The Balkans in Travel Writing

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INTRODUCTION

MARIJA KRIVOKAPIĆ

This book revisits images of the Balkans in the travel writing of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century from the perspective of recent developments in travel writing critical theory and in the humanities in general. The twentieth was a turbulent century for the region. It witnessed two world wars and several civil and regional wars, the creation and destruction of countries, emergence of new political parties, rebellions and consensuses, but also peaceful decades productive in all the spheres of human effort. All these moments have been recorded in travel writing. We believe that pointing out how these changes of the regional historical, political, social, and cultural contours are reflected in travel writing from different periods, i.e. in the eyes of the foreign travellers, would be beneficial for the development of travel writing studies, as well as for the broader field of humanities and social sciences.

Although a lot of travel writing about the Balkans has been produced after the "opening" of Eastern Europe, the collapse of the communist system, the breakdown of Yugoslavia, and the beginning of the civil wars in the 1990s, it has not been paid enough academic attention. This also applies to the well-known authors, such as Paul Theroux, Robert D. Kaplan, and Bill Bryson who travelled through the region in the 1990s and wrote about the dramatic happenings trying to understand their logic. Another reason for compiling this study, which makes it an even more valuable contribution to the development of travel writing studies, is a close analysis of the travelogues created by less known authors, such as Elizabeth Gowing, Robert Nagle, or Emma Fick, who vividly recorded certain moments in the lives of our peoples and the general social dynamics.

Apart from this, the second decade of the twenty-first century, which is facing a collapse of theory in general and, therefore, no longer provides a comfortable trust in the critical tools of the past, is high time to re-address this sensitive subject. It is especially so because the prevailing twentieth-century criticism on similar matters was primarily made from the perspective of postcolonial theory. When it comes to the region, the

studies have been heavily drawn from Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992), Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), and Vesna Goldsworthy's *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of Imagination* (1998). As the postcolonial does not really apply to the subject of the Balkans, which is also one of Todorova's main arguments, we may still be using some of its approaches and methods, such as its focus on the culture-bound perspective of the traveller, for example. However, globalisation and cultural hybridity have strongly affected the authenticities on which the travel writing in the previous periods relied, so that a different kind of traveller, one more cosmopolitan, can be met on the roads worldwide. The same integrations have also caused the appearance of travel that leaves the established routes and seeks the less known, unbeaten tracks of the world's geography. The Balkans still provides ample material for this kind of traveller. Although criticism likes to ironize tendencies to "discover" the hidden and the authentic, we find these recordings equally worthy of our efforts to make the mosaic of how the Balkans has appeared to foreigners.

We have approached the subject through three major parts in the book. The first part, analyzing the complex images of the Balkans developed, mostly, in the course of the 20th century (but also with the examples from previous eras), provides the basis for the development of the commentaries that follow in the second part and also gives a chronological frame to the book. The second part deals with the travel writing about the Balkans produced since the 1990s. This is an important corpus that offers as divergent and contradictory views on the region as was our recent past. It ranges from moral and political criticism to a delight in the rich heritage and the still "undiscovered" Balkan paths. Its narrative style also comprises striking variations from the objective and well-researched approaches to quick impressionist sketches. The largest part of this material is authored by travellers from the West. Therefore, it provides a vital basis for the research into the necessity and the variety of possibilities, or obstacles, that are on the way of the region's accession, when its unique heritage will have to be reconciled with the European one. Moreover, because travel writing is never only an account of travel, but also a story about the travelling subject, it is, therefore, as much about the culture that produced it as it is about the visited region. Finally, in the third part, we provide a reverse look and observe Balkan travellers' writing abroad and about foreign regions. We conclude by analyzing insights and impressions of a Balkan author upon his return home from the West.

The first part of the book opens with a paper by Serbian scholar Dragana Mašović, from the University of Niš, who focuses on the geographical, political, social and cultural setting of Niš and south Serbia.

In her paper "Earliest Media Reports: Travel Writings and Other Accounts of Southeast Serbia from the 4th Century onwards," Mašović assumes that contemporary Southeast Serbia is still a challenge for travellers and travel writers in view of its great variety of landscapes and pluri-cultural and multi-lingual population. The region of Niš, in particular, used to play a prominent role in the history of the Balkans because of its geostrategic location as crossroads on the former "imperial highway" leading from Venice via Dubrovnik and the region of Sandžak to Sofia and Constantinople. This is how it happened that the main reporters travelling this way were the earliest "media" men: envoys, agents, and spies—least of all tourists or poets. Yet, it is the latter ones who are most often mentioned because their reports were of a much wider scope and more favourable to the country they described. The reason for this lies in their focus on ethnography, i.e. on the people and their customs and mores rather than facts, as well as in threats and dangers that the imperial agents might have faced or had to report on for the sake of trade enterprises, political interests or military campaigns. This paper deals with the travel discourse of authors both anonymous and well known. Some of these "media reports" are very short indeed, yet today they are understood as reflective of these unknown and not sufficiently explored humans of the past: peasants living in Southeast Serbia in the days when no one stopped long enough to meet and get to know them, or assign to them any important role in the making of their own history on the troublesome Balkans or, for that matter, in the travel writing itself.

Olivera Popović, from the University of Montenegro, approaches the image of Montenegro in the travel writing produced by Italians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This is a period when Montenegrin streets saw many an Italian depicting Montenegrin cultural, political, and economic developments. Observing the alterity as a fundamental category of social experience, but also as a fundamental category for social analysis (cf. Todorova), Popović's paper tries to pin down the referent concepts which the Italian travellers used to describe and value Montenegrin cultural space.

