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## PROSAIC AS POETIC: STYLISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF MATKO PEIĆ'S TRAVELOGUES

### Abstract

Matko Peić presented his travels through Egypt, Israel, China, India, Japan, the Philippines, most of Europe and the whole of Croatia in several travelogues – *Skitnje (Strolls, 1965)*, *Jesen u Poljskoj (Autumn in Poland, 1969)*, *Crno zlato (Black Gold, 1974)*, *Ljubav na putu. Od Drave do Jadrana (Love on the Road. From Drava to the Adriatic, 1984)* and *Evropske skitnje (European Strolls, 1985)* – which earned him the status of one of the best Croatian stylists. Peić's travelogue style is characterised by a refined synthesis of empiricism, emotion and expression, with which he layers the seemingly prosaic reality of life. In the poetic approach to the latter, three dominant stylistic features can be identified: a) the so-called *masculine* style of writing, presented by the use of augmentatives, the recording of brutal actions, the vigour and eroticism of style, sexualised metaphors, the parallelism of instinctive impulses of the animal world and intense erotic human pleasures, and a blend of aggressiveness, irony, directness of expression and undisputed tone; b) poetics of the descriptive, which is expressed through concise picturesqueness and picturesque lapidary of expression, synesthetic evocations, musical and painterly weft of texts and baroque-rococo characteristics of writing; c) perceptive focus, i.e., the ability to present in a naturalistically faithful manner a certain reality of life revealed in characteristic details and at the same time to perceive it in its totality, as well as to discover in everything observed a possible deeper, potentially symbolic meaning of objects, beings, animals and phenomena.

**Keywords:** a *masculine* style of writing, poetics of the descriptive, perceptive focus.

## Introduction

The versatile artistic, literary and professional work of Matko Peić (1923 – 1999) – an art historian, writer, painter, poet, art critic and journalist – is probably most recognisable to the general public through the category of travelogues. Apart from the whole of Croatia and almost the whole of Europe, Peić travelled to Egypt, Israel, China, India, Japan and the Philippines. As bound witnesses to these travels, he left several travelogues: *Skitnje (Strolls)*, 1965), *Jesen u Poljskoj (Autumn in Poland)*, 1969), *Crno zlato (Black Gold)*, 1974), *Ljubav na putu. Od Drave do Jadrana (Love on the Road. From Drava to the Adriatic)*, 1984) and *Evropske skitnje (European Strolls)*, 1985), of which the latter was awarded the *Ivan Goran Kovačić Prize for Literature* and the first-mentioned the *City of Zagreb Prize* (Heli in Peić, 1995: 220). However, perhaps the greatest reward for *Skitnje (Strolls)* is that it has led to a renewal of readers' interest in travelogues, as Dean Duda (1999: 331) points out, and that according to the critics, it represents the pinnacle of that genre in Croatian literature in recent decades. Peić's achieved travelogue model is not a classic travelogue with relics of the traditional structure of storytelling, as Stanislav Marijanović (2000: 13) observes, but is closely related to essays, poetry, novels, memoirs, diaries, letters, biographical and self-referential prose. He is also known as one of the most excellent Croatian stylists, and the main stylistic characteristics of his travelogues are given below.

## *Masculine style of writing*

Always taking into account the basic requirement – not to be boring to be read, Peić's writing practice achieves amazing effects in three stages: he tries to astonish, shock or amaze readers (Pavletić, 2010: 79). This is perhaps nowhere more noticeable than in his insistence on the boldness, eroticism and *masculinity* of style. A *masculine* idiom is supported by the use of augmentatives, the recording of brutal actions and noticing rough behaviour, as noted by Anica Bilić (1999: 27), highlighting as an example of her claim a sentence from the travelogue *Između Đakova i Vinkovaca (Between Đakovo and Vinkovci)*: "It is good that at that moment someone – with a kick in the stomach – cursed the filly's mother, directing me through stale chamomile and blackened chicory – with the twilight of Bosut's corduroy – to the nearest bar in Vinkovci." (Peić, 1996, as cited in Bilić, 1999: 27). Peić showed his *masculine* stylistic orientation already in *Skitnje (Strolls)*, and before *Crno zlato (Black Gold)*, his most *masculine* theme was the Baltic, which Pavletić illustrates with the following passage:

