

**AN EASTERN EUROPEAN TRAVELER TO PARADISE. LOS ANGELES IN
PETRU COMARNESCU'S AMERICAN TRAVELOGUE FROM 1934**

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Abstract: *Published in 1934, Petru Comarnescu's American journal offers both a fresh take on the Californian milieu of the late 20s and the beginning of the 30s, and open-minded perspectives on the New World. The present paper analyzes how the Romanian intellectual put together the historical, social and cultural pieces of the complex city puzzle in his bold attempt at recreating the atmosphere of the chameleonic metropolis of Los Angeles.*

Keywords: *Los Angeles, travelogue, journal, travel writing, Eastern Europe*

1. Introduction

In his private diary, kept between 1931 and 1937, Petru Comarnescu (1994:62) points out why the title *America văzută de un tânăr de azi* (*America as seen by a young man of today*, my translation) was the most appropriate choice for his American travelogue. While sketching up his own psychological portrait, Comarnescu confesses that his major fears – of growing old both in body and in spirit and his apprehension of being stuck in conventions and routines – triggered his continuous struggle against frozen judgments, his never-ending quest for youth and the desire to remain forever young. Therefore, Youth could act as the main key for understanding both Comarnescu's character and his American journal, which was published in March 1934.

The Romanian intellectual's piece of travel writing reveals both an Eastern European's perspective on the American culture and society and an erudite look at the Los Angeles of the late 1920s and the beginning of the 30s. However, a few days before his travel book was published and while in a state of unhappiness, Petru Comarnescu (1994:113) discloses – again, in his private diary – his crushing fears of becoming mediocre, of turning into a skeptic and a failure, but most of all of growing old as he genuinely believes his inner power resides in his youth.

Belonging to an internationally-acclaimed generation of intellectuals who wrote history on the Romanian cultural scene between the two world wars and which comprised Mircea Eliade, Eugen Ionescu, Emil Cioran, Constantin Noica (to name just a few), Petru Comarnescu was undoubtedly the foremost authority on the United States. His sheer fascination for the New World was not only well-known to all his contemporary fellows (most of them Francophile) but after traveling to the US on a PhD grant meant to facilitate research at the University of Southern California, it also materialized in a book depicting his American journey from the East Coast to the West Coast and his two-year stay in Los Angeles.

What is important to mention here is the fact that Comarnescu wrote down his American experiences not as he traveled across the US but after he returned to his native land, so after filtering and pondering past things over. Therefore, his account is – at least at times – embellished with tinges of nostalgia, which has the effect of reevaluating his past journey. Noteworthy here are the bitter regrets expressed in his private diary for not having recorded his American journey at the pace it unfolded: “I now wish I had written *a real diary* when I lived in America. Memory is the only good which cannot be stolen from us. Yet, even memory needs helping, with all the risks entailed there...” (Comarnescu 1994:85, my translation)

2. The City of Los Angeles in Petru Comarnescu’s Travelogue

The fourth chapter of Petru Comarnescu’s book depicts his two-year stay in California, “the country of hope and disillusionment”, and gives a first-hand account of living in Los Angeles at the end of the 20s and the onset of the 30s. Embarking on a challenging project, Comarnescu wrote up the protean metropolis of Los Angeles by putting together the variegated pieces of the historical, social and cultural city puzzle in his daring attempt at recreating the atmosphere of a chameleonic city that wanted it all in the 20s.

In his highly acclaimed *Southern California. An Island on the Land* (whose first edition was out in 1946), Carey McWilliams (1973:242, 248) points out that:

In the bonanza years from 1920 to 1930, Los Angeles had all the giddiness, the parvenu showiness, and the crazy prosperity of a gold-rush town [...] During the twenties, Los Angeles led the nation in the number of suicides, the number of embezzlements, the number of bank robberies, in the rate of narcotic addiction, and in the fancy character of its sensational murders.

The themes visited in Comarnescu's diary are territory familiar to most travelers, exiles or writers of the City of Angels: the urban sprawl, the paradoxical centerless city, the chimerical Hollywood and the movies, the religious fervor, the car culture, and grand expectations turned to illusions and sheer disappointment. The real history of the city is recounted by Comarnescu in a few diary pages meant to draw the trajectory of L.A.: a mere village in 1781 – El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de Los Angeles, set up by the Governor of California, Felipe de Neve – turned into a seething metropolis at the onset of the 21st century.

