ROUTES, MAPS AND BORDERS: FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN TO REGIONAL LANDSCAPES

JIŘÍ MĚSÍC
(ed.)

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GRANADA
2026

DIGEOCAT LIB.

This publication was produced as part of the project *Research into Representations of Intercultural Contacts in Czech Travelogue Texts from the Mediterranean up to 1918, Using Digital Humanities*, funded by the Erasmus+ KA220-HED programme (Project No. 2022-1-CZ01-KA220-HED-000085765).

Scientific Review:

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© UNIVERSIDAD DE GRANADA
ISBN: 978-84-338-7810-6. GR. 1450-2026
Publisher: Editorial Universidad de Granada
Campus Universitario de Cartuja. Granada
Colegio Máximo, s.n., 18071, Granada
Tel.: 958 24 39 30 - 958 24 62 20
www: editorial.ugr.es
Prepress: TADIGRA, S.L. Granada
Cover design: TADIGRA, S.L. Granada
Cover image: Detail from the *Catalan Atlas* (1375). Modern reproduction (1959), Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. Image: Wikimedia Commons, licensed under CC BY 3.0.
Printed by: Printhaus. Bilbao

Printed in Spain *Impreso en España*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As the editor of this volume, I am deeply grateful to all the authors who contributed their chapters. My sincere thanks go to Dr. Jiří Hrabal, the principal coordinator of the DIGEOCAT & Lib. project at Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic, whose vision and leadership brought the research team together and inspired us to take our work further.

Also, I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to the scientific reviewer, Dr. Maki Sadahiro of Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo, whose thoughtful and meticulous review of the chapters, together with valuable comments on their structure, format, and content, greatly enhanced the quality of this volume.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleague, Dr. José Ruiz Más of the University of Granada, whose support, advice, and encouragement contributed to the improvement of this book.

I am equally thankful to the staff of the University of Granada Publishing House for their professionalism and dedication in bringing this work to publication.

Jiří Měsíc

FOREWORD

Scholarship has its own geography, one that rarely coincides with the lines drawn on a map. People, ideas, and books travel along routes that are often invisible until, quite unexpectedly, they intersect. My encounter with Jiří Měsíc, the editor of this volume, was one such intersection. As a scholar of American literature living in the Far East, I could hardly have expected our paths to cross, still less that they would lead me to write this foreword. Yet itineraries cross, however obliquely, where no atlas foresees them.

Routes, Maps, and Borders: From the Mediterranean to Regional Landscapes gathers the work of a project on Czech travellers to the Mediterranean up to 1918. Its first part reads the travelogues themselves—accounts of journeys to Italy and the Adriatic, to Greece, Spain, Egypt, and the Holy Land—and its second turns to the mapping of literary places and routes. Behind the chapters stand a digital library of more than a hundred travelogues, many of them all but forgotten, and an atlas that ties each route to the themes of intercultural contact recorded along it.

The Mediterranean has long held my interest, since Herman Melville's journey of 1856–57 through Palestine and Italy lies behind both *Clarel* (1876) and *Timoleon, Etc.* (1891). My work, however, has centered on nineteenth-century American literature—particularly its transatlantic reception and the institutionalization of American literary studies—and Central Europe had figured little in my research until I came upon a single travel book and that book remains at the heart of my map.

It was F. O. Matthiessen's *From the Heart of Europe* (1948), and the chapters that follow in the present volume sent me back to it.

They trace journeys out of Central Europe, in which the image of a nation was carried to the Mediterranean and brought home altered. Matthiessen, traveling in the opposite direction, however, carried into Central Europe an image of America that the journey would alter. Having defined the canon of classic American literature with *American Renaissance* (1941), he took part in the first Salzburg Seminar in July 1947 and went on to Prague, Brno, Bratislava, and Budapest, lecturing at Charles University on American literature, including Melville and Whitman. By the time the book appeared in 1948, Czechoslovakia had gone through the February coup, and the democratic ideals Matthiessen had seen in or projected onto the country drew harsh criticism in the United States. It was the last book he would publish. Two years later, he threw himself from a window.

Whatever the justice of the political criticisms it attracted, *From the Heart of Europe* remains a travel book of rare candor, the record of a critic uncertain how far his own words will carry. In Salzburg, his first stop, anthems sung "in various tongues" and poems read in unfamiliar languages had struck him as steps toward "international amity" (31). In Prague, multilingualism was simply everyday life. In a city where scholars handled four or five foreign languages as a matter of course and even policemen were expected to speak one besides Czech, it was he who lacked a language. The chairman of a luncheon apologized for his English and shook his head over his inability to convey the nuances of his thought—though, as Matthiessen notes, "he had conveyed plenty" (106). He was speaking English only because Matthiessen had no Czech, and the lack thus reappeared on the other side of the table as the burden of translation. Nor did answering in his mother tongue leave Matthiessen unscathed. In Budapest, before an audience whose language he did not know, he found it "impossible to know how many people there understood what I was trying to say" (160). The assurance that everyone else will do the translating collapses the moment one's English reaches only halfway, and this condition of "half-translation"—never knowing what has been conveyed and what has been left behind—sets the keynote of the journey.

