

Dositej Obradovi?

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Keywords

Cosmopolitanism

Dissent

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Abstract

Dositej Obradovi? (1739/41-1811), Serbia's foremost enlightener, was able to carry out reforms thanks to his circle of friends and the ties he established among Serbs were a direct consequence of his stay in London. In the first half of 1785, Obradovi? had the opportunity to be a guest in the house of the classicist John Livie, who introduced him to the community of the Scots in London and the dissenting Unitarians in Norwich. Attending these circles was a great stimulus for Obradovi?, who thus understood how British sociability and intellectual circles led to the spread of new ideas. Once he was back among the Serbs, he put this newly acquired knowledge into practice by forming circles of friends and collaborators who could continue his work on publishing and on educating the younger generation of Serbs.

Serbia's foremost enlightener, Dositej Obradović (1739/41-1811) spent his entire life socializing, making contacts and travelling throughout Europe. It was thanks to his efforts that Serbs were introduced to the importance of sociability and sociable practices in the diffusion of enlightenment ideas. Since there were no meeting places like British pubs or clubs, Obradović had to organize occasions for the most important Serbian cultural figures to meet and discuss the education of young Serbs and the publication of the most useful books for this purpose. They met all over Europe (in Trieste, Padova, Vienna, Venice, etc.) where there were publishing houses and Obradović was instrumental in setting long-term goals for them.

Travelling, socializing, learning and teaching, enlightening others – these are the key words that describe his entire life's work and activity and these activities were made possible thanks to various friendships. In 1760, Obradović visited cities in numerous countries and sometimes lived in them for extended periods: Timișoara, Zagreb, Kotor, Corfu, Chios, Smirne, Trieste, Vienna, Bratislava, Halle, Leipzig, Paris, London, Shklow, Venice, Belgrade are among the places with which he was familiar. Obradović travelled with the specific objective of familiarizing himself with ideas that had not yet been introduced into Serbia. He usually travelled alone, rarely with company, but once he got to these places, he socialized extensively and skillfully built up numerous friendships.

Actually, Obradović initially wanted to be a monk to devote himself to asceticism, dreaming about the cave of solitude. In Hopovo monastery however, his master understood the desire of the young man to study: 'Judging from what I have learned of you, if you do not devote yourself to study you will be sorry that you have become a monk; you are not adapted to any other occupation than books.'¹ Once he realized he was not cut out to be a monk, Obradović began travelling and socializing. His autobiography, *Život i priključenija* (1783) mirrors this life: full of adventures, on the four coordinates of the old continent, constantly changing social circles and friendships, but always in good faith. Obradović was driven by his own desire for knowledge as for personal enrichment but also by the desire to bring that knowledge to the Serbs.

While travelling and making acquaintances, Obradović changed professions frequently: after leaving the monastery he did some physical work, then taught as a private tutor but also in the academy (of Shklow). He did some proofreading at Breitkopf's printing house in Leipzig and finally came to be Minister of education in Serbia. In Leipzig, in 1783, he published his first work entitled *Pismo Haralampiju* (The Letter to Haralampije, a parish priest of the orthodox church of Trieste). In 1784, he published *Sovjeti zdravago razuma* (Counsels of Sound Reason), the second part of his autobiography together with fables of Aesop and various other fabulists (1788), writings such as *Sobranija raznih nравоу?itelnih veštje v polzu i uveselenije* (Collection of Various Moral Articles for Profit and Amusement, 1793) and the partial translation of the *Ethics* (1804) of the Italo-Swiss school reformer Francesco Soave. Posthumously his closest collaborator Pavle Solarić (1779-1821) edited the second part of *Sobranija*, entitled *Mezimac* (The Last-born), published in Buda in 1818.

It should be emphasized that Obradovi? reached the peak of his spiritual development when he encountered British culture.² Thanks to the second part of his autobiography, we have evidence of his stay in London and his numerous British acquaintances. When he arrived in London, he could not speak a single word of English. Like most of his Serbian collaborators and friends, he knew Latin and Greek, German, French and Italian, but he had not yet learned English. Yet inspired as he was by his view of England as the promised land of contemporary culture, he was soon proficient in English. He was then able to come into contact with the main cultural trends of the time thanks to a series of lucky circumstances involving his friendships. Upon arrival in Dover, Obradovi? could not understand a single word:

So here I was, thank God, in England, a country famous for ages, which I had long desired to see, in the city of Dover! When I was travelling through France and strolling about the country, I fancied that I was to some degree familiar with both land and people, since I knew their language and could talk with everybody – but here never a word! Old and young, women and children, everybody spoke English, and you could not make out what those persons were thinking of or what they wanted. (*Adventures of Dimitrije Obradovi?* 287)

He then confided to his readers: ‘Now let everybody who is able just imagine and represent to himself how I must needs have felt when I found myself amid such divine and beautiful creatures but I was unable to exchange a word with them!’ (*Adventures of Dimitrije Obradovi?* 287-288) Thus, Obradovi? spent his first three months in London practically alone and having little or no contact with other people. Due to his poor financial situation, Obradovi? was about to leave England when a series of fortuitous events enabled him to extend his stay: at the beginning of 1785, his Greek friend, Sauveur Lusignan, gave him an introduction to the porcelain merchant Mr. John Livie who lived in Wapping. Only recently has it been discovered³ that this merchant Livie was not, as had previously been thought, a fictional character invented by Obradovi? but was actually a well-known classicist of the time, editor of the most beautiful edition of *Horace* (1762) published by Baskerville. In the house of Livie and his wife, Obradovi? had the opportunity to meet many people and especially to understand the very essence of British sociability. Through a series of fortuitous circumstances, he was introduced into the most vibrant British cultural circles of the time. Obradovi? later remembered that:

