him wonder if everything was “a dream of his own imagination” or “reality.” One of the young men at the spa gives him the answer – the writer himself – “We find ourselves in the land of the most original contrasts; here luxury and poverty, pain and joy, new and old ideas everything is mixed with a huge effect on the eye and mind alike [atât ochilor cât și minții]” (*Ibidem*: 215). When at the end of his “24-hour journey” at the *White Lake* [*Balta Albă*], the narrator wants to find out if “Wallachia is part of the civilized world or a wild province [o provincie sălbatică],” the writer, faithful witness of what the foreigners saw, does not answer any more. Wallachia was just like Moldavia, which he had presented in a different physiology, “a kingdom of the most original contrasts” [“împărăție a contrasturilor]” and this is exactly what he intended to show us in a natural and vivid way, in a colourful text which alternates narratives (retelling memoirs alternates with direct speech, etc.). However there is also a serious tone as the writer warns us about the risk that snobbery and shallowness represent for a real social and spiritual progress. The travel memoirs strengthen our belief that the writer found the source of his writings in himself, and the role of the present pages is none other than to convince as to the importance of the bond between the work of art and its creator and as to the qualities as a narrator that this creator, Alecsandri, had.

“The longing for something else and somewhere else” is a feeling rooted in his nature, an essential condition of his existence. He actually confessed that: Rarely can one feel the satisfaction I have at the beginning of my sea voyages, when I feel thrown out of the ordinary course of life” [din calea obicinuită a vieții] [...]. It feels I’m becoming someone else, that all my inner powers grow and I am the real me” (*Ibidem*: 237).

“A longing for travelling” makes itself felt early on in his life, even since he was a child, when, as a student at Victor Cuénim’s school in Miroslava, he would retreat during long breaks, on top of an old carriage, admiring “melancholically” the Socola hills, the passing of “clouds in the endless sky” and the flight of “flocks of cranes in the air.” The journey is also twofold and even threefold: imaginary, through reading and dreaming; real: when the dream of the image in the book comes true and reliving the journey by recalling it. Alecsandri the traveller experienced them all. He started with the imaginary which he

never abandoned. When, as a young man he could not leave his country and its needs, or as an old man he was lying on his bed, and he could not travel by carriage or oar, he would travel with the help of his imagination. These are “the armchair journeys” [“voiajurile în jilț”], which he often mentioned: “I’ve been on so many pleasant journeys like this. I’ve seen so many beautiful shores without leaving my armchair.” A sight—because “sight” is the real world to this “nomad”—which he truly appreciated was that of ports, where hours on end he would look at the shape of the ships like “enormous birds with their wings spread out” [“de paseri uriașe”] (critics actually wrote about “Alecsandri’s fascination with ships”) (Curticăpeanu, 1977: 90).

Each of them “brought in front of my mind’s eye the shores they had left and made me dream of those unknown places...” (Alecsandri, 1983: 235). The sea is the one which literally helps him live his dream. “Nothing absorbs the mind more than the delightful view of the endless blue...”

When he actually lives his dream, by travelling, Alecsandri always heads for sunny places, always in search of the sunlight. “I need the sunlight and the sight of the sea, the former to warm up my blood, the latter to rock my imagination...”⁶

Starting his journey, the traveller is not bound to a plan,

I don’t see journeys as most people do, that is sticking to a plan and following a beeline [a alerga țintă] like a journey car [din rolul de mașină drumeață]. For me a journey is only the one free from any external influence, [slobod de orice înrăurire străină], which only follows the whims of imagination [caprițiilor vremelnicii] and which is the result of no preparation and no definite aim... (*Ibidem*: 223).

Still, there is an aim, and that is enriching the mind and making the soul more beautiful, which is obvious in the short story *The Florist of Venice* [*Buchetiera de la Veneția*]. While visiting Italy he feels enriched by its art and deeply impressed by the southern landscape. He is impressed with the church Santa Maria de Fiore in Florence, designed by Giotto and Brunellesco, with red, white and black marble walls, with carriages and horses and attendant waiting in line in the market in front, and ladies keeld in the mysterious light of the stained glass.; a painting remind of Andrea del Sarto with “soft shades, spread like a sheer veil

⁶ In his letter of May 1888, which he wrote to his friend Al. Papadopol-Callimachi, apud, Al. Marcu, (1931), *Comments upon Romanian classics. Introduction. Vasile Alecsandri as a traveller*. [*Clasici români comentați. Introducere. Vasile Alecsandri călător*.], in vol. *Vasile Alecsandri. Journeys – Diplomatic missions* [*Vasile Alecsandri. Călătorii – Misiuni diplomatice*.], Craiova, Scrisul românesc, p. XI.

over the eyes”; the Donne cafe, full of customers indulging in “dolce far niente” all day long, where clean waiters are ready to suggest 20 sorts of ice-cream. Palazzo delle Cascine, around which gathers the aristocracy of the city, for romance after the sun set; the stroll through Boschetto, the meadow which spreads between the calm rivers of Arno and Miunione, under the slowly coming darkness; there come the Gallery, Palazzo Potto, with its shiny collection of masterpieces, the theatre of Perloga. The art lover proves himself again.