Matthiessen had opened his career with *Translation: An Elizabethan Art* (1931), a study of translators who drew foreign books

into the mainstream of their mother tongue in order to overcome a sense of cultural inferiority to the Continent, and who took up translation as an act of patriotism, much as the voyager and the merchant took up their own ventures. For them, translation was assimilation, and assimilation was the making of a nation. In Prague, however, Matthiessen found himself in the opposite position. He was no longer the translator drawing the foreign into his own language. He had himself become the foreign text, and one only partially translated.

In the heart of Europe, one might say, he rediscovered the heart of America. To live only half understood in a land where one's mother tongue does not carry was a condition long familiar to immigrants in the United States. On October 28, 1947, Czechoslovak Independence Day, Matthiessen lunched with Zdeněk Fierlinger, the former prime minister, and talk of the need for nations to know one another better turned his mind to the rewriting of his own country's history. Immigrant groups, he argued, had been studied "too exclusively in terms of the problem presented by their assimilation" (125). What was needed was a history of what these peoples had brought with them, of how far "Czechoslovakia or Poland or Ireland or Italy, however modified or transformed, are still a living part of the United States" (126). An immigrant history that ends in assimilation, like a translation that aims at completeness, leaves out whatever could not be carried across. Where the patriotism of the Elizabethan translators had been assimilation, Matthiessen's in Prague was to find a plurality of cultures in precisely what such a history had passed over. The remainder that fails to get through is not a deficit but the condition under which the other remains other. Walking back across the Old Town Square after lunch, he saw in the holiday crowd faces "not very different from the faces that I used to see as a boy in Illinois" (126). His uncertainty about being understood abroad had rewritten the image of America he carried with him.

The process by which travel writes, and rewrites, the image of home is also the subject of *Routes, Maps, and Borders*. The chapters on Czech travel writing open to readers outside the Czech lands a literature that has rarely been within their reach. The travellers'

accounts reveal how networks of mobility shaped the image of the nation, and how a world could be put together from a place that did not yet have a state of its own. Did the travellers, like the Elizabethan translators, bring the foreign home as the cultural property of a nation still waiting for its state? Or did the journey rewrite the image of home they had carried with them, as it did for Matthiessen in Prague? What the collection shows, to my mind, is that the two processes are written one over the other, and that the map they leave behind is a palimpsest.

While Matthiessen's translators were naturalizing foreign books, a playwright of their generation was naturalizing a foreign land, remaking Bohemia to suit an English stage. Shakespeare gave a pre-national Bohemia a coastline. In *The Winter's Tale*, act 3, scene 3, Antigonus's ship touches upon "the deserts of Bohemia." This celebrated error suggests another dimension of translation: the imaginative remaking of a place. Half-translation can involve invention as well as loss: a remainder fails to get through, while a surplus appears that was never in the original.

This imagined geography offers another way into *From the Heart of Europe*, which opens "in the air above the desert" (3). Flying home from a visit to his father in California, Matthiessen fell into conversation with the man in the next seat. He took him for a Mexican, but the man turned out to be a Frenchman who spoke Japanese. The conversation continued over Arizona and New Mexico, the Kansas plains, and, just before dark, the Mississippi. The opening scene draws a bridge in the air across a continent, as if anticipating the description of Czechoslovakia Matthiessen would later hear in Prague: "the bridge between East and West" (141). When the author of *Translation: An Elizabethan Art* flies inland from the coast, he superimposes—or so I read the passage—Shakespeare's Bohemia, that desert country beside the sea, on the land beneath him. And the travellers in this volume, who set out from a landlocked Bohemia for the Mediterranean, likewise gave Bohemia, on the map of the national imagination, the coastline that Shakespeare could give it only by mistake.

The Mediterranean is the horizon of the collection's first part, but to follow so many journeys across it is to be tempted toward

other seas. I am reminded of another Bohemian traveller, Alois Richard Nykl, who would later make his name with studies of the Arabic poetry of al-Andalus. As a young man, however, he had passed eastward through the same Mediterranean as the travellers in this volume and had gone, as one chapter of his autobiography has it, "Z Egypta na Daleký východ"—from Egypt to the Far East—landing at Nagasaki in the spring of 1911 and staying in Japan for five years. Nor was it only people who went east. When I requested two articles on the Beat Generation from the 1959 and 1960 volumes of *Slovenské pohľady*, they reached me not from Slovakia but from the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center at Hokkaido University. Archives, too, travel.

Routes, Maps, and Borders: From the Mediterranean to Regional Landscapes will find a wide readership across the regions it joins, and the library and atlas that stand behind it will serve anyone who wishes to follow a traveller's route into the Mediterranean and to read what was written along the way. Its readers, however, will not be confined to those regions. Travel and translation rewrite the maps of those who leave Central Europe and those who come to it alike—as they did for Matthiessen in 1947, and as they have done for one reader who came to this book from the Far East.

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