[...] every Tuesday my friend Mr. Livie entertained at dinner some of his learned friends, and every Friday they gathered in a jovial company at dinner at the house of Dr. William Fordyce, a physician and Knight of the Golden Fleece, to whom the king had awarded that distinction owing to his eminence in medical science. (*Adventures of Dimitrije Obradovi?* 296-297)

Prime Minister Lord Bute (1713-1792) had given much support to the Scottish community in London, that very community to which Mr. Livie and Mr. Fordyce belonged. Mr. Fordyce (1724-1792), physician and scientist, was a particularly well-known member of a Scottish family: his brothers were philosopher David Fordyce (1711-1751), a contributor to the Scottish Enlightenment, James Fordyce (1720-1796), Scottish Presbyterian minister and poet, and Alexander Fordyce (died 1789), Scottish banker (Lazarevi? Di Giacomo 105-116).

But the sociability that Obradovi? experienced among Livie's friends was not limited to that of the intellectuals and businessmen of the Scottish community in London, but also and perhaps more strikingly, had to do with Mr. Livie's wife and the dissenting Unitarians of Norwich.⁴ This lady had impressed him with the wide range of her knowledge: she was always informed about the latest books to be published and it was often Mrs. Livie who introduced Obradovi? to new books and new literary trends. She helped him with the translation of many texts from Greek into English which allowed him in a short time to improve his English and to choose his favourites among the fables of Aesop as well as other fabulists which he later published (1788; 1793). In Livie's home he met Mrs. Livie's sister who was no less than Susannah Taylor [née Cook] (1755-1823),⁵ who married John Taylor, businessman and hymn writer from Norwich, and whose home was the locus of many a radical social gathering. Livie and Taylor were part of [William Godwin](#)'s circle and are mentioned in Godwin's Diary, where John Taylor is commonly referred to as 'Taylor of Norich'. The Livies (particularly Mrs. Livie) were frequently invited to tea and dinner parties at Godwin's home. Among the other guests who frequented the Livies were Robert Southey, Sir James Mackintosh, Sir James Edward Smith, for example, as well as some supporters of the French Revolution: Susannah Taylor was said to have danced for joy when she heard about the Bastille and she was called 'Madame Roland of Norwich' by her close friends (Ross 21). To Obradovi?, who came from the Balkans and was in search of knowledge, all that socializing must have seemed strange and at first a waste of time. He soon realized, however, that this socializing together with the clubbing was the antechamber of English culture, literature, art and science. Commenting on the visits of Susannah Cook (mistakenly referring to Harwich instead of Norwich), Obradovi? writes:

A few weeks later Mrs. Livie's sister, Mrs. Taylor, and her brother Mr. Coke [*sic!*], came from Harwich [*sic!*] for a visit. After that there were banquets and parties every day, either in their house or with some of their friends, and excursions to the most beautiful spots of the city and its environs, in which I was nearly forced to join. This made me waste considerable time, but on the other hand it was pleasant and useful for me, since it gave me a chance to become better acquainted with the most amiable qualities and the unaffected, simple, and sincere manners of the English (*Adventures of Dimitrije Obradovi?* 296).

Indeed, Obradovi?'s socializing with the Livies' circle of Scottish friends and the Taylors' circle of Unitarian dissenters enabled him to learn about contemporary British thought and literary trends so that at the end of his six-month stay in London he was able to return to his homeland and introduce these British practices of forming clubs and social circles for the

diffusion of new ideas. He thereby made an indispensable contribution to the Enlightenment in the Balkans. Later on Obradović wrote poignantly about the painful parting from his British friends:

I notified my friends and benefactors that I must depart. God only knows how sad I was to leave those sweet people! I said to myself that henceforth I should take great care not to become so close a friend of any living person, since I must part from them and regret that I could not be with them to the grave (*Adventures of Dimitrije Obradović* 298).

Once back among his own people, Obradović spread the lessons learned in London from his British friends about sociabilities and the combination of practical and cultural life, and in turn he tried to form his own circle of friends and collaborators (Solari, Trlaji, Raki, Vuji) whose sociability turned out to be crucial for the various initiatives and reforms during the Serbian Enlightenment at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thanks to Obradović, the practice of organising social gatherings to share new ideas was adopted by the Serbs. In the course of these social gatherings, Obradović and his friends and collaborators engaged in spirited exchanges of ideas that led to projects aimed at the benefit of the Serbian people.

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2. Andrija B. K. Stojković, Životni put Dositeja Obradovića: Od šegrta i kaluđerica do filozofa prosvetitelja i Karađorđevog ministra prosvete (Beograd: Beletra, 1988), p. 64-70.
3. Persida Lazarević Di Giacomo, U Dositejevom krugu: Dositej Obradović i škotsko prosvetiteljstvo (Beograd: Zadužbina Dositej Obradović, 2015), p. 77-91.
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5. Janet Ross, Three generations of English Women: Memoirs and Correspondence of Susannah Taylor, Sarah Austen, and Lady Duff Gordon (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1893), p. 1-60.

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