Tatjana Panova-Ignjatović, from the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" University in Skopje, Macedonia, devotes her research to "Macedonian Women Through the Prism of British Travel Writers." This paper offers a comparative cultural analysis on the travel writings by British authors, such as G. F. Abbott (*The Tale of a Tour in Macedonia*, London 1903), Henry Noel Brailsford (*Macedonia: Its Races and Their Future*, London 1906), Mary Edith Durham (*The Burden of the Balkans*, 1905) and Lucy Mary Jane Garnett (*Balkan Home Life*, London 1917), focusing on the

position of Macedonian women and providing different interpretations according to their personal view towards certain norms of conduct. Actually, they were direct witnesses to the events that took place in Macedonia in the period before and after the Ilinden uprising and in the course of the First World War, which was an exceptionally critical period for the future of the Macedonian people. Their observations regarding Macedonian women reflect the specifics and the values of Macedonian cultural identity and tradition. Moreover, they were deeply moved by the subordinate position and the primitive lifestyle they witnessed and the stance that prevails in their works was, in fact, an outcry against the subjugation of the Macedonian people.

Draško Došljak, from the University of Montenegro, provides an analysis of the onomasticon in the mountain travelogues collected in the book *Montenegrin Mountains—Travelogues and Records* (*Crnogorske planine—putopisi i zapisi*), covering the period from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century. The travel writers are both Slavs and foreigners, such as Zuvdija Hodžić, Miroslav Đurović, Nikola Vučinić, Miloš Bojanović, Jovan Laušević, Branislav Cerović, Antonio Baldacci, Pavel Apolonovic Rovinski, Kurt Hassert, Željko Poljak, Ante Sharin, Fran Tuchan, and others. They travelled the mountains Lovćen, Orjen, Rumija, Durmitor, Bjelasica, Komovi, Prokletije, and Hajla, and offered rich onomastic material. They recorded a variety of toponyms and anthroponyms, whose meanings are sometimes explained through the legends the travellers heard on their trips. This work discusses these examples after their motivational, semantic, and morphological characteristics.

Goran Barović, from the University of Montenegro, approaches the image of Montenegro under foreign lenses from the perspective of a cartographer, observing map-making as another way of writing about the place. He sees cartography as a measure of cultural and spiritual life and discusses those maps of Montenegro made by foreigners that obviously project the power politics. The intention of the old mapmakers is mostly reflected through the neutralization of geographical orientation markers and invalidation of the status of the Montenegrin state. Although there are numerous cartographic resources tracing Montenegrin existence long before its international recognition as a nation-state, Montenegro never had its own school of cartography, i.e. until it became a part of Yugoslavia at the end of the First World War. It was only foreign geographers who mapped the country in its relation with European powers, often presenting it as a border zone of those powers. Some of the maps discussed in the paper were based on the sketches or memories of travellers or accidental visitors.

The second part of the book opens with the paper by Antonia Young, from the University of Bradford, Yorkshire, UK, and Colgate University, Hamilton, NY, USA, titled "Distortion and Reality in Travel Writing on the Balkans." In her paper Young claims that it might be reasonable to expect a travel writer to focus on their particular fields of interest, and also to gain and keep the readers' attention through a certain amount of embellishment and exaggeration. However, she asks, with those reservations in mind, how much can a reader still believe? In any writing about the Balkans, Young argues, the first step is to be clear what region the author means by the term, as there is never consensus concerning the exact boundaries of the geographical area known as The Balkans. Nor have boundaries or content of the countries within that region remained constant. These are societies deeply affected by the extremes of the geography and overlaid by ever changing, strong ethnic, political, and religious influences. Young is following the common notion that there have been three phases in the evolution in Balkan travel writing. The first, reflecting colonial attitudes, with a feeling of superiority of the writer's social background, led to a reactive acceleration of nationalism. In the second phase, travel writers became optimistic in their observations of these societies with a tendency to exoticize cultural aspects of Balkan social life disproportionately. In the third phase, with which we are especially concerned here, starting with the period of the Cold War, by the l960s, this romanticization faded with the increase in volume of both travellers and travel writing. These writers reflected and demonstrated a return to feelings of superiority, and contempt for the perceived failure of Communism, and the return of conflictive relationships across the region.

Maja Muhić, from South East European University, Macedonia, contributes with a paper "Reconstructing Empire or Striking Against it? Contemporary Travelogues of the Balkans" as another attempt to look at contemporary travel writing through a double perspective. She also perceives different tendencies in the travelogues she deals with. While in the past writing, the most obvious was the travelogues' dominant colonial legacy, the contemporary travelogues are trying to dismantle that legacy and bring in a fresh air of cosmopolitanism, through a perspective that does not resemble the notorious "epistemological dictator" approach. Several contemporary travelogues are scrutinized in this paper, including the works of Chris Deliso. Unlike certain very ideological travel writings of the Balkans produced in the past two decades (R. D. Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, for instance), Deliso's travelogues of Macedonia bring in a new tension between the colonial legacy of travel writing and the attempt to engage with local stories and histories. To a certain extent then, his work

aims to speak on behalf of locals about their contemporary perceptions of identity, history and common culture in a region (and a country) historically known for fractiousness, conflict, and identity denial from neighbouring countries. This however, does not mean that his travel writing does not anchor itself in certain politically laden agendas. Some of the dilemmas and questions that D. Lisle (2006) comes across regarding contemporary travel writing, such as the competence of travel writing to tell us anything relevant about contemporary global life or how it comes to terms with its colonial past, are shared and looked at in this paper. Similarly to Lisle's attempt to argue that contemporary travel writing is torn between its colonial and cosmopolitan visions while trying to grasp or reflect on global politics, this paper tries to see if samples of contemporary travel writing about the Balkans might deliver this genre from its sinful legacy. It also aims to see if some pieces of contemporary travel writing about the Balkans might serve as a powerful tool to counter the notion of the Balkans as "marginal" and in some sense irrelevant, rendering it instead, as Fleming (2001) points out, as "liminal" and thus, in a sense, central.

