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# BALKANIST STEREOTYPES, GENDERED NATIONS AND LITERARIZATION OF ROMANIA IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LITERATURE

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Skepticism is a major feature of British political attitudes and cultural representations of Central and East Europe, including Romania. British Euroskepticism, more recently related to the attitude of the so-called "Maastricht rebels",[1] is a characteristic of British politics that has become increasingly prominent, representing a school of thought which is opposed to British involvement in further European integration and enlargement. Owing to strong anti-communist intentions, the movement was previously represented by about half of the Conservative wing, the Thatcherite wing, which voiced its old

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[1] "The Maastricht rebels" is a pejorative term designating the members of the Conservative Party who refused to support the government of John Major in a House of Commons vote to secure ratification by the United Kingdom of the Maastricht treaty. Formally known as the Treaty on European Union, which was negotiated between the members of the European Community (the summit was held in 1991 and it came into force in 1993), the Maastricht Treaty led to the creation of the European Union; See Anthony Forster, *Euroscepticism in Contemporary British Politics: Opposition to Europe in the British Conservative and Labour Parties since 1945*, Routledge, New York and London, 2002.

fashioned nationalism: Why should the United Kingdom throw in its lot with "the dubious" French, the formerly antagonistic Germans, and the "backward" Mediterraneans?[2] Faced with the unprecedented surrender of national sovereignty brought about by the Maastricht Treaty, the government of John Major,[3] Margaret Thatcher's[4] successor as British Prime Minister, came close to falling from power before persuading Parliament to ratify the treaty in July 1993. Dissenting Euroskeptic voices could still be heard during Tony Blair's Labour government[5] and its support for Britain's integration into the European Union. In 2002 in Brussels, veteran Labour politician and fervent anti-nationalist Tony Benn claimed: "The European Union should evolve at the pace of national parliaments."[6] A passionate internationalist, he would have liked to see a commonwealth of European states that also encompassed

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[2]  *Ibidem.*

[3]  British politician and public official, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1990 to 1997.

[4]  British Conservative Party politician and Prime Minister (1979-1990). Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who together made the 1980s the decade of conservatism, shared a vision of the world in which the Soviet Union was an evil enemy that deserved no compromise. Their partnership ensured that the Cold War continued until the rise of the "Perestroika" minded Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. In keeping with her strong anti-communist attitude, a 1976 speech condemning communism earned her the nickname "Iron Lady" in the Soviet press. Her declared anti-communism did not prevent her from visiting socialist Romania twice – in 1971 and 1975 – as an official guest. Nicolae Ceauşescu was himself made welcome in Great Britain during his glorious visit in 1978 by the Royal House and important officials. He stayed at Buckingham Palace and was knighted by Her Majesty the Queen of England.

[5]  Tony Blair: leader of the British Labour Party, who became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in 1997.

[6]  *The Guardian,* November 18, 2002.

countries like Russia. Nevertheless, Benn believed that in its current form the European Union was too big and too flawed to be truly democratic. There was simply no room for real debate, street politics or a meaningful link between the elected and the electors. And with the union poised to take in ten new countries as early as 2004, he argued, things could only get worse from a democratic point of view.

Europe was adrift after the Cold War. Though tragic and tense, the Cold War nevertheless imposed stability on Europe and allowed the West to prosper peacefully. With the end of communism, decision makers, including Great Britain, were preoccupied by several vexing problems. Could the new democracies of post-communist countries achieve Western levels of prosperity and avoid the ethnic strife that had engendered two world wars? Would they represent a genuine danger to Western democracies once free from Soviet imperial restrictions (as with all their past imperial conditions) and be incapable of governing themselves? Old, lasting stereotypes again came to hand: the menace of "reverse imperialism" from the East to the West provided politically correct justification for skepticism of European enlargement. "Vampires" once again threatened the West and needed to be stopped by representatives of the enlightened world. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, for instance, explained the seventy-seven days of NATO bombing and subsequent takeover of Kosovo in the spring of 1999 as "necessary steps toward defeating a barbarism that will no longer be tolerated on the European continent."[7] British academic discourses are not much different from