A Journey to Africa [*Călătorie în Africa*] represents this principle put into practice. While in Biarritz, on the shores of the Atlantic, he decides to visit Spain; then he changes his mind and heads to southern France, and from here when reaching the Gibraltar, he gives up on Spain for Africa.

He does the same while travelling through the country. *A walk in the Mountains* [*O Primblare la munți*] (1844) represents the beginning. On his way to the monastery of Pangareata and accompanied by three friends they intend to see Alexandru Lăpușnenu’s portrait and we find out that the portrait had been moved to the monastery of Slatina. They then decide to climb on Ceahlau, up to the peak Grohotis. Not before telling and listening to “stories”. A monk tells, through tears, an old love story and the travellers, in their turn – as in *Ancuta’s Inn* [*Hanul-Ancuței*], years later – tell their own stories: *Toader și Mărinda* – a romance and *A Masquerade Intrigue* [*O intrigă la bal-masché*] – an anecdote with a subject that was taken from a French play. They stop at Hangu, then continue to Durău, “hoping for some sour soup cooked by monks.” Another disappointment. The hegumen was away and so were the keys to the larder. Worn out and starved, they go back to Hangu in the middle of the night, through the woods, where everything seems “dreadful phantasmagoria... Hunger, the writer adds, must have a lot of influence on our imagination...” (*Ibidem*: 187). A shepherd who they meet on their way sings for them a “traditional song” [“doina”], “the most beautiful, sad, heart-felt I ever heard [...] Every time I hear this song [doina], I feel like Moldavia is crying after its lost glory” (*Ibidem*: 188). This is one of Alecsandri’s biggest revelations concerning folk poetry.

After many funny events, vividly told, the travellers return to Piatra Neamț, without having seen the portrait of the Romanian ruler and without having climbed the Ceahlău. But, at the end of the trip Alecsandri says: “that’s what happens to most plans, especially those related to journeys”. This short travel memoir is extremely valuable as it emphasizes another aspect of his artistic and moral portrait: Alecsandri the prose writer and nature. It is no one other than Alecsandri the poet,

Alecsandri we always knew, but in a perfect communion with nature, which he felt was a necessary condition to his very existence. “I need it, the way I need food and light.”

The endless panorama of the mountain, with its “grand and wild beauty” does not produce in the prose writer, as it does in other famous travellers, the feeling of the sublime. He avoids the landscapes which loses the calm of its clear outline and runs away from grand pictures. Just like in *Pastels* [*Pasteluri*], he stops in front of the picturesque which delight the sight: the glow of the river Bistriței in the sun, the show of a sunset, a rock in the golden ray of the sun. The variety of colours impresses him most and the effects of light touch him deeply. Light is everything in his descriptions, and it brings an individual type of colour and feeling. “When the sun appeared in the sky filling everything with light, Bistrita Valley suddenly shone majestically [...] How could not your heart fill with joy and satisfaction [...]”, the author makes a comment on the intensity of the impressions.

The value of the world seen in the light, in case of this solar poet, is not only concrete, but also deeply symbolical.

Journey in Africa [*Călătorie în Africa*], which has become Alecsandri’s best work for a great number of readers who got acquainted with it, is an original type of diary since it includes “a continuous chain of stories” in the texture of his memories. Instead of the bottles of wine from *Ancuța’s Inn* [*Hanul-Ancuței*] by Sadoveanu, it is glasses of Malaga wine, punch – punci or French champagne that stimulate the narrators’ inspiration. Ship captains and passengers are involved in a competition of telling funny and sad stories, including the Romanian traveller. Being led by his confessed pleasure of telling stories, like in *A walk in the mountains* [*Primblare la munți*], *Flower girl from Florence* [*Buchetiera de la Florența*]⁷ or *A saloon in Iași* [*Un salon în Iași*], he also relates two tales: *Fire mountain* [*Muntele de foc*] and *The first step in the world* [*Cel întâi pas în lume*]. “An unspeakable satisfaction” of the journey is, thus, prolonged in that of the story, “the punch improves through the fascinating conversation”, whereas Alecsandri’s diary acquires an unexpected form, as has already been