Linked now to Comarnescu's feeling of standing in front of an unreal city permanently looking for its deep roots, the Oscar award winner director Kathryn Bigelow (qtd. in Klein 2008:98) tries to explain why Los Angeles has always made the perfect set for apocalyptic movies: "Perhaps because there's so little history here [...] It's not a city. There is no center. And no identity except a 'poly-identity' suitable for whatever you project onto it, a faceless place... blurred into one."

Although Kathryn Bigelow's remark easily falls in the category of usual clichés voiced about Los Angeles, her hackneyed words could also stand as a reminder of the difficulties experienced when advertising a place in search of an identity. Whenever the history of Los Angeles seemed scant or unmarketable, the city boosters (those of the 1920s included) unfailingly and unscrupulously manufactured and sold a historical past, firstly embellished, and then neatly packaged and delivered to hordes of incoming tourists and immigrants. And more often than not, the illusions sold ruined their dreamers.

Seen as a space of heterogeneity and amalgamation and as a mixture of architectural styles, the city of Los Angeles permanently disconcerts both the ordinary visitor and the more informed traveler. The opening to Comarnescu's fourth chapter of his American journal reveals precisely the diarist's disappointment at his first ride through Los Angeles. To the Eastern European visitor, the city in front of his eyes appears to be nothing but "a last – hour improvisation" (Comarnescu 1974:212, my translation). However, this is a recurrent motif found in the works of most travelers, exiles or writers on Los Angeles. In his major study upon Los Angeles in fiction, David Fine (2004:ix) points out that the foremost characteristic of the metropolis – the lack of a centre and the urban sprawl – made the first writers who arrived in L.A. believe exactly the same, that they were standing in front of a chimera:

First, in its low-density horizontal spread across a vast basin the city simply did not look like a city to the arriving writers – not like New York, Chicago, or San Francisco. It was a city that appeared to have no center and hence no periphery. It rambled on and on across a landscape that spread from mountain to ocean. Its pastiche of architectural styles, moreover, simulacra of every manner on architectural history, gave it the appearance of what the historian Carey McWilliams called “a giant improvisation”. It seemed to the newly arrived writers like an “unreal” city – and was represented as such in their fiction – a fragile and temporary place that could be torn down at any moment if it didn’t collapse first in an earthquake.

Therefore, the “last-hour improvisation” feeling experienced by Comarnescu when first entering Los Angeles in the late 20s stands both as a valid remark – shared, among others, by the reputed historian Carey McWilliams – and as a prevalent sensation imprinted upon a traveler’s consciousness by a city which permanently eludes any cut and dry categorization.

According to the historian Gordon DeMarco (1988:113), the Mad 20s were “the olympiad of promise and high hopes”, but for Los Angeles they meant “business as usual – a boom within a boom. Oil, the movies, Sister Aimée, subdivisions”. The real estate boom, in full blast at the beginning of the 20s, moved L.A. to a pole position in the number of inhabitants, after surpassing San Francisco in 1922. With an increasing rate of 100,000 per year, Los Angeles experienced during the Roaring Twenties “the largest internal migration in the American history, larger than 1877 and the boom years between 1900 and 1910” (DeMarco 1988:113.) And the huge real estate boom brought along profound societal changes so much so that those reckless years left a lasting imprint on the further development of the city.

The essence of the City of Angeles during the Jazz Age can be found in the stories of two emblematic figures in the history of the metropolis: Sister Aimée, a charismatic religious entertainer and Chauncey “C.C.” Julian, a shrewd oil stock promoter. Both of them built empires and had their heyday in the mid 1920s and both ended their lives when the dream was gone. C.C. Julian, “the Great Gatsby of Los Angeles”, was the perfect embodiment of all the recklessness and wildness of the Flapper Era and of the American dream, which takes its dreamer along when it goes bust.

He was the talk of the town. An instant legend. Once he gave a cab driver a \$ 1,500 tip and another time threw a party that cost him \$ 25,000. He gave a Cadillac to a woman he met in a night club and once raised \$ 1.5 million in just a few hours on Spring Street. Then there was the fight with Charlie Chaplin at a Hollywood night spot. And the time he barricaded himself in a room at a Los Angeles hotel against process

servers, driving them off with a gun. Julian maintained four homes in Los Angeles, and had apartments in New York and Oklahoma City. He vigorously denounced bankers, calling them ‘crooks, con men, and pawnbrokers’. He was Los Angeles’ version of the Great Gatsby as he might have been played by James Cagney. (Demarco 1988:116)