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[7]   Tomislav Z. Longinovic, "Vampires Like Us: Gothic Imaginary and <the Serbs>", in Dusan I. Bjelic and Obrad Savic (eds.), *Balkan as Metaphor. Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002, pp.39-59.

political discourses in this respect. After deploring the neglect of Eastern Europe in Western historiography, which remained "to be considered backward or inferior",[8] Norman Davies (author of a best selling history of Europe) shares the same (East) Euroskeptic concerns:

> Paradoxically, the threat of anarchy in the East may well act as a spur to closer union in the West. Last year, Albanian refugees sailed across the Adriatic in their tens of thousands, and tried to force their way into Italy. Hordes of Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian tramps and traders are pouring into Poland, just as Poles recently poured into Germany and Austria... If scenes of disorder were to be repeated on a larger scale, and in Central Europe, the sense of urgency in Western capitals would be wonderfully enhanced. So far, the consolidation of the European Community has been proceeding at the pace of the slowest. A strong blast of cold air from the East might quicken the pace.[9]

The distinction between British official and public, political and journalistic, and literary and academic discursive constructions of Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, is artificial. Most take on elements of Balkanism and Orientalism in a general endeavor of justifying skeptical attitudes, extreme decisions, or military action, which would become quite unpopular among the British if they were not capable of reviving the most sensitive issues of identity and survival: "the strong blast of cold air" from Eastern Europe or the Balkans was/is still menacing Western homes and nations. It makes them shiver, while the optimistic "wind of change"

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[8]    Norman Davies, *Europe. A History*, Pimlico, London, 1997, p. 19.
[9]    *Ibidem*, pp. 1136-1137.

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from the same East or Balkans is only timidly blowing over the West.

Balkan is in fact not simply a geographical, historical and cultural reality that is measurable, definable and assessable. It implies certainty and doubt, reality and myth, facts and images, ideology and imagination, political fabrication and textual invention, traumatic history and inspiring poetry, a place and a condition, the trap and the wish to escape one's destiny. Balkan is both a pejorative stereotype and a complex metaphor: it is used disparagingly to refer to Europe's rejected dark side and nostalgically to refer to Europe's lost ancestors – its wild barbarian warriors and romantic passionate geniuses. In what follows I will try to focus my analysis on the oscillation between these last two manners of representing the Balkans in contemporary British literature. They belong to the rhetoric of Balkanism, conceived both as a body of knowledge and as the critical study of that discourse, in particular its political and ethical consequences.[10] Called by the British either Eastern

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[10]  For the analysis of Orientalism and Balkanism, see: Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, London & New York, 1979; Milica Bakic-Hayden,"Nesting Orientalism: The Case of Former Yugoslavia", in *Slavic Review*, 54, nr. 4, 1995, pp. 917-931; K. E. Fleming, "Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography", in *American Historical Review*, 2000; Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998; Maria Todorova, *Inventing the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, 1997. Specialists have established Balkanism as a critical study of colonial representation distinctly different from Orientalism: "Rather than representing the Balkans substantively, either as a geopolitical place or as a people with a 'collective paranoia', these authors began to represent the Balkans as a 'place' in a *discourse-geography*. That is, as the object of a coherent body of knowledge – Balkanism. Thus instead of telling us what the Balkans *are* they diverted the question of the Balkans into the problem of imperial language… While Said argues that the East/West Orientalist binary refers to a 'project

Europe, a neutral term used for politically correct reasons during the Cold War, or the Balkans, a term used in the 19th century and safely adopted after 1989 together with its negative connotations, this frontier space is represented as trapped in its condition: both inside and outside European history and geography.