“The space swollen from the mating of huge animals with terribly salty jaws, horribly bitter ovaries. Salt-bitten females, iodine-clasped males. Livestock sea. Water heavy from tons of whale oil, slippery from herring fat. Wrinkled by walrus’ moustache. Foamed by polar bear’s mumbling. Swollen by a rough life, this sea despises the little story of the mermaid, of the triton. The gloomy, soulless Baltic seeks only a rough sailor who has neither the shred of the blue of a swallow’s wing in the cap ribbon, nor a small gold anchor on the coat sleeve, but is black and stiff and has a leather anorak, in which he stands by the sea rather as a metal-worker by a huge cauldron with boiling lead, than as a sailor. A cruel fornicator, the Baltic, tolerates only women tougher than platinum, with raw breasts, brilliantly cut by the axe of the wind” (Peić, as cited in Pavletić, 2010: 49–50).

At the same time, he does not shy away from aggressively sexualised metaphors, and an interesting explanation of one of them, the one related to machines, Peić offers in a conversation with Danijel Jelinić for *Večernji list* newspapers:

“The problem of sexuality in *Crno zlato* is a problem of the very pace of talking. If you worked only with steel and machines and not with women and meat, the file would look like some kind of order catalogue with arranged machines and spare parts. It would seem technological, cold and inhuman. I warmed up the machines with sex. That is how I humanised them” (Peić, as cited in Pavletić, 2010: 61).

If the ideal of masculine writing is considered to be a combination of aggression, irony, strong directness of expression and undisputed tone, then Peić came closest to it in the next passage from *Crno zlato* (*Black Gold*), brought by Pavletić:

“I really don’t know what to compare that old fiery male device to! How can I describe that companion of millions of *nikotindžija*? That grandson of Prometheus! The *fajercajg* is a man’s friend, something between a dog on the ground and the eponymous constellation in the sky! [...]

Modern lighter is small, silvery-ashy, light and flat. It naps between a man’s heart and stomach or lies at the bottom of a woman’s purse between lipstick and powder. And the big old lighter was large, brass-blush, heavy and wide. Constantly awake, upright, bouncing in the pants pocket!” (Peić, 1974, as cited in Pavletić, 2010: 55).

The affective basis of discourse is indicated here both lexically and syntactically, as Pavletić (2010: 55) observes. Lexically, two words in particular that Peić introduces instead of neutral literary ones are affectively coloured: for the *lighter*, he uses the old colloquial Germanism *fajercajg* (germ. *Feuerzeug* = lighter), and he calls smokers *nikotindžije* (nicotine lovers). These are denotatively and connotatively effective words, especially impressive in their phonetic structure, and they are also representative examples of Peić's irreconcilably negative attitude towards smoking. Using a harsh and derogatory name, *nikotindžije*, for smokers, he exposes nicotine as a poison and indicates its exotic origin with the suffix *džija*, characteristic of Croatian Turkisms. The affective layering of the text is evidenced by the introduction of women into the circle of nicotine lovers, thereby speaking in detail about the universal igniter, also activating activating also erotic allusions related to the lighter as a phallic symbol and the purse as an alternative symbol of the uterus. Pavletić finds the root of this strong erotic instinct/tension in Peić's writing free from any dogmas; Peić emphasises gender in everything, erotically swollen from sensations coming from the recognisable and exciting female sphere, and writers with such a developed and openly expressed *male* view of things do not need a landmark – their imagination eyes enable them to see what is hidden from others (Pavletić, 2010: 55–59).

