

I DREAMED OF CANADA
AMBIVALENCE IN SERBIAN ATTITUDE TO CANADA

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Abstract. *Tihomir Levajac from Banja Luka in the Republic of Srpska wrote a book 'I Dreamed of Canada' in which he described his personal experience of Canada. His essays are a starting point for the analysis of the cultural clash between the Serbian and Canadian cultures, more specifically the feeling of inferiority that the Serbs share with many other citizens of the under-developed countries in relation to the Canadians, seen as a superior and privileged nation. A personal touch to this attempt to compare and contrast the two cultures is given through the analysis of one of David Albahari's stories in which this Serbian author, now Canadian resident, describes his life in Canada.*

I Dreamed of Canada is a book written by Tihomir Levajac, a professor at one of the universities in the Republic of Srpska. The Republic of Srpska, now included in the Bosnian confederation, is a part of former Yugoslavia which may prove of some significance for understanding the directness of Levajac's title. It is a simple enough book, a sort of witty and ironical travel account of the author's visit to Canada soon after the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. However, the book is epigrammatic in the sense that it delineates all the psychological steps of mis/adaptation of Serbian, or shall I say, most immigrants who encounter Canadian culture with all the differing attitudes on both sides. The present paper is an attempt to follow these stages of disillusionment, always taking into account the complexities of the Canadian milieu itself. The conclusion that may be challenged is that many of the problems experienced by immigrants are also shared by the Canadians themselves, and may be the corollary of the nation-formation process characterising Canadian history.

One of my colleagues from the Sociology Department frequently tells me, as a response to my various complaints about friends, that to be disenchanted one first has to be enchanted. Likewise, disillusionment as a reaction to first experience one may have with Canada is a certain sign of illusions that were cherished beforehand. This is certainly true of Serbian visitors and especially immigrants. All of them, or for the sake of fairness, all

of us, go to Canada for the first time with blown-up expectations. It sounds commonplace and even shabby to describe this northern country as the promised land but it is more than true for the mind framework of the people in Serbia. America was never that attractive to us and if it was then the reasons were purely materialistic. It was not the promises of the American constitution : life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that ever drew Serbian people to the shores of America at the beginning of the 20th century when the migration to this country was most massive. Not even today would the young of Serbia move to the States for that reason. The collective wisdom of our people holds it that "Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose" in line with Houseman, one of the first World War poets. Neither is liberty an unqualified advantage if most other things are denied nor is the pursuit of happiness more than a formal promise without the conditions to realise it. Serbian people used to go to America primarily to earn the money, get rich if possible and then come back to their families. Few of them actually did since the pull of money is always too strong to resist, but symptomatically quite a few of them spend their very last days in native villages. A neighbour of mine told me the story of his uncle who was interned during the World War 2 as a young family man leaving behind a wife and two daughters. He had been obliterated from their lives for forty years only to reveal himself a few years ago with the news of his American family and wealth. But now, at the age of 80, he is leaving everything and coming back to die in the place of his birth. This story is by no means singular. What varies is only the amount of money these unfortunate people bring back. For us today they are simply the old nostalgic generation of emigrants.

On the other hand, the new generation of emigrants is attracted by what the constitution of Canada has to offer: peace, order, and good government. This is easily understood if one knows the basic outline of Yugoslav history in the second half of the last century. One word suffices to describe it: instability, and the majority of our people who have recently left the country were driven by an understandable need to achieve peaceful and orderly existence safe-guarded by a good government. It is a misconception that most Serbians apply for immigration because of the economic difficulties in our country. You may be surprised, but making money is much easier in our part of the world than keeping, investing and multiplying it. The unpredictability of government decisions concerning taxes, extra profit and economic trends generally is such that doing any business implies high risks. This is an outcome of the ethnic instabilities which still shake my country and which are themselves again the product of bad governing at the highest level in the past, if I may be the judge of it. Tihomir Levajac is of a similar opinion:

We are a people that has learned to live from day to day, from the first till the fifth of any month, from New Year till Christmas, from one uprising to another, from one bloodbath to another, without a national plan or programme, without road signs, not looking into the future, not knowing what hardships might await us there. (13)

Living in a country where tomorrow cannot be clearly defined by any means whatsoever one inevitably begins to long for a more stable society in which one's personal talents and accomplishments may be fully realised. It is in this sense mainly that Canada is a promised land, or as Djuro Damjanovic put it in his review of Levajac's book: "Canada is an old, eternal, unattainable hope, a starry-sky hope of life". (Unattainable because it is really difficult to get a Canadian visa.)