If in the past Romania's condition of in-betweenness made it very difficult (or even impossible) for British visitors to define, compare and classify it in terms of its so-called ambiguous historical, geographical, cultural, social and psychological characteristics, today Romania is an even more difficult puzzle to solve. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, Romania no longer represents the epicenter of evil, though neither does it concentrate what is valued as good in the West. Good and evil are now mixed together, giving rise to images that are always grey in color, lacking in individuality, stability, character, and honesty. Although veiled metaphorically, ethical judgments pervade British representations of Romania beneath the superficial layer of factual observations. Such judgments are often made for subjective or political reasons, condescendingly produced from a position of moral superiority, and as such one could say "no big deal!" Nevertheless they become a serious matter once we take into account the way this hierarchical valuation leads to essentialized negative features, to generalized wrongs and faults, to this absolute guilt of the Other, which is historically and genetically determined once and for all in Western images

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rather than a place', Bakic-Hayden claims that in the former Yugoslavia *Orientalism* is a *subjectivational practice* by which all ethnic groups define the 'other' as the 'East' of them; in so doing, they not only orientalize the 'other', but also occidentalize themselves as the West of the 'other' " (Dusan I. Bjelic, "Introduction: Blowing Up the Bridge", in Dusan I. Bjelic and Obrad Savic (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 4).

of Romania. The matter is also serious when these representations are either passively unconsciously internalized or conveniently adopted by Romanians themselves to give substance to easily exploited excuses and justifications. It is more serious still when they are vehemently opposed, together with the entire Western world that produced them, by those same Romanians conscious of their absolute superiority in isolation.

Nothing is what it seems to be in Romania, and British writers waver between extremes of feelings and opinions. But they keep searching for a genuine Romania, and this search becomes both a psychological quest (for the Other and, at the same time, of the self engaged in an initiating experience) and a detective investigation into a character whose destiny is closely related to the author and to Romania.

Romania, and the other countries of the former communist bloc, can be described in terms of in-betweenness and post-colonialism. In a binary Europe, in-between marginality is a space of cultural interference between the West and the East and does not suppose a marginality related to a dominant center as in post-colonial context, but many marginalities as the cultural centers dominating the symbolic map of this European region.[11] The history of this space is thus semi-peripheral and semi-colonial, half European and half Oriental or Balkan (perceived as non-European entities), oscillating between imperial or

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[11] For the interference–marginality–inferiority relationship and the "epistemological multiperspectivism" required by the approach of cultural liminality, see Sorin Alexandrescu, *Identitate în ruptură*, Edtura Univers, București, 2000. For the concepts of "in-between peripherality" and "self referentiality" see Steven Totosy de Zepetnek," Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture" in Steven Totosy de Zepetnek (ed.), *Comparative Central European Culture,* Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana, 2002, p.10.

ideological dominance and hegemony. It is situated at the border of cultural influences where political control originated in old Ottoman or Oriental imperial antagonistic centers – Greek and Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman, Tsarist and Ottoman – or Central European Empires (the Habsburg Monarchy) on the one hand and the recent communist imperialism on the other – all of which have interfered with local national and cultural self referentiality.[12] The history of the space also records the clash of political and economic interests between old Western imperialism and Eastern or Oriental ones, Western democracy and Soviet totalitarianism during the Cold War, stability and insecurity, and Western democratic tradition and fake Eastern democracy after 1989 – all of which have confronted and continue to confront one another on this very spot. It is also situated at the border of real physical imperialisms (medieval or modern) and the metaphorical, literary, textual and narrative colonization also known as the *imperialism of the representation*,

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[12] Peripheral Romania was often seen (or saw itself) in the mirror of a multitude of cultural spaces, such as the imperial centers to which it was subordinated at that time or had been subordinated to in the past, living nevertheless in a network of influences which evoke remote cultural spaces. In Michel Foucault's beautiful and important discussion of what he calls *heterotopias,* "something like counter-sites" ("Of Other Spaces", in *Diacritics*, 16, 1986, p.24), he is only interested in territorially or spatially "real" places in constructing his term ("places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society"). He contrasts heterotopias to the more mimetic *utopia* ("sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society"). "Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias." Among such heterotopias, different from all the sites it reflected and spoke about, was Romania, both in its hetero-representations and in self-representations.

