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The Construction of Italy in Soviet Travelogues

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Abstract. At the focus of the article is Aimée Beekman's travelogue *Plastmassist südamega madonna* (*A Madonna With a Plastic Heart*, 1963). Using imagology (or image studies) as the theoretical basis, the article analyses the Soviet Estonian author's image of Italy in order to see what characterises the Soviet travelogue. In the depiction of the other and construction of the capitalist West, Soviet society is also depicted. The Soviet travelogue deals with certain topics from a Soviet point of view using Soviet rhetoric and logic. The Soviet travelogue differs from the earlier travelogue tradition in the manner of Friedebert Tuglas which entwined the history- and art-books the author had read with personal impressions. The Tuglas-like travelogue is both educative and enjoyable to read. The Soviet travelogue tends to remain a one-sided description of the places seen; it does not dug deeper into the twists of mind and developments of topics. The Soviet ideology strongly influenced the text written.

Keywords: Estonian travelogues, Aimée Beekman, image studies, Italy, Soviet ideology

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Io sono colei che mi si crede!
Luigi Pirandello, Così è, se vi pare!

Estonians' travel opportunities have been restricted for a long period by socio-political circumstances and thus a view of the rest of the world has largely depended on travel writing. A travelogue makes it possible to undertake a journey without even leaving one's room; it introduces the reader to unfamiliar people in faraway lands. A chance to travel in one's mind is especially significant when physical movement is restricted, as was the case for most of the inhabitants of the Soviet Union. Many people used this "imaginary" way of travelling – it is vividly shown by the immense popularity of travelogues during the Soviet era. Travelogues determined the readers' perceptions and assumptions about things and people. While depicting the other, constructing the capitalist West,

writers also implicitly depict the Soviet society. Defining the other, one defines oneself (Voestermans 1991: 219).

The aim of the article is to analyse Soviet Estonian authors' image of Italy in order to see what characterises the Soviet travelogue. The focus of the article is on the writer Aimée Beekman's (born in 1933) travelogue *Plastmassist südamega madonna* (*A Madonna With a Plastic Heart,* 1963). It also covers the historian Juhan Kahk's (1928–1998) travelogue *Alpide taga on moonpunane Itaalia* (*Behind the Alps Lies Poppy-Red Italy,* 1967), the former high official in the Communist Party of Estonia Artur Vader's (1920–1978) *Itaalia päikese all* (*Under the Italian Sun*, 1973). The article also deals with the chapters on Italy in the Estonian producer, actor and prose writer Voldemar Panso's (1920–1977) travelogue *Laevaga Leningradist Odessasse ehk Miks otse minna, kui ringi saab* (*From Leningrad to Odessa by Boat or: Why Go Straight When You Can Go Around*, 1957), a Soviet literature and society figure Max Laosson's (1904–1992) *Natoblokk turisti bloknoodis* (*The Notebook of a Tourist within the NATO Bloc*, 1962) and the writer Debora Vaarandi's (1916–2007) *Välja õuest ja väravast* (*Out From the Yard and the Gate,* 1970). The theoretical background of the article is the research field of imagology within literary studies. Imagology (or image studies)[1] deals with the depiction of countries and peoples. With the basic concepts of imagology as a starting point, the typical topic developments of the Soviet travelogue are covered, such as the thematic features of the worker, Western society and its mechanics and idiosyncrasies, faith and the Church, the question of the so-called "real Italy" and the characteristic perspicacity of writers of Soviet travelogues.

The Tourist Glance

The way one gets acquainted with a country (e.g. alone or in a group) affects the image one receives and the image formed. The means of transportation either favours or hinders contact with the country – i.e. whether only tourist sights or also some remoter corners are visited (Pfister 1996: 7). Aimée Beekman, like most of the Soviet people abroad, travels in Italy as a tourist. Tourism differs from travelling:

[1] About imagology see e.g. Beller, Leerssen 2007; about Estonian travelogues from the imagological point of view see e.g. Kõvamees 2008a, Kõvamees 2008b, Kõvamees 2009.