"Personality Coloured Renderings," by Bojka Đukanović from the University of Montenegro, discusses the controversial approaches to the region from examples of Joyce Cary's sojourn in Montenegro and Christopher Hope's stay in Belgrade. Đukanović begins from the fact that Cary originally took part in the 1912 Balkan Wars for two reasons: one is that he was yearning to be with his beloved and the other was his anxiety that the rest of the twentieth century may not provide more opportunities for such a noble engagement as fighting for a cause. This point is especially interesting when observed against the larger background of Montenegro being for centuries almost absolutely isolated from the rest of Europe. Christopher Hope, on the other hand, came to Yugoslavia to witness the atmosphere on the eve of its complete disappearance as a political entity at the end of the twentieth century. Both of the novelists stayed in the Balkans during the period of struggles and hard times, but the different periods, different motives of their stay, and different personal dispositions resulted in the narratives of contrasting tones.

In their paper "The Ex-Yu as the Other in Some Anglo-American Travel Writings," Saša Simović and Ljiljana Mijanović, from the University of Montenegro, assume a multidisciplinary perspective and use a number of examples to examine how the region was "constructed" in the Western imagination as uncivilized so much that its name turned into an adjective and a verb. Since the 1990s, the prevailing image is that of the region irrevocably standing between the West and the East. While

Todorova insisted on a distinction between the Balkanist and the Orientalist discourse, and Goldsworthy explored the Balkans as the potential alliance between postcolonial, post-communist, and Eastern European influences, the Balkans still cherished an otherness—such as in the form of socialist architecture or deficient tourist services—that prompted prejudices. The final part of the paper focuses on the East-West dichotomy that played itself out in the opposition between Greek Orthodoxy and Catholicism and on the examples of a traveller's reaction to the varying architecture.

Amela Lukač Zoranić and Jahja Fehratović, from the International University of Novi Pazar, Serbia, are concerned with the depictions of the Sandžak region. Relying on Goldsworthy's hypothesis in *Inventing Ruritania*, they situate the Sandžak in "the heart of darkness," the "dark vilajet," of the Balkans. Namely, since the end of the rule of the Ottoman Empire, different military and rhetorical strategies were activated seeking to reinforce the power of the West and to subjugate the region. These strategies were intended to negate the region's cultural landscape and its infusion with meanings and practices of the West. Finally, this paper emphasizes how the Sandžak region, as a cultural product of European/ Ottoman heritage, has always been in the clench between the East and the West, as an exceedingly hidden Europe.

Armela Panajoti, from the University of Vlore, Albania, contributes with "Mid-1990s Albania in the Memoirs of a Former Peace Corps Volunteer." Panajoti first describes the 1990s as difficult years for Albania, a country that had just left behind a harsh political system, the communist regime, often considered the toughest of all in the former Communist countries. While the country and its people were trying to smoothly get through what is known as the transition period, many foreigners, probably driven by a sense of curiosity, came to work and live in Albania. Peace Corps volunteers were among these. They usually came to live and work in Albania for a couple of years and then would leave to go back home. They also usually taught English in Albanian schools. This paper was inspired by the memoirs of one of these, Robert Nagle, a former Peace Corps volunteer and writer, who worked at the University of Vlora between 1995 and 1997. He recorded his experiences in short stories written during and after his stay in Albania. These stories, at times funny and at others sad, touch upon several aspects of Albanian life. Their focus is everyday life, that is, aspects of neighbouring life, the trash system, the daily dilemmas of many intellectuals, university life; and the pyramid schemes whose fall led the country to civil uprising and the evacuation of all Americans soon after in 1997. The paper is an attempt not simply to

analyse these stories in the light of their perspective on and representation of Albania, but also to contrast all these from a 2014 perspective.

Tom Phillips, from Reading University, UK, is focused on interpreting *besa* as an example of complex cultural phenomena. Namely, the Albanian word *besa* is difficult to translate into English in a way which preserves the unique combination of values and behaviours it signifies. The absence of a single equivalent word for it, however, does not mean that this complex cultural phenomenon cannot be described in terms which are comprehensible to a non-Albanian speaker. Therefore, Phillips looks at how English-language travel writers have approached the subject and written about their encounters with *besa* and Albanian customary or *kanun* law. In doing so, he explores why it might be that, in the last twenty years, the subject appears to have exerted a fascination for travel writers such as Dervla Murphy, Edmund Keeley and, in particular, Robert Carver. Phillip's overall contention is that, when encountering *besa* and *kanun* law, the different strategies these writers adopt in their attempts to interpret and represent these phenomena often result in partial, sometimes contradictory, sometimes imposed interpretative and evaluative descriptions—which, in themselves, can be traced to frequently repeated assumptions about Balkan culture in general. Most commonly, writers tend to treat *besa* and *kanun* law as if they are wholly separate phenomena—usually in order to differentiate between the "good" tradition of hospitality and the "bad" tradition of blood feud. In identifying such descriptions as potentially problematic, however, Phillips also acknowledges that they are, of necessity, partial or preliminary, and that they become problematic only when presented as definitive and authoritative "truths" about Albanian or Balkan culture. Connecting assertions of authoritativeness with the conceptualisation of any culture as a relatively stable construct, he concludes by suggesting that acknowledging that something has always-already been lost in translation makes possible the representation of *besa* as a fully complex phenomenon whose significance is not fixed, but open to multiple, negotiated interpretations.