*the imperialism of the imagination and knowledge.* By referring to this space in terms of Balkanism, Vesna Goldsworthy draws a comparison between real imperialism and the imaginary one:

> As a 'colonized' region, the Balkans offer a mirror image to the more traditional fields of post-colonial inquiry with their focus on textual practices in the framework of the physical exploitation of an area by a Western power. The take-over of the intellectual domain, the exploitation of the raw materials of history, can be similarly lucrative (…). Although the physical colonization of large parts of the Balkans by the Ottoman Empire provides a reverse example of traditional colonial patterns (a portion of Europe dominated by an Eastern, alien and non-Christian empire), this 'textual colonization' has provided the industries of the imagination with easy, unchallenged access to raw material.[13]

Paraphrasing Homi Bhabha's rhetorical question from the *Introduction* to *Nation and Narration*[14] while taking into account the "ambivalent nation-space", we might ask ourselves: What kind of a cultural space is Eastern Europe with its transgressive boundaries and its "interruptive" interiority? It is a liminal space, "in-between the designations of identity,"[15] whose interstitial condition perplexes the foreign observer.

In the framework of the new European construction, Romania is represented either as a Central Eastern European country on the structure of the Habsburg Monarchy, somewhere between the West and the East; as a South-Eastern or Balkan country on the structure of the Ottoman Empire,

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[13] Vesna Goldsworthy. *op. cit.,* p. X.
[14] Homi Bhabha, *Introduction to Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London, 1990.
[15] *Idem, The Location of Culture*, Routlege, London, 1994.

somewhere between Europe and the Orient; or in the border space left by the Iron Curtain between Western civilization and Eastern backwardness, between democracy and dictatorship. Romania's symbolic locations as an East European or Balkan country, between Europe and the Orient, between traditions of democracy and inborn tendencies to dictatorship, are prevalent in British representations about Romania, where different influences are perceived in a manner that implies a strange "hybridity", and not cultural interference. In as far as Romanian self-representations are concerned, they reflect the ambivalence of the foreign representations about them, and it is a matter of decision which direction of development is to be taken by Romania: a Central European or a Balkan one. The "invention" of Eastern Europe was a project of "half-orientalization", as Larry Wolff maintains, for the 18th and 19th centuries.[16] It is still true for the 20th century, even if it is veiled in metaphor and implied in a more sophisticated discourse. The discursive elements of Orientalism, Balkanism and exoticism (implicit or explicit) are always counterbalanced by those of the European identity that cannot be eluded. As a space of imaginary colonization, Eastern Europe reacts against the center with a discourse similar to the post-colonial one (though less offensive, exclusivist and intolerant), but directed instead against a center that has colonized only its image (and, implicitly, its self-image).

Half-Oriental and half-European, this in-between marginal or borderline cultural zone gives birth to a play of images and counter-images, kept in balance in an oxymoronic image, while the West-East relationship is represented as a Manichean struggle between good and evil, white and black, light and

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[16] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994.

darkness, purity and corruption etc., with visible political and moral implications (even today, through the ambiguity of the European integration criteria). Also perceived as a projection of the subconscious, the discourse on the Eastern alterity translates the anxieties, incertitude and identity crises of the West into the categories of domination, intellectual superiority, and virile action. Through the psychosocial mechanism of identifying the "scapegoat", the inoffensive exotic images of the Balkans or the Orient become hostile images meant to afford justification to any drastic political or military action in the name of the high values of the West: civilization, democracy, tolerance, peace, stability, happiness. Ambiguity is the motivation for incomprehensibility, and it is a source of fear, concern, and skepticism, representing a potential danger that has to be monitored.

The analysis of Romanian images from British perspectives confronts itself at each level with their complexity. But if we had to find a common denominator, then it would be their intermediate liminal condition and, in less elaborated hypostases, their cultural, ethnic (or even racial) and ethical ambiguity. We temporarily enter the registers of Orientalism and Balkanism, then return to those of Europeanism: an oscillation which complicates the analysis of British self- and hetero-images constructed in communist or post-communist Romania in best-sellers, such as the travel accounts by Dervla Murphy in *Transylvania and Beyond*[17] and Georgina Harding's *In Another Europe. A Journey to Romania*,[18] or the novels

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[17]  Dervla Murphy, *Transylvania and Beyond*, Arrow Books, London, 1993.