> Tourism as not self-directed but externally directed. You go not where you want to go but where the industry has decreed that you shall go. Tourism soothes you by comfort and familiarity and shields you from the shocks of novelty and oddity. It confirms your prior view of the world instead of shaking it up. (Bassnett 2003: xii)

Beekman, like most of the tourists, also visits mainly the well-known cities and sights, e.g. Venice, Rome (including the Vatican), Florence, Capri. The smaller and less well-known places are not reached by the writer. She mainly moves in the public city-space: museums, churches, hotels, etc. Beekman keeps her contact with the Italians to the tourist level: they are the hotel staff, waiters, tourist guides, officials, etc. The rural and more faraway and private places, like the homes of the Italians, are out of her reach. As a result, only the so-called chief sights are seen and depicted. There are some places and objects that are considered obligatory, for instance in France one has to visit Paris, where it is mandatory to see Notre Dame, the Eiffel Tower and Louvre where one also has to see the portrait of Mona Lisa (MacCannell 2001: 16).

Although the travelogue is based on a transient tourist visit, fundamental conclusions are drawn about Italian/capitalist society. Voldemar Panso has wittily observed:

> The gaze of the tourist largely depends on one's profession, tendencies, education. Generally a large doze of naivety is involved and mixed with superficiality and the holiday spirit and romance of travel instil optimism. The tourist's days are not weekdays, he is joyous. He does not go, he is taken; he does not look, he is shown things. He is credulous and believes everything he is told or has determined beforehand not to believe anything. He is inclined to draw wide conclusions based on casual details. A brief chat with an official results in conclusions drawn about the economic state of the nation. (Panso 1957: 51)

One of the characteristics of the travelogue is its collectivism: the writer never leaves the rest of the group. Beekman does not feel the need to wander off by herself, unlike the writer in exile Karl Ristikivi (1912–1977) in whose the travelogue *Itaalia capriccio* (*The Italian Capriccio*, 1958) those kind of wanderings are essential (see Kõvamees 2008a: 86). In Beekman's travelogue the form *we* is used, for example:

> We take in the bright blue warmth, still dizzy from the two hour voyage. The guide hurries and walking backwards counts us with a wobbly hand. Just like a school teacher who takes kids to the zoo. (Beekman 1963: 5)

Beekman attributes all described emotions to the whole group. While the Ristikivi-like traveller is an individual who tends to become separated from the group, the traveller in Beekman's travelogue is part of a collective, s/he breathes and thinks with it. (The first person plural form and the impersonal form can also be found in Artur Vader's travelogue, see Vader 1973: 12.)

Labour and Society

One of the central figures of the Soviet travelogue was the worker. In pre-Soviet Italian travelogues by Estonian authors the issue is very rarely dealt with (about Italian travelogues by Estonian authors see Kõvamees 2008a: 41–54). One of the most important issues in the Soviet travelogues is everything associated with salaries, workers and their working and living conditions. Frequently, these issues are even more important than the country's rich historical and cultural heritage which served as the focal point in earlier travelogues. Thus Beekman asks in her travelogue's chapter about Rome:

> "But what about unemployment in Italy?" we interrupt the chatter of the guide who solemnly recites the dates of architectural monuments sliding past, dishing up the history of the Eternal City at a gallop. (Beekman 1963: 13)

There are other episodes where the writer condemns the guide's point of view, calling it superficial and fancy. Beekman is convinced that unimportant details are mentioned but significant aspects are left untouched, for example, the guide does not mention the most noteworthy event at the end of the 1950s – the strike of the factory workers in Florence (Beekman 1963: 17).

The travelogue gives a cursory summary about the salaries, the number of the unemployed, the rent, prices etc. illustrated with figures which are supposed to fortify Beekman's viewpoint. The large number of illiterate people and emigrants also gets mentioned (Beekman 1963: 14, 16, 17–18). (The travelogue by Vader is furnished with figures to the extreme.)