Professor Levajac is an author of modest abilities in literary terms but very perceptive and critically inclined. Each of the stories in his book tackles one issue, randomly chosen just as his experience of Canada was random and coloured by the personal experience of his Yugoslav friends who kindly acted as his guides. However subjective, his account of Canada is still very indicative of how Serbians in general react to what Canada has to offer. Bread, for example. Nothing is more important in Serbian diet than bread although there are only three or four varieties of it on the traditional Serbian menu. So, when you are faced with dozens of different types of bread arranged in most imaginative ways in a huge superstore (the size of which is always alarming to us though similar chains of stores are mushrooming in Serbia and we'll get used to them soon, I guess) you have to be impressed at first. It looks like the dream of limitless choice has come true at last and a shop is not a shop but a fair "where illusions are sold" (11). It looks as if the world of the future, the way communism imagined it, has been realised in Canada offering 'a veritable cornucopia' (25) of everything one could think of. However, after this initial excitement and delight at the sight of such plenitude, a Serbian traveller begins to feel betrayed since something seems to be missing. In the above case of bread, it was the taste, which was absent from the deliciously looking bread. Tasteless bread is just a symbol of the phenomenon better described by Adrienne Rich in her book *What Is Found There*:

...an alleged triumph of corporate capitalism in which our experience - our desire itself - is taken from us, processed and labeled, and sold back to us before we have had a chance to name it for ourselves (what do we really want and fear?) or to dwell in our ambiguities and contradictions. (Rich, XIV)

An average visitor may not be able to verbalise the feeling which is a paradox in itself since such bounty is not supposed to inspire criticism, but the feeling is persistently there: disappointment. And then it spreads onto other spheres of everyday life experience in Canada.

What seemed to be perfect turns out faulty in Serbian mind. This country functioning like a clock-work appears to have too many regulations to be acceptable. Its stability is mysteriously and uncomfortably related to unbearable taxes. Freedom that it advocates does not include drinking alcohol in the open. And ecologically devised and health concerned jogging tracks supposed moving in the same direction:

Onwards and onwards only, in the same direction, lest they should collide, just overtaking one another! Onwards and onwards, racing and competing, but the opposite direction was out of the question! Onwards only, towards the new, towards a new tomorrow, because yesterday did not exist here! (64)

Bitterness experienced by professor Levajac is common to most Serbian immigrants in Canada. The land of their dreams and hopes has a reverse, it is really a "pleasure dome with caves of ice", and this realisation is difficult to digest. "Canada and Serbian lands are worlds apart, standing opposite each other, two worlds, separate and different worlds" (6). Serbs prefer living in the past, Canadians look towards the future, Serbs are proud of their tradition, Canadians of their achievements, Serbs swear and curse, Canadians apologise and smile.

The worst disappointment is indeed with the people of Canada. They are always so civilised that a Serbian is prone to feel uncomfortable in their presence. As Levajac's

friend Milos complained: "Whoever he happened to meet, be it in a superstore or at work, at the company, would be all smiles, in a good mood, happy" (71). To him, as to most of us coming from this part of the world, it looked almost indecent. Canadians somehow seem to be above everyday problems that worry Serbians and other immigrants, their good humour and perfect manners make other earthlings feel inferior while Canadians by contrast appear superhuman and, in the last analysis, non-human. From the initial admiration and envy there is only a split-hair line to hostility and contempt: "People here led orderly but empty lives." (75) "They were too reserved and very selfish" (72). "Everybody paid for himself or herself" (51). "Only success counted here" (50). "One lives solely in accordance with commercial law" (55). "Everybody wanted to get younger, as if old age was not part of life" (48). "No-one here lived for anyone other than himself or herself" (27). What the author heard from Canadian Yugoslavs soon developed into his own attitude towards his hosts. "Canada was beautiful and clean but also foreign and cold" (94). And the last stage of frustration borders with hysteria as illustrated by the reaction of one Serbian woman:

She hated Canadian law, which protected animals rather more than man, the climate in Canada, to which she could never grow accustomed, Canadian air, which was very humid, Canadian flowers, she would tear them all because none had anything in the way of a smell, Canadian yards because of the artificial grass in them, Canadian pavements with dog shit, Canadian houses because they tended to creak under one's feet, the Canadian sea because she could never feel the smell of the sea, the Canadian sun, which she saw twice a year, even the stars, because they were visible from here, from Canada. (22)

It is not difficult to see how inferiority complex evolves into a superiority complex so that Serbs very often conclude, as a sort of psychological compensation for the feeling of inadequacy, that: "One pleasure remained at my disposal: that of being a Serb" (92).