The female counterpart of CC Julian – in showmanship, power, and destiny – was Sister Aimée Semple McPherson, who made a capital on the spiritual yearnings of the Angelenos and brilliantly fit the portrait of any top eccentric who ever came to Southern California. Sister Aimée, the evangelical diva whose turbulent life story and electrifying sermons made the headlines of the day is in herself an icon and a landmark in the history of Los Angeles. Three years after her arrival in L.A. in 1922 – together with her church, her children and 100\$ in cash – Sister Aimée collected over 1 million dollars and owned property worth \$ 250,000 from preaching the message of her Four Square Gospel: conversion, physical healing, the Second Coming, and redemption. Most of the money went into building her Angelus Temple in Echo Park.

In addition to having close encounters with renowned movie stars of the 20s, the Romanian intellectual also visited the temple of the religious star of the day. Comarnescu’s visit to Sister Aimée’s tabernacle could easily stand as a historical testimony along with other notable visits to the Angelus Temple, such as historian’s Carey McWilliams in 1922 or H.L. Mencken’s in 1926. After describing the temple “as large as a theatre”, Comarnescu (1974:238, 239, my translation) sketches the portrait of the priestess: “a beautiful woman, a bit passé”, “impressive because she appears to be both an actress and a sincere woman”, “talking and the same time acting”, “attacking evolutionism” and “using gestures, shouts, touching words” to impress her followers. The religious show is shrewdly used by Sister Aimée who, says Comarnescu, “undoubtedly oscillates between swindling and mysticism” since she – just like a versatile businessperson – correctly sensed the unhappiness of the people of Los Angeles, and turned their misery into a source of profit.

However, Carey McWilliams (1973:262) softens the portrait of Sister Aimée when noting the way he remembers the priestess:

Although I heard her speak many times, at the Temple and on the radio, I never heard her attack any individual or any group and I am thoroughly convinced that her followers always felt that they had received

full value in exchange for their liberal donations. She made migrants feel at home in Los Angeles, she gave them a chance to meet other people, and she exorcised the nameless fears which so many of them had acquired from the fire-and-brimstone theology of the Middle West.

The religious fervor of the late 20s in Los Angeles was not the only significant detail that caught Petru Comarnescu's attention, whose vast interests in fields such as sociology, psychology, or the history of art turn him into a keen observer who deftly illuminates diverse facets of the American culture and society.

The Eastern European diarist (Comarnescu 1974:214, 218, 280) also draws a series of parallels between the Old World and the New World when analyzing what he calls *L.A. paradoxes*. First of all, Comarnescu points out that even if the city resembles an earthly paradise built for people to rest, a metropolis which bursts with human activity, it ends up being quite unusual and artificial. Second of all, although the climate of the city invites its inhabitants and its visitors towards more tolerant ways and more freedom in ideas and thoughts, the people who reach the city hold tight to their old mentalities and prejudices and afterwards try to impose their Puritan values upon their fellow citizens. So instead of generating a complete alteration in ways of behavior, the city remains powerless and the people it accommodates – mostly from the East and the Middle West – carry over to the newly-found land the rusty mentalities of their old land.

And lastly, Comarnescu also notes that the all-year-round Californian sunny climate triggers a constant disposition towards optimism and joy, and it also brings comfort, solace and equilibrium, whereas on the European continent, the changing seasons usually act as a gauge for assessing people's swinging moods. To add more, the seasonal changes give one the crippling sensation of time passing by, of aging with the onset of each autumn and of rejuvenating with every coming spring. In contrast to that, Los Angeles offers one the overwhelming feeling of living an eternal youth, since the metropolis obliterates thoughts of death, ageing and abyss. Petru Comarnescu goes on even further when rhetorically asking himself whether his feelings would have been the same upon visiting California not at the age of 24 but at an old one. The answer attempted by the Romanian traveler is that LA is no country for old men but a city for young people in love with life, sports and nature. Old people are not in their element in Los Angeles since their old mentalities and Puritanism seem obsolete in a metropolis built for pleasure, joy and entertainment.

One more comparison between Europe and the US is employed when discussing the topic of movies. Comarnescu (1974:225) deems that while the Europeans select for their movies only exceptional individuals and those artists who usually stand out in a crowd through their extraordinary beauty, peculiarities, and oddities or through their superiority, the Americans – just like the Greek sculptors of old – go for the ordinary. Therefore, while the American spectators identify themselves with their stars, whom they perceive as their alter ego, the European spectators see in their movie stars the element of difference (e.g. exotic beauties, geniuses, diabolical tragedians, etc.), and idols who are poles apart from them. The diarist concludes that the old continent is enamored with the extremes, and in a permanent quest for the abnormal, the original, the exceptional, while the New World loves the standard, the ordinary, the norm.