The travelogues dissect problems in the capitalist society, the struggles of the working class with low salaries and high prices. Against this background the writers hint at how well the Soviet workers live. For example, Laosson

emphasizes that for the Italian peasants museums are unknown, but most of the visitors in the museums of Leningrad and Moscow are workers (Laosson 1962: 75). Vader describes traffic jams and the shortage of public transport in Rome (Vader 1973: 22–23) by which he tries to hint at how good it is for the Soviet person not to have a private car; therefore, there is no need to get stuck in traffic jams and to breathe in the fumes. In those kinds of texts we can talk about the antithesis born from the mirror-reflection (Lepik 2000: 742): by dwelling on the unemployment in a capitalist country, the poor conditions of the working class, etc., the author implies that in the Soviet Union everything is quite the opposite, in the very best condition. Susan Bassnett has written:

> Travel writing has built into its very existence a notion of otherness. It is premised on a binary opposition between home and elsewhere, and however fuzzy ideas of "home" might be, ideas of otherness are invariably present regardless of the ideological stance of the writer. Writing about other places, other contexts, involves writing (albeit implicitly) about one's own context, about oneself. Hence all travel writing exists in a dialectical relationship between two distinct places – that designated by the writer and perhaps by readers as "home," and that designated as the cultural other. (Bassnet 2003: xi)

Beekman does not content oneself with the short overview of the Italian society, she illustrates the inconsolable fate of the Italian people by describing the former opera singer Angelo who has given up arts for earning money. Angelo has a positive image, he also seems to favour Soviet tourists. This is vividly shown in an episode where he gives the pennants with sickle and hammer that had been on the restaurant tables to the leaving Soviet tourists (Beekman 1963: 20). The character of Angelo opens an important aspect in Beekman's image of Italy. The former opera singer is meant to demonstrate to the reader that for earning money one has to give up arts and one's dreams. This is the part of the text where behind the hetero-image we can glimpse the auto-image of the writer, the way the writer shows her attitude towards her own culture: in the Soviet society, with which the writer identifies herself, people are not unhappy.

The Degenerating West

Another intriguing aspect of the image of Italy by Soviet writers is the depiction of the so-called degenerating West. Besides unemployment, high prices and low salaries Beekman writes about the depressing situation in the Italian film industry where poor comedies, erotica and horror flourish. Stanley

Kubrick's (in the travelogue: Coobrick) *Lolita* based on Vladimir Nabokov's novel is singled out. The film is characterised as foul, a clear manifestation of the capitalist society's interest in unhealthy states of mind. Nonetheless, Beekman introduces the content of the film, giving it special attention although it is called inferior and as such unsuitable for the Soviet viewer. With evident satisfaction, Beekman notes that the film that (in her mind) was made pursuing sensation and fame failed at the Venice film festival. Instead, two Soviet films (*The Childhood of Ivan* and *Wild Dog Dingo*) won the Grands Prix (Beekman 1963: 48). The aim of the long retelling of *Lolita* appears to be to make it seem disgusting so the common Soviet viewer does not feel the need to see it. Decisions are made for them; the Soviet viewers are able to see awarded Soviet films, which have also been acknowledged by the capitalist film industry.

Beekman states (as well as for example Laosson) that there is nothing to watch in the Italian cinemas if one is a thinking person. Empty cinemas seem to confirm that statement, for Beekman it is a sign that the common Italians are much wiser than the production they are offered. Interestingly, high-quality Italian films made by true masters are shown in the Soviet Union (Beekman 1963: 45). It is noteworthy that the writer defines herself first of all as a Soviet person, an identity not formed on a national basis.