Aleksandra Nikčević-Batrićević and Marija Krivokapić, from the University of Montenegro, are focused on Dervla Murphy's *Through the Embers of Chaos.* They explain how Murphy's writing belongs to the tradition that recognizes travel writing as an urgent political engagement, both when it comes to gender and to global politics. In the extremity of her endeavors to understand the political, social, and, most of all, human destiny of the Balkans, Murphy bicycles through the region for months and thus, in the first place, subverts the traditional idea that movement predominately belongs to the powerful Western male. Avoiding this

typical trope of progressive mechanistic civilization, she has an opportunity to explore the unbeaten tracks, to stop and observe the ordinary and, therefore, to provide unique aesthetic observations. However, despite her original promise, i.e. that she wants to see with her own eyes what has happened in the Balkans, Murphy cannot avoid the intentionality of her gaze which is primarily anti-NATO. But also, despite her biting criticism of militarism as the chief reason of contemporary conflicts and of "humanitarian intervention" as "an exercise in hypocrisy," (Mcdonagh 2002) nowhere in the Balkans at the turn of the century does she find hot water for baths or showers or good food to substantiate her hard trips up the winding mountain roads. Especially when she comments on the local people's surprise to see a grandmother bicycling can we notice the attitudes of the western feminist. The numerous sites of atrocities, the dire roads, the malnourishment, and the recognizable eastern negligence, all combined in the production of a controversial narrative, which, while abounding with sympathies to human suffering, is also always on the edge to veer away.

In her paper "Tony White's *Another Fool in the Balkans: In the Footsteps of Rebecca West* (2006)," Marija Krivokapić claims that few books are so courageously acquiescent to the generic limitations of travel writing as is Tony White's book, and, therefore so aware of the inescapable influence of a better known writer. Prepared to cross the border by Rebecca West's book, and also by a virtual walk from the UK to Belgrade performed by an expatriate Serbian artist in his art gallery in the East End of London, White travels by train from Zagreb to Belgrade in the party of FAK-YU artist, an alternative writers collective ("Festival alternativne književnosti—Yugoslavia," "The Festival of Alternative Literature—Yugoslavia"), to take part in a short story festival in Belgrade. A long tunnel before the Zemun part of Belgrade darkens the train, diverts his sight from the surrounding nature, allows him time to reflect, and announces his entrance to another zone. But, he is acutely conscious of his privilege to be thus formatted as a traveller through Yugoslavia and taken care of by its literary vanguards, and thus he assumes a humble pose. These artists' uncompromising denunciation of the new Balkan politics and nationalisms (which many equate with ex-Yugoslav nostalgia) obviously impacts White as he too rejects the "universal" truths and the Balkanist discourse, and, instead, points out to the regional potentials of affluence in every sense. Yet he still calls himself "a fool" not only because he hopes he could reach the yet indiscernible truth about the region, or how it reflects contemporary Europe, but maybe more because he still hopes his own writing can escape the theorizing urgency of

international academia. Finally, he produces a book that is less an account of travel than a meditation on the possibilities of travel, but mostly an essay on the nature of art.

The third part of the book opens with "'A Balkan Cleaning Up': John Sofianopoulos' Balkan Travels during 1920s and His Social Insights." Michael Sarras, from the University of Ioannina, Greece, looks at the work of John Sofianopoulos (1887-1951) who was an outstanding 20th-century Greek intellectual, lawyer, and statesman. He travelled throughout the Balkan Peninsula and, quite early after the October Revolution, to the USSR. His impressions were published, as *feuilleton*, in the Athenian liberal newspaper *Eleftheron Vima*. Later on, his articles related to his Balkan travels were collected and published in a book entitled *How I viewed the Balkan Peninsula* (1927). Sarras briefly analyzes Sofianopoulos' views and insights, formulated while travelling, on the current crucial issues, like the interwar social-economic questions; he was especially concerned about the social development of the peasantry and, generally, about, as he called it, "the Balkan cleaning up."

Sofija Kalezić-Đuričković, from the University of Donja Gorica in Montenegro, talks about literary forms as expressions of private life in the work of Radonja Vešović. In 1979 Vešović published a book of travel *A Sword Cutting Swords* (*Mač što mačeve siječe*) that depicts his 1974 visit to Vietnam. The paper reviews Vešović's sojourn in this "strange" country of tragic history, at the time when it was still suffering the wounds inflicted by the American military. In the seventies of the previous century, in line with the official political stand of the country, the author found Vietnam as the embodiment of his own ideas on socialism and liberty. More than thirty five years after the emergence of his text, Kalezić-Đuričković concludes that some aspects of his work, ideological in the first place, do not stand the test of time, especially when it comes to the author's anticipations about Yugoslavia's future and prosperity. However, keeping in mind that the book sprouts from the pen of an acclaimed man of letters, the literary and poetic aspects of this book make it an interesting testimony about a country whose fight the author perceives as replicating globally, as an attempt at reinforcing the proletarian idea that found its strongest voice in the October revolution, the Spanish civil war, and the Yugoslav liberation war.

Jovanka Denkova, from "Goce Delčev" University in Macedonia, deals with the travelogue as a literary genre in contemporary Macedonian literature. Her research begins by comparing the numerous attempts to define the genre made by Macedonian literary theoreticians, and presents an overview of its topology and classifications along with their features.

All these critically theoretical deductions are discussed through the works of Slavko Janevski, Tome Momirovski, Slave Nikolovski-Katin, and Trajan Petrovski. Denkova especially focuses on the travelogues by Tome Momirovski, about his visit to Australia, and Trajan Petrovski's impressions from the United States of America.

The book closes with a co-authored paper by the Croatian scholar, Nina Sirković, from the University of Split, and the Serbian scholar Aleksandra V. Jovanović, from the University of Belgrade, titled "Josip Novakovich's Reminiscences from the Balkans." In his travel essays, writing about other countries, Novakovich also deals with his homeland Croatia, recalling memories and emotions from the past when he used to live there. The times have changed as well as the country, but history has strongly intruded in the present. The authors observe three of Novakovich's essays and impressions about encounters with different places in Croatia and new perceptions about them. "Vukovar" and "Two Croatias" are essays dealing with the post-war period. In "Vukovar" the author expresses personal moments visiting the city after the massacre and asks himself if there are lessons to be learned from the atrocities. "Two Croatias" is an essay about other people's completely different perceptions of a country which has gone through war and is now in recovery. Travelling on a train from Zagreb to Sofia, which used to be called the "Balkan Express," Novakovich recalls events, scents and tastes from the past, concluding that a whole era has passed, the trains in the Balkans are almost dead and one cannot only blame the war. The author's associations and reflections inspired by the visit to his former homeland remind the reader of the past times which are gone forever.