[18]  Georgina Harding, *In Another Europe. A Journey to Romania*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, Sydney, Auckland, Toronto, 1990.

*The Long Shadows* by Alan Brownjohn,[19] *Kitty and Virgil* by Paul Bailey,[20] *Looking for George. Love and Death in Romania* by Helena Drysdale,[21] *Lost Footsteps* by Bel Mooney,[22] and *Trouble in Transylvania* by Barbara Wilson.[23] All of these were written by well-known authors and welcomed enthusiastically by the British public and media.

British images of communist and post-communist Romania are ambivalent (Romanians are full of prejudices and guilt, incapable of serious work, unfit for modern times, narrow-minded, primitive, passive, idle, backward, pathetic, and cowards on the one hand; but good-hearted, childish, picturesque, poetical, and romantic on the other). In their search for essential truths about the Romanians, British travelers trace back their faults and vices either in their ever repeating history or their genetic inheritance. Doomed to be haunted for all time by the specters of their history, by dictators returning to life under different guises, by their Balkan and Oriental, barbarian and primitive genes, Romanians have no great hopes for the future. No revolution can change their absurd immutable fate: it is a cliché common to British and Romanian representations. This is why British literary representations of Romania do not end happily. Love ends in death, truth becomes lie, sanity paranoia, hope suicide, evidence conspiracy, and dreams of freedom become nightmares. If many attempts to build healthy lasting love relationships in Romania are hopeless for the British traveler, he or she is still

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[19] Alan Brownjohn, *The Long Shadows*, Dewi Lewis Publishing, London, 1997.
[20] Paul Bailey, *Kitty and Virgil*, Fourth Estate, London, 1999.
[21] Helena Drysdale, *Looking for George. Love and Death in Romania*, Picador, London, 1996.
[22] Bel Mooney, *Lost Footsteps*, Penguin Books, London, 1994.
[23] Barbara Wilson, *Trouble in Transylvania*, Virago Press, London, 1993.

the only one to win something from the encounter: the traveler is changed at the end of an experience that took place in an alien, sometimes hostile, sometimes mysterious country; grows more mature, self-conscious, and prepared to embark on another experience like this; can leave everything unpleasant behind because the future is always open in Britain; and develops, in contrast with the Romanian background, a keen sense of belonging to a safe, civilized, democratic country, to a comfortable home and a stable family. As for the Romanians, they keep on trying to cope with their destiny, sometimes in a desperate search for identity and freedom, sometimes dragging their existence along like puppets on strings; while at other times, trying to escape from an unstable gloomy present that is not much different after the fall of communism, either to the free world or a mythical past, either in poetry or in death. They all remain unchanged from the beginning to the end of the books, even if they are observed in two different moments of their lives: before the Revolution, and immediately after.

If stereotypes cannot be avoided, what makes these travel accounts and novels about Romania far more complex than previous ones is the search for the authentic self in an unfamiliar space. The result of the investigation concerning the Other and his/her country is less important than the personal experience itself. The traveler is not willing to find out or to admit that "between the filth (physical and moral), and the charm of the place," between the gray concrete and the picturesque landscape, corruption and poetry, indifference and passion, there is more of "a dialectic relation than an implacable opposition," as Virgil Nemoianu states with reference to "the complexes of the Romanian culture."[24] To

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[24] Virgil Nemoianu, *Tradiție si libertate (Tradition and freedom),* Curtea Veche, București, 2001, p.144.

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acknowledge this would have meant to undermine the very foundation of their discourse, and, consequently, to lose the interest of the British audience. What is important for the traveler is the challenge: will he/she manage to tame and assimilate the radical or exotic Other, to make him/her comprehensible, imaginable, definable, and classifiable by using familiar values and criteria? Exertion of power over the Other becomes a success: whatever resists British or general Western patterns will remain the exotic Other, convenient to blame and punish when needed for the wellbeing of humankind. The rest is what they have in common. This initiating experience will reveal what he/she is and is not in the mirror of the Other, and will teach him/her to value and cherish his way of life and civilization in a democratic country like Britain.