Helena Sablić Tomić (1999: 66) also notes that Peić's travel itinerary is complemented by hedonistic shifts towards the sensory and sensual, as well as descriptions of various life anecdotes that happened to him along the way or anecdotes he only heard about and wrote down. His travel discourse is saturated with the expressiveness of narrative actions with a dynamic change of narrative levels, as well as the hyperbolic insistence on the parallelism of instinctive impulses of the animal world with the most passionate erotic human pleasures. Due to all these procedures, Peić's discourse acquires an energy charge unparalleled in modern travel prose (Sablić Tomić, 1999: 66). Vera Šutalo also notes that in Peić's texts, true physical sexuality, i.e., obsession with women and sexual, is more than clearly noticeable, and reports that in one conversation, to her direct question about why he had so much love for women, Peić answered somewhat vaguely:

“In true eroticists, eroticism is not in motive, but in expression. Words touch, kiss, hug, mate, have their orgasms within a sentence. There is almost no sentence in my texts in which a verb does not rape a noun. I am an eroticist in that sense. I have an ear for word mating, for the sexuality of syntax. And nothing is erotic enough if it is not revealed enough. And

when it is already revealed, then it takes culture to understand that if it were dressed, it would be more naked than when it is naked” (Peić, as cited in Šutalo, 2008: 82–83).

Thus, according to Pavletić (2010: 59), in Peić’s texts, objects are worded, and words materialised because he approaches things as a man: resolutely and lustfully, in order to win and adopt them, integrate and personify them, and sexually qualify them for the act of union, for the love of words and items. His fresh linguistic settings – for eroticised stylisations of which the syntagms are, as a rule, subtly appropriate – are characterised by a vehement style of sensual and shamelessly naked words in their full expressiveness. Peić’s texts are full-bloodedly sexual and erotic – directly and between the lines – both in observations/analogies and topically/emotionally-affectively through vocabulary and figures, images and stilemas, rhythm and intonation. Although he penetrates male or female sex in many ways, Peić’s writing does not promote pansexualism but simply understands the relationship between the sexes in everything, a passion that unites or separates male and female, not only in humans, but also in animals and plants. Fierce love, along with the eternal female and primordial male in everything and always, is the constant of Peić’s writing. They are noticeable in various textual layers, at all available levels of meaning, both in objects and in stylems, regardless of the way in which highly erotic stylems are motivated (Pavletić 2010: 59–64).

### **Poetics of the descriptive**

Peić’s entire opus is based on the principle of visualising his own experiences and all corresponding observations, as noted by Vlatko Pavletić (2010: 101), and with very few conceptual excursions, categorical discursiveness and confessional digressions. All his travelogues have a very strong poetic effect, primarily because of the abundance of remarkable observations and visual details, which sometimes seem complete, like miniatures. Especially prominent in this respect is *Skitrnje (Strolls)*, which, in addition to the unusual view of Turopolje and Slavonia – which is why it is primarily appreciated by most critics – also offers a real treasure trove of poetic values. Peić virtuously varies his incomparable and poetically impressive expressiveness depending on the object or mood, finding unexpected connections between words and thus connoting musical correlates of emotions in a wide range of the so-called colouring tone: from tender femininity to masculine roughness. In the musical weft of his travelogues,

Pavletić finds connections with Mozart's compositions because his lyrics are equally musically harmonious and sonorous, but also with Chopin because he is equally intonationally and rhythmically emotional. He also notices that Peić often composes travelogues according to the rondo, and they are either Debussy's preludes or are composed of complete smaller parts which, according to Pavletić, can only be compared to the effective and lyrically impressive Schubert's *moment musical*.

Peić's travelogues are, furthermore, a kind of assembly of attractions; namely, he compared himself to the camera and interpreted his writing as a series of shots taken in a frenzy of experiences and only subsequently thoughtfully connected to make certain impressions, suggesting emotions and evoking moods that would otherwise be lost forever. Hence their truly unique form, but also comparability to other similar travelogues, such as those of Matoš or Crnjanski.