Being a multi-generic form, travel writing demands to be observed from a multidisciplinary perspective. Therefore, our contributors are not only academic specialists, practitioners, and professionals in the field of travel writing, but they also come from broader fields of literature, linguistics, history, sociology, anthropology, ethnology, political sciences and international relations, and geography. This nomadic perspective on the body of texts that observe the Balkans as a subject of travel proves our thesis on the importance of the genre in the contemporary world. Opening his *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (2013), Tim Youngs argues that "[t]ravel writing […] is the most socially important of all literary genres" and concludes the book saying that its "ethical importance […] is

stronger than ever,"[1] because "[i]t throws light on how we define ourselves and how we identify others."[2] This "we" becomes the most interesting subject when it travels with an intentional mind, recollects and narrates the experience with an intention, but especially when it reveals a pronounced discomfort with the prevailing metonymy—"the Balkans." Therefore, as it has always done, travel writing may enforce mutual understanding of peoples and cultures. More importantly, as we argue in this book, its generic potentials prove to tend to overcome both the discourse of power and the discourse of apology.

[1] Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 189.
[2] *Ibid*., 1.

PART ONE:

THE BALKANS IN TRAVEL WRITING UNTIL THE 1990S

EARLIEST TRAVEL WRITINGS ABOUT SOUTHEAST SERBIA AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

DRAGANA R. MAŠOVIĆ

1. Introduction

1.1 "I left Europe. I was in the East"

The protagonist of Henry James's *Travelling Companions*, Mr. Brooke, on his Italian travel, finds himself in the Venice Church of St. Mark's, and while studying and commenting on its atmosphere of "the age of a simpler and more awful faith," he concludes that he had "left Europe; I was in the East."[1] This remark draws a neat dividing line between the West and the East, the latter comprising some of the "drawn and indexed"[2] elements of the usual representations of the East, especially the Balkans: evocations of the past, the exotic, the pre-civilized, the untamed and—why not—"a simpler and more awful faith." These and many similar views have been objects of contemporary studies, i.e. of the deconstruction of the representations of the Balkans as the Other, namely, the preconceptions often implied in the kind of writing known as travel literature. Moreover, this intricate and many-faceted form of writing in itself has been an object of study for literary (and other) analysts who have tried to define it in terms of a (literary) genre[3]—a highly demanding task since many of the respective texts tend to be composites of numerous genres, writing styles,

[1] Henry James, *Travelling Companions*, 1919: 11. Retrieved from http://www.munseys.com/disktwo-/travcom.pdf.

[2] Cf. Chris Rojek, "Indexing, Dragging and the Social Construction of Tourist Sights," in Rojek, C. and Urry, J., eds., *Touring Cultures. Transformations of Travel and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[3] For instance, Vasilisa Aleksandrovna Šačkova, „Putopis kao žanr umetničke književnosti: Pitanja Teorije," *Putopis. Časopis za putopisnu književnost*, Year 1, No. 1-2, 2012: 195-202.

traditions (including political, sociological, cultural, philosophical and other inserted commentaries).

1.2 General Framework

In this paper travel literature is approached with respect to a latitude of forms far beyond one single genre or one single structure, although such attempts are considered as useful and revealing.[4] Rather, travel literature is defined as a wide-ranging term comprising literal and metaphorical works (writings) about travel. In other words, it comprises a variety of texts, from factional to fictional, about a journey or journeys, of a single man or a group, written on the basis of his (or their) experience, understanding and intentions, and addressed to a wide array of audiences.

Though this definition is not by any means exhaustive, it still points to three elements—experience, understanding and intentions—which figure out in some forms of travel literature with the third one turning out to be the controlling one of the previous two. This can be shown with reference to the texts under study in this paper. They are excerpts from the writings of the travellers who explored the Balkan countries in the 17th, 19th and 20th centuries, at the time before the world and Balkan wars disrupted the cultural profiles of the respective regions and gave rise to different approaches and, consequently, to different travels and travel writings as well.

2. Analysis

2.1 Travel Writing Is Itself in Motion

Travel writing is by far a much wider concept than a literary structured travelogue; that is why it is used here as more suitable if we want to embrace all sorts of texts produced in the last centuries. It comprises, as said above, a variety that ranges from non-fiction (faction) or factual reports to fiction or fictional accounts,[5] that is, to more or less fabulated genres.[6] In-between are many mixed forms, either leaning towards more

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] And, likewise, between "personal memoir and ethnography, science and romance," Bendixen, A. and Hamera, J. *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 2.

[6] It does not, of course, end here. In many analyses of the contemporary forms, the "fiction" as situated on the pole of a diverse and rich facto-fictional writing is approached from avant-garde, modernist and postmodernist traditions. In these

factual reports or to more structured fictional narratives (though the borders between them are often murky and hard to define), or combining them.

The same stands for some of their component elements, each of them covering up a range of possibilities. Thus, the explored country can be, at one pole, real, rooted in more or less historical space and time, while, at the other pole, an imaginary or fantasyland. In between we can find a territory of romance, dreams, speculations—for instance, we can find Mr. Brooke brooding upon an "imaginary" yet factual East with its "more awful" religion as well as its presumed rural idyll. Or, as for the traveller/narrator, he can choose his narrating position on a large scale, from a seemingly detached or distant observer (analyst, scientist, explorer, administrator, reporter) to a more or less involved witness or participant in the events described. Again, the traveller can take an in-between posture, for example, in a mélange of autobiography and travelogue (a popular 18th century genre), when his journey becomes a more personal and intimate affair, with elements "indexed and drawn" from the *Bildungsroman* discourse. Or, the travel could shift from one pole, or the description of a journey in given space-time coordinates, to the other pole, a more inner (spiritual) experience, as in pilgrimage—which leads to a variety of journeys, with the dominant motifs of a quest, or escape, etc.