British travelers, genuine or fictional, always have an agenda; they are either following in their predecessors' footsteps, trying to enliven old images of Romania and childhood stories of a legendary country, or are following in the footsteps of a lost dear one; either looking for adventure in a gothic background, or simply trying to win a bet. One moment a dramatic search, another a detective investigation – proof that truth cannot be told from fantasy, certainty from doubt, trust from suspicion, or memories from reality in a country where even a democratic revolution seems to be either an act in a Balkan vaudeville or a useless sacrifice which no one can exploit to the people's benefit.

Much ado about nothing and soap opera images are interspersed between dramatic images of love and death, passion and revenge, with the Romanian chorus of lamentations in the background. The images of post-1989 Romania are limited to a period of two or three years after the Revolution, when travelers like Dervla Murphy were confronted with "much hardship, tension, dissension,

suspicion"[25] and no light could be seen at the end of the tunnel. Afterwards, Romania seems to have lost much of the British writers' interest. An apparently modern country, its growing display of color and light and people trying to live at Western standards can be no more appealing than before.

## 1. On the Track of Previous British Travelers among Balkan Ghosts

Dervla Murphy did not despise the Romanians; she developed instead "a horrified sympathy" for all of them.[26] Her first intention was to make a cycle tour on the tracks of Patrick Leigh Fermor and Walter Starkie in pre-war Transylvania and to relive her father's stories of a legendary Transylvania. Instead of beautiful idyllic landscapes with picturesque peasants toiling the land, she finds everywhere "the dead gray concrete,"[27] impoverished people, "malnourished to a Third World degree,"[28] queuing for bread in a "state of collective shock,"[29] with interest in "no-change." It is only in rural Transylvania that she discovers what she considers authentic values and traditions, such as an "Ethiopia type of hospitality."[30] For the rest, nothing could have survived the oppressive communist dictatorship, which is, in her view, "an urban phenomenon". Romanian culture is perceived only at a popular level. High culture is not among her concerns. Her occasional encounters with people in the streets, restaurants, or hotels cause her to provide an indubitable diagnosis for a general state of mind:

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[25]  Dervla Murphy, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.
[26]  *Ibidem.*
[27]  *Ibidem*, p.163.
[28]  *Ibidem*, p.34.
[29]  *Ibidem,* p.59.
[30]  *Ibidem*, p.31.

> An embarrassing feature for many Romanian discussions is the inability of intelligent people to think a problem through – or analyze an event – logically consistently. Healthy saplings, planted in the wrong place, must adapt to constriction, and many good brains seem to have been alarmingly stunted.[31]

Not only was communism to blame for this but also the Balkan historical and genetic heritage, and, to prove this, Dervla Murphy invokes all kinds of Balkan ghosts and stereotypes. Communism, in her opinion, represents nothing but a "cynically" rewritten Balkan history of dictatorships. As in any Balkan country, violence and cruelty "run parallel with so much spontaneous kindness and generosity."[32] Romanians have no sense of "responsibility," they are "good at diagnosing," "they shy away from the idea of doing something," "they feel powerless," and they "don't truly value the freedom of speech and access to outside information."[33] If dishonesty is rooted in Romania's pre-communist Balkan history, other vices, such as passivity, could, in her rich imagination, be traced back in their Byzantine tradition: "Eastern history is influenced by the fact that it received Christianity from Byzantium, which was rigid and moribund, and not from the developing and dynamic young Western civilization. This could not but deeply influence subsequent Eastern history."[34] The only "positive" features Dervla Murphy was ready to point out were: "resilience, unstoppable human, disinterested kindness,"[35] which is nevertheless not to one's advantage from a pragmatic

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[31] *Ibidem* p.141.
[32] *Ibidem*, p.109.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 187.
[34] *Ibidem*, p.163.
[35] *Ibidem*, p. 231.

perspective. The ambivalence of these identity features (generalized and essentialized) is also to be found, not only in the Romanian characters' lamentations, but also in the more or less political, more or less official and occasional discourses of the real Romanians.