Clearly one is here dealing with prejudices, racial, cultural, you name it, which inevitably multiply if there is insufficient knowledge or experience concerning the issue in question. Serbs habitually jump to conclusions and tend to either over- or under-estimate the other party usually at their own expense. However, to believe that Canadians are free of this shortcoming is another prejudice, which Levajac also shatters. On one hand he quotes Canadians who hold that Serbs are "...disorganised as a people, undisciplined, irresponsible and disunited, not given to hard work, disorderly, obstinate and stubborn" (90). On the other hand he cites a Canadian who says that "...all the Serbs he knew personally and all the Serbs he had ever met and worked with were OK... well-educated and brought up, of good character and humane, good in every respect" (91).

The only way to break through all these prejudices on both sides is first to accept the fact that "the truth was either below or behind, above or inside, anywhere but on the surface" (72) and then to discover what is hidden under the unsatisfactory surface. Levajac is right when he says: "...what one tends to perceive first in a foreign land is that which runs contrary to one's views, habits and morals" (5) so to avoid false impressions it is necessary to "grasp their essence" (5). This task is far from easy for either party because it demands of them to acknowledge distinctions of culture and region, and of alterantive cosmologies and epistemologies. A Serb in Canada feels as if between worlds and at a loss while his Canadian neighbour seems to have all the advantages on his side. He does

not realise that Canadians are also between worlds in a way and that a clearly defined self-image which they project is only an outward manifestation which does not quite correspond to the essence.

Therefore, the construction of a stable self becomes a common issue for both immigrants and Canada-born residents. They share the same starting-point, as Margaret Atwood says in her afterword to *The Journals of Susana Moody*: "We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here: the country is too big for anyone to inhabit completely, and in the parts unknown we move in fear, exiles and invaders. (62)" This complex feeling is not that difficult to explain and the way Robert Fulford does it seems quite adequate:

The feeling of being always on unsound political and constitutional foundations is the direct result of our beginnings. We have no "foundation myth," as the anthropologists say. Canadians did not emerge slowly from the mists of time, far back in unwritten history; nor did we, like the Americans, found our state on Enlightenment principles inscribed in a sacred constitution; nor can we, like the Israelis, look for national legitimation through either ethnic history or a covenant with God. We lack ethnic, religious, and ideological identity. (6)

A nation developing on such grounds, for a couple of centuries only, with a huge influx of immigrants who originate from and carry in themselves various other cultures, certainly faces difficulties in defining its own original culture and nationhood. What makes it more difficult is that Canada takes pride in not being a 'melting pot' but a 'cultural mosaic'. Arthur Lower points out the disadvantages of the melting-pot concept: "The tragedy of the immigrant - and his hope - repeated for each and every human immigrant soul but with individual variations, lies exactly in these words 'melting pot', for to use the Biblical phrase, 'he must be born again' - he must put off his old way of life, old habits, old associations, old speech, and enter a new and puzzling world which seems to offer him - what?" (374) Canadian government does not put too much pressure on the immigrants to conform publicly, at least that was the case half a century ago, because apart from material betterment it did not have much to offer in the way of Canadian national symbolism. For this reason 'cultural mosaic' was much more acceptable as a notion of Canadianness, developing in our days into multiculturalism which "replaces nineteenth century conceptions of national identities, and mythologies" (Monkman, 44).

The ideological umbrella that shelters immigrants and true-born Canadians alike is the one Romans carried in their conquests made of: peace, order, safety. Politicians still use it today because it is made of solid and eye-catching material, but their task is not completed: "We have made Canada; now we have to make Canadians." Palmer explains that the process of making Canadians through the concept of cultural pluralism "postulated the preservation of some aspects of immigrant culture and communal life within the context of Canadian citizenship and political and economic integration into Canadian society" (163). This sounds fair enough but where is then peculiar Canadian identity? McLuhan long ago gave his answer to the identity question by saying that it is a nation of "multiple borderlines, psychic, social, geographic... it is these multiple borderlines that constitute Canada's low profile identity" (244). A more recent opinion on the same issue passed by Robin Mathews makes one aware of the inherent dialectic which maybe should be preserved rather than broken: "Canadian identity lives in a process of tension and ar-

gument, a conflict of opposites which often stalemate, often are forced to submit to compromise, but which - so far in our history - have not ended in final resolution" (1). All the hyphenated words like Yugoslav-Canadian denoting national identity also indicate " a highly unstable identity, an identity that is as likely to fall apart as hold together" (15), Bentley remarks. Canadian cultural patchwork therefore contributes to the creation of the Canadian identity in a very complex and somewhat obscure way so that it is wiser to keep to the safer ground and conclude with Fulford: "Like Canadian culture itself, Canadian nationhood remains elusive and shaky" (24).