The shift from one pole (faction) to the other (fiction) implies that travel writing "is itself in motion,"[7] meaning it is malleable enough to fit the changing experience, understanding, and intentions of both the author and the audience. In this paper, in view of the complexity of trying to delineate traits of a variety of travel writing options—which would exceed the scope of this paper—we have opted to analyze only one pole of the scope of travel literature, that is, the factual prose or those texts that claim (or are regarded) to be based on the "real experiences of actual travellers rooted in the specific factual details of both history and geography,"[8] showing that even this kind of writing can reveal a certain prejudiced

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context, the traditional form is subverted for the sake of its opening up to self-conscious and metafictional elements which, in addition to introducing other innovative (post)modernist elements, turn it into a mode of introspection, reflection, meditation, philosophical/metaphysical exposition. See, for instance, an essay on the Serbian avant-garde travelogue (Jaćimović, 2012: 7-15). That is how the journey has become more inner than "outer," the soul-searching I-travel overreaching the (f)actual sights to the point of being locked up in another solipsistic self, this time a metaphysical outcast of the "real" world.

[7] A. Bendixen and J. Hamera, *op. cit*., 2.

[8] *Ibid.*

colouring on the part of the authors, as well as similar readings on the part of the audience, then and now.

2.2 Home as the Norm

The analysis of the non-fictional travel writings in this paper points to three characteristics prominent in a context of the relations established between the author, the object of his writing, and the readers: namely, the distance between the traveller and the land of his travel, its objects and people; the (mental) luggage he carries in terms of his preconceptions about the referential configurations he is about to explore, as well as to judge according to the "home" standards (norm), and, in conclusion, his own personality as an immutable and established fact.

The texts under study in this paper are taken from a collection of texts, fragments and excerpts about Southeast Serbia, or, more precisely, the region of Niš.[9] Due to a great variety of discourses used in describing this part of the Balkans, it can serve as a good illustration of the ways many different people (travellers)[10] have constructed their representations of the area, from the fourth century onwards. Of them all, three texts are chosen as revealing in terms of the attitudes taken towards the country in question, namely, 1) part of the report about the given region by the Ottoman Turk, Mehmed Zilli, better known as Evliya Çelebi, administrator,[11] chronicler, historian and geographer, author of the seventeenth-century *Seyahaname* (*Travelogue*) (in ten volumes), 2) part of the text by the French writer, poet

[9] Vidosav Petrović, ed., *Niš u delima putopisaca od IV do XX veka* (Niš: Punta, 2000), and Vidosav Petrović, ed., *Niš in the Travel Writings from the Fourth to the Twentieth Centuries,* translated by D. R. Mašović (Niš: Vidosav Petrović, 2002). In many ways, in much of its history Niš has been regarded as a "gateway to the Orient." This geo-strategic position has made it such an important place for many people, most of all military strategists, in the well-known turbulent history of the Balkans.

[10] Though some of them are anonymous or known only from the secondary sources, the majority of authors, either Serbian (or from former Yugoslav countries) or foreign, are varied in the professional sense (traders, agents, politicians, diplomats, adventurers, and the like). A small but ever increasing number of them includes poets, writers, and intellectuals. A taxonomy would categorize them as a "military strategist," or "a spy," or "a bureaucrat" whose assignments were to prepare a report on the Balkan regions in terms of their resources or simply as spoils, or military goals, etc., for interested parties (colonizers).

[11] According to some sources, the name is just a pseudonym because Evliya means "government official" and Çelebi means "gentleman" (Genealogy).

and politician Alphonse Marie Louis de Prat de Lamartine referring to the Tower of Skulls, one of the local cynosures, in the first half of the 19th century, and 3) an excerpt from the travel writings of Mary Edith Durham, a British traveller, artist and writer who described, among other countries, the given region in the early 20th century. The three of them may stand for the attitudes implied in the selection of the material, its construction into a respective form of travel writing and in their views of the people and objects represented.

2.3 Two Gentlemen and a Dame in (Balkan) Distress

All the three texts, at the same time, can be taken to illustrate what Maria Todorova emphasizes in her study on *Imagining the Balkans*, namely "great descriptive effort [...] immense erudition, and the tireless labor that went into these works."[12] This is especially true when it comes to Çelebi's report on the then Ottoman town of Niš.[13]

Çelebi's report is that of the "Empire official" who visited the region of Niš in the year of 1660 and prepared a full-scale and comprehensive account of the given area. Though with some inaccuracies,[14] it comprises detailed information about the things presumably of the state interest, such as geographical and historical background, region/town administration, description of the downtown (*varoš*) with the exact number (two thousand sixty) of "ground penurious houses," as well as (also carefully counted) "lofty one-story *saries*" surrounded with vineyards and gardens, etc. Special attention is paid to the religious (Islamic) objects, as expectedly, in a wide range from mosques and schools to the *turbes* (stone tombs) and water fountains, with their inscriptions fully quoted.[15] As for what Todorova calls "preconceived ideas or outright prejudice," they do appear in the form of "occasional flashes"[16] but with no evident intention to denigrate the indigenous population. To put it simply, Çelebi's "gaze" is that of a man of his times, his religion, and his ethos. His remarks such as that "women wear colourful dresses and go out for a walk" may be taken as observations arising from his way of life and (religious) attitudes to

[12] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 80.
[13] The things pointed out here refer only to the part of his travel book describing Niš.
[14] Referring to local Serbs as Bulgarians, for instance.
[15] In view of the importance of water in Islam and communities, the water fountains also enjoy their share of literal and symbolic significance.
[16] Maria Todorova, *op. cit.,* 80.

women. Or, that "men are generous givers and devoted to pleasure" probably comes from the same tradition. Definitely, his report is written by someone who considered himself as a norm (and this tendency is to become more prominent in later times), embodied in a posture of an imperial gentleman-official. Well-informed and cultivated, he is an administrator whose *intentions*, that is, tasks, are controlling his experience and understanding of the Balkans, the objects and people he is describing and listing. His sentences are short, compact, and factual. They are to provide for the audience of his time and later, a much needed view of the then society. Among other things, enough data is stored about the early cultural markers, such as the bridge, the fortress, and, in general, people's cultural habits. Disregarding "occasional flashes," this is the most appreciated aspect of his travel book.