Likewise, while many writers see only things, Peić often notices only colours, which stimulate his imagination and evoke associations before the sharp contours of the observed object reach him (Pavletić, 2010: 18–219). According to Zdravko Zima, Peić is a landscape painter, and nature is his most important signpost, and he especially loved it in autumn: "He likes life with a mild taste of decay, like a painter looking at his object at the crossroads of light and shadow, where what is inaccessible to the naked eye and what always portends agony is fixed" (Zima, 2000: 247–248). Peić very often cites colours in pairs in order to emphasise one more strongly in comparison to the other and to present each of them as contrasting and not as fundamental (Pavletić, 2010: 103). This gives the image dynamism, and in addition to painterly, also the semantic dimension underlined by the corresponding conceptual oppositions. One of the most common oppositions is between the new and the old, for which Pavletić gives an example from the travelogue *Od Beča do Budimpešte* (*From Vienna to Budapest*), in which near the Hungarian border the author says that it was "several hours of wide, simple highway, once *black* from pigs and *white* from geese, and today *yellow* and *grey* from cars" (Peić, as cited in Pavletić, 2010: 104). Peić's style offers a really rich impressionistic palette: rigour of Cézanne and fascination of Bonnard, but also a little miracle of reconciliation of Monet and Manet, which is perhaps most reminiscent of the "arrangement of objects" into picturesque structures, the general impression of which owes a lot to the polishing of every detail, without imposing details and trifles exhibitionistically, but merging with each other in an impressive whole that means/radiates and where things are present so that they are seen, heard and experienced in the sensory and poetic

timeless dimension, in two contexts simultaneously: in the context of the reality from which they are torn and in the context of the prose in which they are inlaid (Pavletić, 2010: 112).

Synesthetic evocations are almost a logical sequence of Peić's painterly sensibility, for which he found an inexhaustible source in Poland, and Pavletić singles out the following sentence from *Jesen u Poljskoj* (*Autumn in Poland*) as an example: "The old, sweet *aria* of the Polish *landscape*, arranged as a piano, has begun again: the keys of deciduous trees in the glow of coniferous lacquer." (Peić, 1969, as cited in Pavletić, 2010: 122). Inconsistent with possible expectations of the majority that images in the context of travel prose must, above all, be authentic, truthful, documentary, in Peić's prose, they are generally very evocative, regardless of whether they are primarily symbolic or associative, and to what extent imaginative (Pavletić, 2010: 135).

The baroque-rococo characteristic of Peić's writing should not be neglected either. Bilić (1999: 22) sees points of contact with rococo in the current sensory experience and in attentive, studious observation and impression as the starting points of Peić's literary work. Thus, rococo features are noticeable in the immediate perception of nature, spontaneous observation, concrete, precisely observed details of the microcosm, with the dynamics of movement and feelings of joy in the atmosphere of light (*Ibid.*). Inspired and taught by Kanižlić's example, whose work was the topic of his doctoral dissertation, Dina Marković (2000: 93) points out that Peić's baroque and rococo originate from Požega's inexhaustible literary source as his personal, ultimately humorous style. Its Turopolje twilights should be understood as a temporal and spatial transmission of the meaning of historical extinctions and dying; they are discreetly in aesthetic harmony – the seventeenth-century baroque with the stylistic complex of Peić's baroque. Peić overcame all the baroquely observed scenes of suffering, horror, pain, mourning and dying with the optimism of his rococo expression while baroquely watching and writing about the old carriage of childhood and youth, ruined village churches, shabby gold of wooden saints and much more, with the intensity of his irony, antithesis, and especially the strength of contrast and paradox (Marković, 2000: 94–95).

Peić's poetics of the descriptive, in the end, is perhaps most evident in its concise pictoriality and pictorial lapidary, as Pavletić (2010: 29) observes, completely without superfluous words, but therefore with real adjectives and the most expressive verbs in the most important places. Using the technique of short hints, adds Bilić (1999: 32), Peić enhances the rhythmic texture, so the syntax

shows the pulsation of travellers' feelings: affects in exclamatory sentences, exclamations, pauses, and unspoken and short sentences bring dynamism to his penetrating and impressive prose expression. Peić's exact documentary and positivistic realism are mixed and fused with ingenious imagination in an ideal ratio and complete concentration: "A dynamic portraitist, as Matoš would say, of our people and regions, an unattainable miniaturist in literature as our Klovčić was in painting a long time ago, marked and limited not only the physical but also the spiritual borders of Croatia in all its nuances, visible to his sharp eye and expressed in words by his precise, fine-grained pen." (Jelčić, 2003: 12).