⁷ “Young Alecsandri was excited to visit «this world’s garden» for the first time, referring himself exactly to the whole of Italy, especially thanks to the fact that the region of «Piemont has the reputation of one of the most lively and merry cities of Italy». «Together with Florence, even more than it, Venice will remain for Alecsandri a bright retreat for his thoughts»” (A. Roșca, 2013). *Vasile Alecsandri as a constant admirer of Italy*. [*Vasile Alecsandri veșnicul admirator al Italiei*.] <http://ceascadecultura.ro/Serveste/Articol.aspx?idart=3413>, accessed on 12 April, 2015).

mentioned, of a “narrative system following the principle of the Decameron”, the way it is ingeniously and originally called by G. Călinescu.

The itinerary of the journey is followed, with long stops, at the most important stages of the trip. Vasile Alecsandri’s journeys that fully reflect the author’s diligence represent a remarkable occasion for a literary pretext which in future will be regarded as one of the most varied in the literary universe of the author’s prose.

In the autumn of 1853, while in Biarritz, where the author is considering going to Spain, he meets an Englishman, Anghel, who convinces him to change his plans, leaving the Southern coast of France for Gibraltar. Having disembarked in Gibraltar, he decides to postpone visiting Spain and heads for the deck of a French ship that goes to Morocco. The most interesting part of the diary (due to its unusual character) is represented by the description of the African itinerary. Alecsandri is the first Romanian traveller who reaches this part of the world and, as Tudor Vianu states it, “reflects it in our literature” (Vianu, 1966: 105). However, the writer prefers, according to G. Călinescu, “a folder with light and impressionist sketches”, avoiding – again – “big pictures”. One cannot agree more. Alecsandri, for whom the visible world, as well as the exterior reality exists, first and foremost, through what faces the eye, perceives the African picturesqueness in a concrete way in his writings by means of the matchless descriptions of streets, interiors, persons and sights, all these floating “in the ocean of a burning light”. The most adventurous part of the journey is the way to Tetuan which presupposes crossing the Uadras Mountains in fierce heat, deserted places, the threat of being attacked by the robbers, thirst and suspicion – suspeciuine on part of the bedouins in rags. [...] Since, according to Alecsandri – which presents the evidence of a great change of things – “the strongest talisman for a European in the Empire of Morocco is to be English – «inghiliz»”.

In what follows the writer offers a kaleidoscopic chain of images and points of view with an almost cinematographic technique. Visual and sound notations form a quick succession, the general impression being determined by the global context rather than by the elements that it comprises. This is the way the accumulation of little facts, due to their density, produces the impression of a dynamic picture saturated with colour and full of life.

Journey in Africa [Călătorie în Africa] reveals him as a poet of the Mediterranean nature and, at the same time, a colourist and a painter whose aim is to restore its own way to state its existence in the universe of objects to every angle of the world. Even though the epithet is still a

stereotype, and the metaphorization is reticent, Alecsandri manages to individualize the scenery making it memorable. For example:

Now the shadows of night covered the ground and trees seemed like ghosts from another world running along the fields until they vanished in the distant darkness. Thousands of stars were shining in the arch of the sky; some of them were falling from the sky [ceriului], leaving a silver trace after them; others were reflected in the waters of Adur; others seemed to glide like big diamonds on the snow of the tops of the Pyrenees. Everything in the world was secretive and deeply penetrating; in the nature's dead silence, in the immobility of the objects that surrounded us, the speed of the coach [repegiunea malpostei] seemed to double, the clatter of horses and the sound of bells had something fantastic about them (Alecsandri, 1983: 193).

In the cases of other works, journeys and personal excursions also represent disguised fictional instructions and a source of inspiration (Cristea: 2010). Travel diaries by Vasile Alecsandri are a realization of a genius due to the richness of the ideas and the variety of the rendered feelings, the sharpness of observation and cheerfulness of narration, as well as the expressive relief of the style where the imaginative spirit of the narrator by vocation is accompanied by the conventional, and some new formal procedures that are always adapted according to the multitude of interior emotional experiences in front of the performance of the exterior universe.

For those few writers of the 19th century travelling played a leading role in their spiritual lives, like in the case of Alecsandri. At the same time, this traveller, “with the instinct of a migratory bird”, the way he was so becomingly called (see Doina Curticăpeanu, 1977: 172 and on), who travelled all across Europe and reached the continent of Africa, who aspired to seeing America, Japan, Egypt and India, this “constant traveller” who used to begin a new journey – the imaginary one, continued in writing, recollecting it – at the very moment the previous one was finished – could not manage to find peace and happiness in a place other than home, in Mircești.