Besides degenerating films, one can find observations about flourishing Americanisation, advertisements with semi-naked women, magazines that exploit sex and nudity (see e.g. Kahk 1967: 51–52). Even the dance culture seems strange and vulgar (Kahk 1967: 51). All these details are tiny fragments in the mosaic constructed by Soviet authors. As a whole the intention is to depict the society of the capitalist West as decadent and vulgar in contrast to the exemplary Soviet culture and way of living.

Faith and the Church

The question about faith sharply distinguishes the Soviet travelogues from the previous travelogues by Estonian authors. In earlier travelogues for instance the St. Peter's in Rome is often compared to the royal palace, sermons with theatre (see Tuglas 1945: 92, 103). While in the earlier travelogues the Roman Catholic Church is seen simply as unfamiliar, in the Soviet travelogues the reader finds more or less rhetorically decorated passages on the negative influence of religion on people and Vatican as the centre of the machinations of the church. In the works of the non-Soviet authors the contrasting of Catholicism and Lutheranism predominates, without a negative attitude towards Catholicism. Rather the two are juxtaposed and the differences between them are explored. Soviet authors juxtapose religion and atheism.

The fact that Beekman declares herself to be an atheist and does not approve of faith is clear from the beginning. For Beekman faith is something that belongs to the past, yet in 20th century Italy it is still present even after man has conquered space. The Soviet viewpoint is expressed, according to which faith suffocates clear judgement and represses humans. Beekman compares the ceremony in St. Peter's to a theatrical performance. Throughout her viewpoint is clearly negative. The Church is manipulating people and believers are simple-minded (Beekman 1963: 29). It does not occur to the author that for her it may be simply a performance but for somebody else it has a significant meaning. It is emphasised that there is only one right way of seeing things and that is the viewpoint of the author. The opposition emerges: they – the believers, and us – the non-believers. "They" are depicted as simple-minded and humble, lacking a progressive worldview where science is on the foreground and not the miracle-working icons (see e.g. the episode with the Black Madonna (Beekman 1963: 29)). The intention of the reportage from the church is to convince the reader of the negativity and obsoleteness of faith. It is important to mention that it applies not only to Catholicism but to faith in general. Beekman, like most of the Soviet writers, does not distinguish between Catholicism and Lutheranism; the opposition lies between faith and atheism. (While, for instance, Vaarandi mentions the difference between Catholicism and Lutheranism (Vaarandi 1970: 35).)

The centre of the clerical machinations is Vatican, which is depicted as a big, insidious and powerful organisation. It aims to enlarge its authority. Beekman interprets everything through the prism of this conviction. Her intention is to create a negative image of Vatican, which though representing a celestial power does not despise earthly benefits. Thus, the financial affairs of Vatican are mentioned (Beekman 1963: 31) as well as its actions against socialism and communism. In that aspect Laosson goes even further. For him, Vatican with St. Peter's, as the centre of the Catholic world, is not simply strange in its magnificence, but he tries to make the reader sick and tired both of Vatican and religion in general by describing Vatican trading with children (Laosson 1962: 27).

Considering the above, the reader may ask why the country where there are so many communist-friendly people, some people still go to monasteries. Beekman's travelogue does not provide any explanations but Kahk notes:

> The capitalist society with its noise and cruelty, fraud and hypocrisy can frighten and depress a weaker person. And maybe finally there is no other solution than to seek shelter in a little garden where peace and quiet reign. (Kahk 1967: 40)

Kahk also writes about a boy who runs away from a monastery and later becomes one of the founders of the Communist party (Kahk 1967: 42). Therefore, those who *stay* in a cloister are weak, but the stronger ones use the benefits of the cloister to get an education and later use it for progressive purposes.

Both writers try to convince their readers that faith is bad, thus strengthening their resolve that atheism is good. Atheists were predominant in the Soviet Union and their conviction that faith was to be associated with simple-mindedness and backwardness in the modern world was thus reaffirmed.