### **Perceptive focus**

According to Pavletić (2010: 80), Peić's travelogues are words of art in which the intertwining and permeation of perceptual and expressive astonishment are a precondition and guarantee of the poetically most valuable travelogue achievements. His observations often have the power and astonishment of revelation, and his generalisations are not necessarily speculative but equally revealing, given that they arise from a series of perceptions of the real, i.e., from every thing and from every phenomenon, and are formulated by the artist's firm belief that the epiphanized individuality has the power to represent the whole. Epiphanies are especially rich in *Skitnje (Strolls)*, and the bow of Peić's painted visions is tense between dawn sensations and imaginative processing of the real. The zone of greatest tension is occupied by the most precious fragments: virtuosically balanced and masterfully polished grotesque, ranging from dissociative metaphors to ambiguous associative anecdotes. Critics did not miss Peić's extraordinary ability to present vividly and in a naturalistically faithful manner a certain reality of life revealed in characteristic details and, at the same time to see it in its totality and permeate all this with the poetically suggestive emotionality of his attitude towards a given object of observation and contemplation.

However, critics have put less emphasis on Peić's ability, and even the need, to reveal in everything he observes not only the authentic appearance and impetus for dreaming but also a possible deeper, potentially symbolic meaning emanating from objects, beings, animals and phenomena, thanks to the author's lucid ability to separate them in a unique plastic manner from a specific context and to fit them into new, abstract-mental or emotional relationships. He did this extremely successfully in *Slavonski vlak (Slavonian Train)*, keeping his attention on a turtle, whose image is an opportunity to start dreaming about the



impenetrable protection that we, like this slow animal, would constantly carry with us and would not dream of it panically in the hours of our unsublimated fears, when we find ourselves endangered and without the possibility of finding safe protection (Pavletić, 2010: 95–167). Finally, in essence, the turtle is a picture of symbolic ambiguity in the sphere of existential questioning of life and death, as evidenced by the following passage singled out by Pavletić: “There is a turtle from Posavina: an animal coffin that was converted into a count’s ashtray, a bum’s tambourine tummy. And it did not find it hard: to be a dog bowl! In the end, there are also paws that knew better than hands – ah, what strength: to turn a grave into a nest!” (Peić, as cited in Pavletić, 2010: 179). Peić’s understanding of the connection and permeation of life with death, which is woven into all his travel prose, has acquired in the turtle its plastically prominent and concisely expressive symbol; with its inverted armour from which life came, it is the image of the cradle, the denotation of emptiness, therefore death, and with it the connotation of the destiny of all living beings. As an ambiguous symbol, the turtle interferently suggests that the grave becomes a nest, and at the same time, the nest becomes a grave. Although living means dying, death limits the vacated space for the emergence of new life (Pavletić, 2010: 179– 180). Stanko Andrić (2011: 174) notes that since animals occupy such an important place in Peić’s metaphor, that style could therefore be called somewhat animalistic and, in any case, vitalistic. This is followed by the observation of Tonko Maroević (2000: 208), who praises the author’s distinct plastic sensitivity combined with the indisputable culture of an encyclopaedic character, but believes that he cares more about primacy and ferocity, about violence and wildness, believing that through specific animalism he will come to animism (or even unanimism) of the existing.

Peić, furthermore, contributes to the effectiveness of his style by successfully using two main principles of text organisation: parallelism and contrast, and the latter especially when he wants to dramatise, increase plasticity and tension (Pavletić, 2010: 299). The source of his opposition is various antinomies and antonyms of generally paired opposites, such as life – death, new – old, natural – technical. He often contrasts life details with signs of dying and ruin, especially in *Skitnje (Strolls)*, where he enriches the finale of the famous description of skinning a murdered fox. There is the opposition, both in the appearance of the living and skinned fox and in the juxtaposition of its cold corpse and the author’s intrusively vivid memory of the fox’s characteristic grinned sneer, as well as in the vicinity of the skinned remains of the fox and live animals – a dog and a cat – turning their heads away from its raw meat (Pavletić, 2010: 300).