What can be, yet, concluded about the early travel literature using the Çelebi text is that the distance between him ("us") and "them" is considerable, which classifies him as a precursor of what contemporary theory calls a "stroller" or observer with no close contact or involvement with the objects of his gaze.[17] They remain as Others in his side remarks and only once (as far as Niš is concerned) do they come closer, in a single sentence, when referred to as scary *haiduks*[18] (which might be one of rare references to the enslaved Christians), but no other groups or parts of the population are mentioned apart from the general "men" and "women" with no defined ethnic or religious affiliation. Yet, since this was at a time an Ottoman town, presumably its different layers are subsumed under the Muslim one or pushed to the (negligible) social margins.

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[17] In his analysis of the "stroller," Bauman compares him to a theatre goer who is separated by the "fourth wall" from the scene of action: "for a stroll as one goes to a theatre […] (in the crowd but not of the crowd), taking in those strangers as 'surfaces'—so that 'what one sees' exhausts 'what they are,' and above all seeing and knowing of them episodically […] rehearsing human reality as a series of episodes, that is events without past and with no consequences […] the fleeting fragments of other persons." In its later form, as a *paparazzo*, the stroller spins off the fragments into stories at will. However, not only a modern *paparazo* but old travel writers also do the same, turning the strangers they see "into actors in the plays he scripted, without them knowing that they are actors, let alone the plot of the drama they play" (Eeva Jokinen and Soile Veijola, "The Disoriented Tourist. The Figuration of the Tourist in Contemporary Cultural Critique," in *Jugoistočna Srbija, Skull Tower*, eds. C. Rojek J. and Urry (2003): 80. Retrieved from http://www.jugoistocnasrbija.rs/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=308&-Itemid=379&lang=en.

[18] The name is of Hungarian origin, here referring to a member of the medieval (Serbian) brigand gangs, robbers as well as fighters against the Ottomans.

A few centuries later we find ourselves in what historians like to designate as "semi-independent Serbia"[19] and with the traveller, this time French, Alfonse de Lamartine, another cultivated gentlemen "of many hats" as his compatriots described him.[20] He visited Serbia in the years when it was stormed by liberation fights, including the Battle of Čegar near Niš, which ended with the Ottoman commander Hurshid Pasha ordering that the skulls of the killed Serbian soldiers be gathered from the battlefield and skinned before being mounted in rows on a 3m high tower.

For many travellers, the Tower of Skulls is a monument of barbarity and cruelty. For others, though, in the past and today, it has been a horrid expression of hatred. Still, at the same time, many of its visitors, including Lamartine, turned its horror into its opposite, a monument of love for freedom on the part of the Serbian rebels. In other words, its discourse of hatred is turned into that of love—patriotic, though.

Travelling as Lamartine did—overland—back from Constantinople,[21] he wrote a semi-autobiographical travel narrative, full of commentaries, reflections, social and political projects in the spirit of a liberal and social Christianity, and—the last but not the least—his Romantic views of liberty and liberation. The result is a mélange as befits an erudite, free to insert a variety of genres, cultural and literary quotes and allusions, into what he considers a literary project. Part of it was a description of the land of "highlanders with innate manners, shepherds who live for freedom and women as beautiful as ladies from Swiss cantons," in other words, Serbs.[22] But this is not all.

In a separate chapter entitled "Notes on Serbia" (*Journey to the East*, 1833, *Jugoistočna Srbija*) Lamartine establishes the Tower of Skulls as an icon of Serbian liberation fights. He recounts how, pausing, at one moment, under what seemed to be a marble tower, he suddenly realized that its walls were made of rows of human skulls—some fifteen or twenty thousand (at that time, presumably no more than a thousand). He was, of course, exaggerating but this exaggeration was part of his prevailing

[19] Serbia became independent in 1878. By that time it had already negotiated and somewhat modified its status within the Ottoman Empire.

[20] The reason for this might be "his persistent taste for wearing many hats: as poet and politician, philosopher and teacher, landowner and business inventor." C. W. Thompson, *French Romantic Travel Writing: Chateaubriand to Nerval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 120.

[21] Obviously, such a decision was a curiosity at that time; it is noted that he was "the only Romantic writer who chose to return overland from Constantinople to Vienna." *Ibid*.

[22] Cf. *Serbia.com. How Serbia Stunned Alfonse de Lamartine.*

Romantic rhetoric of excitement and "poetic inebriation" with brave "highlanders." Enchanted, upon learning the history of the ghastly tower, he intensified and magnified the whole experience, turning it, first, into poetry (when "a strong and fresh breeze blew from the mountains and by blowing through numerous holes on these heads, faces and skulls, created a piteous and sad whistling"[23]) and then into poetry of martyrdom and, finally, full-fledged ideology. His message to the Serbian rebels soon became a patriotic appeal to the Serbs, of all times—"This monument must remain! It will teach their children the value of independence to a people, showing them what price their fathers paid for it." In this way, Lamartine praised, glorified and heroized the rebels' fate and the Tower, which, in the times to come, became a first-rate cultural, historical, and patriotic monument. Preserving not only its own tragic fate but also Lamartine's commentary as national heritage ("with eye and heart (greeting) the remains of these brave men whose decapitated heads became foundation of their homeland"), the Tower of Skulls today is an object for tourist as well as schoolchildren's pilgrimage, referred to every time an example is needed to stir up nationalist feelings.