The "real" Italy and the Characteristic Perspicacity of the Soviet Authors

In the Italian travelogues by Estonian authors one also finds passages about the "real" Italy. It may be associated with certain landscape images as for example in the travelogue by the Estonian artist Ants Laikmaa (1866–1942):

> The traveller edging himself gradually into Italy from the north thinks at every stage on his journey south that this is where "real" Italy begins. The surroundings become more "Italian", i.e. closer to our preconceived notions of what constitutes the Italy we have gleaned from books and pictures. (Laikmaa 1996: 203)

For Laikmaa, Capri becomes the quintessence of Italy. For Ristikivi the precondition for seeing "real" Italy is seeing it as it really is,

> [a] direct contact with all the senses which necessitates becoming a native citizen for however short a period. It requires wandering the streets, finding your way in the maze of street names, using public transport, jostling in a crowd or just listening to your own footsteps on an empty pavement. (Ristikivi 1958: 221)

The travelogue by Beekman reveals the writer's suspicion that "they" (i.e. the Italians) wish to paint a fancy picture and create a one-sided impression of Italy, because "they" do not want to show the living quarters of the working class, nor talk about unemployment and strikes. Therefore, the writer makes the following generalisation: "Although they tried to present to us Italy as a Madonna with a well-functioning heart of gleaming plastic, we sensed in our hearts and

minds the malfunctioning real, living heart of Italy." (Beekman 1963: 16) In Beekman's case an important role is played by her evident satisfaction that she has "penetrated" the glossy façade and seen things how "really" are. Soviet authors consider the real essence of the country to be found in everything concerning workers, their living conditions, salaries, etc. In Soviet travelogues they split Italy into two: the capitalists, to be derided, and the workers, the representatives of "real" Italy, to be supported.

At the same time the writer does not admit in the travelogue that the very thing she sees is only her own created image. Beekman, like other Soviet authors, is convinced that her world view and beliefs are the only right ones. It is clearly visible in Beekman's travelogue that "for the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define and then see" (Beller 2007: 4). Fixed images and stereotypes influence her way of seeing things. It was also noticed by the critics (see Eilart 1966; Toomla 1964).

The Soviet travel writer goes to Italy with a set of pre-conceived notions and finds them confirmation. The authors suspect that the locals wish to conceal problems; sometimes this suspicion becomes paranoid. A certain perspicacity, which characterises Soviet writers, helps them to see through "the fool's golden façade" (Mallene 1961). Soviet critics emphasised that it was important to see behind the façades. Soviet travelogues are also expected to be original creative works, the term "creative blast furnace" is used: the author's thoughts and experiences and materials read have to go through the furnace before making it to the travelogue (Mallene 1961). Therefore, writing a travelogue is a kind of tightrope walk: on the one hand, the travelogue is expected to be artistic and original; on the other hand, the travelogue cannot be too original. The Soviet travelogue has to support a certain worldview, meaning, the travelogue has to deal with the problems of the capitalist society. Thus, the critics expected the travel writers to tackle certain themes in the Soviet way.

Conclusion

In an excellent travelogue history and art books, fiction and personal impressions are intertwined. The travelogue is educational and makes good reading. This kind of travelogue combines a trip to a foreign country, the musings of the writer, as well as the responses of the reader (cf. Fussell 2001: 106).

The Soviet travelogue expresses the Soviet point of view and uses Soviet rhetoric and logic. The authors make no attempts at sophistication: their travelogues remain superficial. No intertwinement of books of history and art, fiction and personal impressions takes place. In the depiction of the other and

construction of the capitalist west, Soviet society is also depicted. One could say that the situation in the home-country is implicitly and explicitly reflected against the background of the image of Italy.

It is important to note that the writers in several instances identify themselves with the Soviet Union; a Soviet filter lies between the Estonian's gaze and that which is depicted. Simultaneously, a sense of belonging and identification with fellow Soviet travellers and Italian Communists can be observed. Another level of identification also emerges: there is notable compassion and sympathy for the working class.

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