Although Petru Comarnescu confesses to not being an enthusiast for the Hollywood scene, he obtained inside information about the world of the movies from one visit to the studios, “an experience as instructive and aesthetically disgusting as the image of human entrails in an emergency room” (1974:247, my translation). Moreover, he played as an extra in the movie *Floradora* – featuring the star of the day Marion Davies – for the sole reason of observing the inner workings of a movie studio. In addition to that, Comarnescu recounts his visit to the Paramount Studios when “An American Tragedy” was shot and having met a series of movie stars such as Anita Page, Carole Lombard, Buddy Rogers, Philip Holmes, Jack Oakie, etc., or having seen stars such as Joan Crawford, Marion Davies, Eddie Cantor, James Hall, Charles King, Charlie Chaplin, Norma Shearer and Mary Pickford. Comarnescu’s only regret is that he did not have a close meeting with Chaplin, the only star he did not consider mercenary or commonplace.

One peculiarity of Comarnescu’s piece of travel writing is represented by the consistent use of comparisons sending to Romanian realities. For example, when discussing on the unhappy world of Hollywood, the readers are also given the diarist’s look back home: “It is exactly the same distance from the center of Los Angeles to Hollywood as from the National Theatre [in Bucharest] to Chitila...” (1974:239, my translation). For the East European traveler, the past is the suitcase carried from one land to another and which can never be forgotten or left behind on any platform. The old land – with its histories and landmarks – acts as a gauge, a benchmark, a projection onto the new land, which always blends, magnifies and/or distorts images.

On the same note, other Romanian diarists, such as Stelian Tănase (1998:29), stay aware – at all times – of the major stumbling block encountered by any traveler entering a new realm: the impossibility of looking at a new place with innocence and wonder. Before the traveler starts roaming through the entrails of the new city, s/he must forget at once what they once picked up about the visited place – from various sources of information: TV, newspapers, movies, and readings – in order to enable their sensibility to make fresh discoveries. That is why, the traveler, the exile or the emigrant of the 21st century, skeptical and a bit blasé, always surrounded by ordinariness and commonplace, and inundated with sundry information, may find it a real challenge to leave their cultural baggage behind when stepping into a new world.

And just like Vera Călin (1997, 2004) in her Californian diaries or like Petru Comarnescu, Stelian Tănase (1998:100) also uses in his *L.A. vs. NY* from the 90s a series of comparisons sending to past Romanian realities. For Tănase, not only do the abundant Californian markets represent undeniable proof of the United States' wealth but they also stand as a cold reminder of how the communist Romanian markets of the 80s looked like: cold, poor, grim and gray, and with shabbily clad people standing in never-ending queues.

However, the use of analogy in various American diaries (of exile or on travel writing) poses one thorny problem. In her study on nostalgia and the immigrant identity, which draws on Paul Ricoeur's concepts of *idem* and *ipse*, Andreea Deciu (2001:40) clearly shows that the pervasive use of analogies is both a risky means of argumentation – since the similarity and/ or the difference between the two objects can be challenged – and one which continuously feeds the nostalgia of the diarist and their *idem* identity, i.e. their “hard” self already shaped in the rhythms of the past and the mould of the world left behind.

3. Conclusion

Had Petru Comarnescu's American diary had another historical journey, I believe it would have been as popular and widely read as, for example, Ilf and Petrov's (2006) US travelogue from 1935. But Comarnescu's book followed the destiny of its author and the societal openness which marked the Romanian cultural scene between the two world wars came to a bitter end once the communist regime was installed.

While tracing the symbolical presence of the US in communist Romania, Bogdan Barbu (2006:115) discusses the unhappy destiny of Comarnescu's books which dealt with the American

society and culture: they were pulled out from the bookstores or simply banned by The Iron Guard and later on by the communist regime, a testimony in itself for the closing of the Romanian mind.

Petru Comarnescu's continuous efforts to objectively depict US places and personalities turn him into a reliable diarist who can easily establish a bond with his readers so that writing up Los Angeles proves to be a two-edged endeavor which sheds light both on the Romanian intellectual and his native land, and on the city of Los Angeles.

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