Yet, though in his emotional outbursts, Lamartine expressed his pride and love of the brave Serbs who had endured so much pain in their fights for liberty, concerning the projects he had in mind, he also posited as a "norm" defining the tragedy of a remote nation within the framework of his own political vision.

Moreover, for the (political) culture of the region, what is more important, at least in this context, is that Lamartine and the Tower became inseparable on the grounds of their contiguity, i.e., metonymically-bound. Finally, in the context of travel literature, the Tower and Lamartine's poetic outburst have proven how the travel writer can inscribe his own persona upon the monument, thus assigning to it a semiotic implication anticipating, stimulating and manoeuvering political (nationalist) engagements in the decades to come.[24]

The third text, Durham's, is different from the first two. It is removed in time from Çelebi's travel book, with its detailing of the Ottoman presence in Niš and its distance between the "reporter" and the "men and women" which could be compared only to that of two mutually alien species, mutually "untouchable." It is also removed from a warm-hearted Romantic attitude cherished by Lamartine who, with his travel account,

[23] C.W. Thompson, *op. cit*., 121.

[24] In this way we can read, for instance, the title of the respective chapter in Petrović's book, "The Tower of Skulls: The Foundation of Serbian Independence." Obviously, it owes a lot to Lamartine and so do many other similar titles and texts.

engraved his name in the Serbian history book, i.e., his literary statement became part of the history of Southeast Serbia. This time the author is a lady of sharp wit and sharp tongue who, in her travelling (writer's) life, later changed her attitude towards the Serbs blaming them for the onset of the Great War.[25]

But, before expressing an open disgust for the raw and primitive people of the Balkans, most notably the Serbs, she described her visit to Niš in a less dark-coloured manner. Just in the case of Lamartine, whose unusual decision to travel overland through the Balkan "wilderness" caused so much surprise among his contemporaries, the appearance of an English lady, on her own (hence her narrator's profile could be "a lonely, brave and cultivated English lady"), caused a real surprise among the people of Niš, including the hoteliers. Even more so, since—and this is a moment also noted by Todorova—it is the first travel report that mentions how well the native people were acquainted with the prejudice against them in the West.[26]

Without going into details about the rest of her Serbian (and later Albanian) adventure (books), in this particular fragment referring to Niš a new trait appears in the early twentieth century: a dialogue between the lady and the local people (though more for its anecdotal value). The distance is shortened and encounters/contacts suggest possibilities of interaction and communication. Only this time, with the whole stage dramatized, preconceptions and prejudices are not in flashes but in outpourings.

The construction of Niš is a matter of careful selection: through Durham's eyes, we see a culture in three close-ups: of a fair, a cattle market, and a cemetery. Highlighted is the cattle, unexpectedly tame (most surely "brought up together with the family," as Durham remarks[27]), unlike untamed people who, in the heat of the day, eat hot sausages and, hot-tempered as they are, dance a rather hot dance: *kolo*. To crown it all, there is a report on the local people mourning their dead and performing a memorial service, as Durham remarks, more pagan than Christian, at the local cemetery.

All in all, the picture of the Niš population, as given by Durham, is that of the "nation struggling to become the West and to become modern." But this is only one side of it, claims Durham, the side it turns to the rest of the

[25] Cf. Maria Todorova, *op. cit*.
[26] Vidosav Petrović, *Niš in the Travel Writings from the Fourth to the Twentieth Centuries*, 235.
[27] A detail often found in the British travel writings about Ireland. The implication is that people and cattle share the same premises.

world from which "it had been cut off for so long." The other side, says Durham, can be revealed only after considerable efforts are made to come upon "something typically Serbian and for this I was not to wait so long"—for the Serbian religious practice.[28] Obviously, regardless of the factuality of her account, what comes first is her intention to discover the "other side" of Serbia for which she knew, *a priori*, that it was there. In this case, as well, intention precedes experience, or, in other words, intention dictates the nature of her experience and understanding of the local ethos.

This leads to an assumption about travel literature, even in the days when it was useful and informative: that its authors did not travel without "luggage." The main thing they carried from "home" was a sense of difference, established *a priori*. It does not arise from perceived varieties of history, culture, language, etc., but from a preconceived notion about the countries they are setting out to visit: they had to be different if not opposite or inferior to their "home" ones. As for the "travelled country," apart from the possibilities of being understood as "a rural idyll" or "exotic and wild East," there is also another one: that it is understood less as a specific country with its own ways but more like a deviation from the norm—the (superior) West.

This attitude can be seen in many other features picked up by Durham and other travellers. For instance, many descriptions (strangely enough) start with remarks about women: the ways women in the East dress or

[28] A more sympathetic traveller would try to devote some time to think about the Orthodox Christian Church and its "more awful traits" in religious worship as, among other things, signs of devotion to the endangered tradition. Yet, Durham acts as a norm, judging the rites only on the basis of what she sees thus confirming the hegemony of the visual in the early travel writings. Thus, her visual experience and her intention (to prove the other side of the Serbian "pro-European" face) control her understanding. Namely, she underlines that from the Ottoman invasion till the 19th century a great majority of these peoples (Macedonians included) were cut off from the rest of the world and thus deviated from the norm (otherwise, their worship would have been similar to her "home" ways). That is why their church is anachronistic, paralyzed in time, much more similar to the church of the 4th or 5th century than the contemporary one (Catholic or Anglican). She describes how the Serbs read a funeral service in the cemetery (just as Macedonians slaughtered a sacrificial lamb on the altar)—both of these acts being equal in terms of their deviation from the norm. Moreover, she spots beggars in front of the cemetery gate—just like in England in the 14th century, or five centuries ago. Finally, the most deviating practice refers to the women loud in their weeping for the dead and offering not symbolic but literal heaps of food laid out on the graves, as noticed by Durham.