Besides her search for an already categorized Romania, Georgina Harding's cycle tour to Eastern Europe, which took place almost at the same period (1990), reveals moments of personal involvement and a desire to understand the country. She did not intend to surrender by turning her back to people she was recommended to fear and avoid:

> I was getting a little afraid of Romania, she confesses. That country was said to have the most repressive government in Eastern Europe. A Stalinist climate of fear was said to prevail there: one person in three a police informer, children taught to spy on their parents, quiet beatings and disappearance of dissidents.[36]

But she puts her fears aside and she is able to develop the warmest feelings for the Romanians and their country, particularly for Transylvania, the land surrounded by "the most mysterious mountains of Europe."[37] Sometimes quite familiar among her new friends, other times a stranger on "the fringe of Europe" in a "Ruritarian" background, Georgina Harding was nevertheless clearly in a quite different place: "This was not just my preconceptions speaking; this country was visibly different."[38] Its people were direct descendents of Europe's extinct ancestors, which gave her a sense of familiarity instead of such an anachronism. This image was evoked by the view

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[36] Georgina Harding, *op. cit.* p. 54.
[37] *Ibidem.*
[38] *Ibidem*, p. 58.

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of a "fair-skinned girl with Baltic blue eyes and pale blonde plaits": "Suddenly I realized what struck me so about these people. The girl seemed a child of some extinct European race. An anachronism. A medieval child in a green landscape, beneath a tree thick with reddening apples, yet her face was so familiar. It was only a small distance that separated us."[39] So close, and yet so remote: people living in different histories!

Who took these stereotypes from whom – the westerners from the Romanians, or the Romanians from the westerners? We cannot neglect Romanians' preoccupations (philosophical, anthropological, ethnological, historical, and cultural, beginning with the 19th century) with the mystery of their identity, the roots of absolute good and evil in the Romanian soul, and the identification of all the negative stereotypes, Balkan or Oriental, in the discursive representations of the self. As a general remark, the self representations keep oscillating between positive and negative extremes, and seldom have a constant direction, reflecting thorough convictions. At times, the Balkan identity (assumed, though not necessarily, since the affiliation is partial, cultural-historical, and not geographical) was and still is valued positively as a symbol suggesting the continuity of shared traditions in this European region, while at other times it was valued negatively as a scapegoat for helplessness.

I believe we cannot speak of a transfer (conscious or unconscious) of Balkan stereotypes from Romanian discourse to British discourse. We might recall, for example, the fact that the British were neither interested in what Romanians were thinking about themselves nor willing to discuss it with their educated aristocratic hosts during their 19th century trips

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[39]   *Ibidem*, p. 87

on pre-established itineraries. They were not aware of "Dinicu Golescu's complexes" expressed in the addenda to his translation of Thomas Thornton's *The Present State of Turkey* (London, 1807), through a French intermediary, and entitled *Starea de acum din oblăduirea gheograficească, orășănească, și politicească a prinţipaturilor Valachiei și a Moldovei, de Thomas Thornton, Englezul…*(Buda, 1826). Nevertheless, the images of Europeanness infested with Oriental and Balkan elements are also establishing their presence in British representations of Romanians, though much more critically. The phenomenon could be explained by the existence of a common supply of representations about a people (in our case, the Romanians), well established in the collective memory, comprising the respective self- and hetero-representations, which can be invoked in support of the demonstration.

Balkanist and Orientalist stereotypes about Romania, which came to life during the 18th century and were already established in the 19th century, are conveniently taken over and exploited in the 20th century. They often lose direct connection with their cultural, political, social, psychological, philosophical or religious roots. Additional significance is given to them in accordance with new contexts, the fluctuation of interests and the means to put them into practice. Nevertheless, the essence of the respective stereotypes is much the same as in their early life.