This sort of elusive sociological milieu inevitably bears a lot of import on the individual psychology shaping an identity which is in perpetual search of itself. The titles of the books perused for the purpose of writing this essay are indicative enough: *Canadians in the Making*, *Canadian Identity*, *A Passion for Identity*, *The Next Canada: In Search of Our Future Nation*. The whole nation is involved in a quest and likewise all its subjects wage their private wars for clear-cut definitions of identity. In this respect there are no essential differences between the immigrants' identity problems and native-Canadian doubts.

The sub-title of one more book, by Richard Gwyn, is more than telling: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian*. It should remind all immigrants, Serbs included, that appearances are deceptive and that coming to Canada may not be the final solution to their problems. They will be inescapably challenged to question the motives for moving to Canada and to reconsider the preconceived ideas of this country only to be faced, in the end, with an unsettling question: "What have I chosen?", like David Albahari, a well-known Serbian author, now Canadian resident. His story *Under the Silver Moonlight* opens with the sentence: "My name is Adam and I don't know why I'm here." He is obviously representative of most immigrants, a new Adam in the Canadian paradise, but utterly perplexed and lost. He narrates all the stages of his progress to Canada and ends his story inconclusively, listening to the voice from the outside whiteness calling out words in all languages but his. The final scene depicting a solitary man sitting on a chair in a desolate room and waiting, represents a typical illustration of the theme of loneliness pervading Canadian literature. The Serbian protagonist is unaware in his deep personal pain and suffering that he is only one among many and that his experience of bafflement and frustration is shared, at least occasionally, by most Canadians. It is for this reason that Canadian literature is preoccupied with loneliness despite all the smiles and outward cheerfulness of its citizens. Tihomir Levajac penetrates through this surface of civilised manners and realises that in Canada you would be "living with people you could not approach because they kept apologising and using courtesy as a defence mechanism" (72). The unbearable lightness of being Canadian pulls them heavily down into solitude and self-examination very much in the fashion of any unhappy immigrant. All the undisputable advantages of living in Canada fade before existential loneliness which is not produced only by contrast to vast landscapes. Albahari pins it down describing his flight away from Yugoslav chaos towards the chaos in himself, "the other chasm, hidden within me, equally broiling and empty, equally prone to doubt and uncertainty" (288). It seems that only in Canadian luxury does one discover the full depth of his or her inner emptiness, the need to define it and the urge to fill it in. The way to deal with this problem will to a great extent depend on the community because national and personal identities are linked in many ways. Robin Mathews sees two options:

Will Canadians attach the ultimate worth of people to the anchor of profit and the ability of the individual to make profit? Or will Canadians attach the ultimate worth of people to something else: community values, social well-being at all levels, an idea of service at home and in the world, a concept of universal justice? (3)

In order to give a reliable answer to this question without making any wild guesses, Myrna Kostash conducted an extensive survey and talked to young people in all walks of life about their vision of Canada in the future. The insight she gained was surprising because the message of the young contradicted the expectations of the old generation:

We take care of each other. Money isn't our bottom line. We are a compassionate society. You can take away the Crown corporations and lift all the regulations at the border and lie down like doormats in front of the CEOs, but we have more faith than you in why it is good to live a Canadian life. (327)

It is certainly encouraging and relieving to find evidence for a more optimistic vision of the next Canada especially so if it is held by its young citizens. The warmth felt in their response gives hope that they will manage to make a transition from individualism to communitarianism and diminish the reasons for feeling lonely. Mathews believes that "the non profit-making culture of Canadian people meeting, talking, running organisations, socializing, observing the world together, planning personal, family and community futures, operating the workplace, participating in unions, and selecting representative figures other than those presented by bourgeois interests provides a potent force for the continuation of character and identity" (121). What seems even more important to me than the distinct cultural character is the possibility of developing psychologically healthy individuals within a culture which cherishes such values. Immigrants from whatever part of the world would not then feel ambivalent in their attitude to Canada but would soon feel at home in this land of dreams.

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SANJAO SAM KANADU - AMBIVALENTNOST U ODNOSU SRBA PREMA KANADI

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Tihomir Levajac iz Banja Luke napisao je esejistički putopis "Sanjao sam Kanadu" u kome opisuje svoje lično iskustvo boravka u Kanadi. Njegovi prikazi predstavljaju polazište za analizu kulturološkog sudara između srpske i kanadske kulture, odnosno osećanja inferiornosti koje je svojstveno mnogim Srbima kao i građanima drugih nedovoljno razvijenih zemalja u odnosu na Kanadjane koji se obično doživljavaju kao superiorna i privilegovana nacija. Ličnu notu ovom pokušaju da se uporede i suprotstave odlike ovih dveju zemalja daje i analiza jedne od kratkih priča Davida Albaharija, "Pod srebrnom svetlošću mesečine", u kojoj ovaj autor srpskog porekla, a sada stanovnik Kanade, opisuje svoj doživljaj nove domovine.