Peić's associative potential, Pavletić (2010: 186) points out, is one of the strongest in Croatian literature due to the vividness of expression, a dense network of analogies and inexhaustible invention in finding connections and contacts, closeness and kinship between things and phenomena. His scintillating strangeness and wiggly astonishment testify to his extraordinary perceptual power, as well as to his intellectual lucidity and inventiveness and craftsmanship perfection, manifested by extremely subtle stylistic finishing. After all, Peić's style is so peculiar and impressive that it becomes contagious, which is why some fans of his travelogues, when writing about him, start writing like him (Pavletić, 2010: 254).

### **Conclusion**

Matko Peić imposed himself with his *masculine* approach to reality and poeticising its seemingly prosaic dimensions as one of the most unique and exemplary stylists in Croatian literature. His travelogue subject is recognisable by its exceptional perceptual and expressive abilities, which are also adorned with impeccably coordinated power of expression, the functionality of all language levels (including stylistic) and mental, emotional and conceptual dimensions. At the same time, the poetic dimension of his being adds a subtle poetic aura to the travelogues, the hedonistic dimension contributes to their energy and eroticism, and the aesthetic-erudite proficiency is the foundation of the richness and originality of observation. Skilfully combining literature, fine arts and music; life, death and eros; natural, technical and sublime, Matko Peić created the largest and, according to many, the most valuable travel opus in Croatian literature. However, it would not be correct to interpret Peić's *passionate wanderings* only as an escape and a search for idyll, as Dubravko Jelčić (2004: 494) emphasises because his travelogues are not permeated by country experiences or idle moods, on the contrary, they contain – through wise simplicity and deep and lavish, though not flashy expression – the knowledge of the unity of man and earth, of landscape and human soul, of flora and fauna; hence, the tragic realisation of life imbued with dark instincts and vague passions between the meaning of death and the meaninglessness of life.

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## PROZAIČNO KAO POETIČNO: STILSKE KARAKTERISTIKE PUTOPISA MATKA PEIĆA

### Sažetak

Matko Peić svoja je proputovanja Egiptom, Izraelom, Kinom, Indijom, Japanom, Filipinima, većim dijelom Europe i cijelom Hrvatskom izložio u nekoliko putopisnih knjiga – *Skitnje* (1965), *Jesen u Poljskoj* (1969), *Crno zlato* (1974), *Ljubav na putu. Od Drave do Jadrana* (1984) i *Evropske skitnje* (1985) – kojima je stekao status jednog od najvrsnijih hrvatskih stilista. Za Peićev je putopisni stil karakteristična rafinirana sinteza empirije, emocije i ekspresije, kojom uslojava naoko prozaičnu životnu zbilju. U poetičkom se pristupu potonjoj izdvajaju tri dominantna stilska obilježja: a) takozvani *muški* stil pisanja, kojeg prezentira uporaba augmentativa, evidentiranje brutalnih postupaka, krepkost i erotičnost stila, seksualizirane metafore, paralelizam instinktivnih nagona životinjskog svijeta i intenzivnih erotskih ljudskih užitaka te spoj agresivnosti, ironije, izravnosti izričaja i neprikosnovenog tona; b) poetika deskriptivnog, izražena kroz sažetu slikovitost i slikovitu lapidarnost izraza, sinestezijske evokacije, glazbenu i slikarsku potku tekstova te barokno-rokokojevske karakteristike pisanja; c) perceptivna izoštrenost, odnosno sposobnost da se naturalistički vjerno predoči određena životna zbilja otkrivena u karakterističnom detalju te da ju se istodobno sagleda u njezinom totalitetu, kao i da se u svemu zapaženom otkrije moguće dublje, potencijalno simboličko značenje predmeta, bića, životinja i pojava.

**Ključne riječi:** *muški* stil pisanja, poetika deskriptivnog, perceptivna izoštrenost.