At the end of this analytical presentation of the most representative texts of travel diaries, as a result of our synthesis, we would like to conclude that Vasile Alecsandri wanted to make an object of cognition out of the material and spiritual existence of his time, as well as resulting from the observation of people and places for personal satisfaction. His attentive examination of life and surroundings always followed him through an emotional transposition where both cognition and love, guided by his talent, directed his interests towards the material and human universe, as well as towards the literary forms through which his spirit of observation as well as his unshakeable affection for people

could be specified with greatest clearness: recollection, physiology and travel diary. These are the forms of the narrative prose that discover Alecsandri in the equation of his own being.

With a sense of justice and a hierarchy of values, the judgment of posterity that has been directly nurtured by the essence of the works and from the point of view of the epoch that produced it should always remember that, on its best pages, Vasile Alecsandri's travel prose represented an artistic achievement in its time. As a result, we can speculate on the destiny and the orientation of the Romanian literature that followed in its modern evolution.

REFERENCES:

- Alecsandri, V., *Scrisori inedite. Corespondența cu Ed. Grenier 1855–1885. (Unpublished letters. Correspondence with Ed. Grenier 1855–1885.)*, Publishing house Georges Gazier, Paris, 1911, translated and published with an introduction by Alecsandrescu-Dorna, Bucharest, 1911.
- Alecsandri, V., *Scrisori (Letters)*, vol. II, Bucharest, Socec, 1904.
- Alecsandri, V., *Proză (Prose)*, Selected texts, comments by Georgeta Rădulescu-Dulgheru, Bucharest, Cartea Românească, 1983.
- Băiceanu, L., The second person prose: from Michel Butor to Mihai Zamfir. *Management Intercultural*, vol. XVI, no. 2 (31), 2014, p. 393.
- Călinescu, G., *V. Alecsandri*, Bucharest, Editura Tineretului, 1965.
- Călinescu, G., *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în presen (The history of Romanian literature from its origin until present)*, the 2nd edition, revised and completed, edition and preface by Al. Piru, Bucharest, Minerva, 1982.
- Cornea, Paul and Păcurariu, D., *Curs de istoria literaturii române modern (A coursebook of the history of modern Romanian literature)*, Part II. Fasc. I, Bucharest, Publishing house Didactică și Pedagogică, 1974.
- Cristea, T., *V. Alecsandri – 120 de ani de la moarte. Actualitatea prozei (V. Alecsandri – 120 years from death. Topicality of prose)*, 2010, <http://www.poezie.ro/index.php/essay/13951930/email.html>. (13 March 2015).
- Curticăpeanu, Doina, *V. Alecsandri prozator – Profilul memorialistului (V. Alecsandri as a prose writer – A memorialist's profile)*, Bucharest, Minerva, 1977.
- Ghica, Ion, *Scrisoare către V. Alecsandri, (A letter to V. Alecsandri)*, Bucharest, Minerva, 1976.
- Ibrăileanu, G., *Vasile Alecsandri*, in *Scriitorii români și străini (Romanian and foreign writers)*, vol. I., Bucharest, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968.
- Maiorescu, T., *Poeți și scriitori (Poets and writers)*, in *Critice (Critics)*, Bucharest, Minerva, 1984.
- Marcu, Al., *Clasici români comentați. Introducere. Vasile Alecsandri călător (Comments upon Romanian classics. Introduction. Vasile Alecsandri as a*

⊙ THEORY, HISTORY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

traveler) in vol. *Vasile Alecsandri. Călătorii – Misiuni diplomatice (Vasile Alecsandri. Journeys – Diplomatic missions)*, Craiova, Scrisul românesc, 1931.

Rădulescu-Pogoneanu, Elena, *Viața lui Alecsandri (The life of Alecsandri)*, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc, 1940.

Roșca, A., *Vasile Alecsandri veșnicul admirator al Italiei (Vasile Alecsandri as a constant admirer of Italy)*, 2013, <http://ceascadecultura.ro/ServesteArticol.aspx?idart=3413>, (accessed on 12 April 2015).

Trifan, E., *Imaginea Italiei în opera lui Vasile Alecsandri (The image of Italy in the works by Vasile Alecsandri)*, 2014, http://confluente.ro/Elena_trifan_1395416667.html, (accessed on 1 May 2015).

Vianu, T., *C. Negruzzi*, in *Arta prozatorilor români (The art of Romanian prose writers)*, vol. I., Bucharest, Editura pentru Literatură, 1966.