## 2. Gendered Nations and Literarization of Romania: Distant Realm of Legends and Poetry

It is not my intention to develop a thorough analysis of Balkanist stereotypes and their recurrence in British literature about Romania. Obvious themes like Balkanism and vampirism have already received considerable attention. Related to these

themes, I intend to focus on a double mechanism of representing communist and post-communist Romania: the relationship between gender and national or ethnic identification and their literarization. As Nira Yuval-Davis points out, the image of a nation usually implies specific notions of both masculinity and femininity.[40] This theory is also applicable to the process of representing the Other, more often than not achieved by reference to the self: the Other is the reverse image of the self, reflecting what the self is not; the Other is the repudiated image of the self, reflecting what the self refuses to be; the Other is the desired image of the self, reflecting what the self would like to be. This process of referring to the self (the Western subject of knowledge and representation – superior, rational, active, etc.) in the endeavor of representing the Eastern or Oriental alterity (inferior, imaginative, contemplative, passive, etc.) belongs to the analysis of the power relationship, explicit or implicit, which lays at the foundation of the Orientalist and Balkanist discursive construction. This supposes the generalization of the marks of the Other: their correlation with features attributed to gender and their literarization on the same structures of gender construction, estranging even more the alterity from its material reality.

In the case of British literary representations of communist and post-communist Romania, Orientalness (effeminacy, invitingness, lust, temptation) or Balkanness (barbarity, aggressive masculinity, corruption, violence, oppressiveness) are seldom explicit in discourse, rather they are suggested metaphorically and attenuated through literarization: as in Oriental tales, the Romanian woman represents danger to the

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[40] Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gen și Națțune* (*Gender and Nation*, 1997), Editura Univers, București, 2003, p. 9.

Western man, even if her strategy is motivated by her desire to free herself from the claws of an oppressive regime. This way, she wins the authors understanding and compassion, symbolizing Romania's very condition at the gates of Europe, compelled to draw the attention of the West by any means. Through the mystery surrounding her, the woman becomes the symbol of a Romania characterized by ambiguity, where truth and lies, reality and appearance cannot be discerned. As a typical descendant of Sherazade, the woman is the object of the man's guilty attraction: he jeopardizes his own identity, freedom and dignity as a British citizen, yielding to her enticement. Again as Sherazade, she makes him more humane and compassionate for the sufferings of others (see Alan Brownjohn and Bel Mooney). This is the outcome of the contact between will and desire, reason and imagination, realistic prose and legends of remote places.

If the woman symbolizes the realm of legends, the Romanian man will be the very quintessence of poetry in a country that is always remote, mysterious and exotic, lost in time and space, outside the natural evolution of civilization, ambiguous, and, hence, a virtual source of danger. Nevertheless, at the point of contact of the poetic spirit with the rational, matter-of-fact spirit, the British character, this time a woman, also has something to win in the capacity of understanding and unconditional love (see Helena Drysdale, Paul Bailey). The Romanian man – the poet extracting the vigor of his poetical existence and creation from Romania's source of romanticism, folklore, and myth – completes the image of the passionate, contemplative, and imaginative femininity – the woman, who frees herself from the state of indifference and passivity the very moment she identifies the Western victim able to take her to the desired "paradise" of the civilized world. From this moment there is only a step to

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the identification of all these gender features and literary dispositions with Romania as a whole.

Which are the true Romanians and which is the true Romania – those of legend and poetry or those of dictatorship? British observers can never tell. A country of an immutable ambiguity deserves an immutable skepticism from the decision makers in Great Britain when issues concerning European integration and enlargement come into discussion. And writers seem quite receptive to political arguments.

Associated with essentialized features of "imagined communities"(as defined by Benedict Anderson[41]), the masculinity-femininity opposition becomes very lucrative when included in the long series of dichotomies inherent in the West-East power relationship: the West – subject of knowledge – historical agent – reason – civilization – high culture – urban – empiricism – literary disposition towards prose, on the one hand; and the East or the Orient – object of knowledge and decision – instinct and passion – nature-popular culture – rural – intuitive knowledge – sense of poetry, on the other. The result of such imaginative hierarchies is the differentiation of "gendered nations" belonging either to a masculine West or to a feminine East. By virtue of generalization, "gendered nations" can be further subjected to a process of "literarization": the West is prosaic, matter of fact, while the East or the Orient is poetical, romantic, and imaginative. The in-between marginality of the Balkans complicates any attempt to analyze their representations. When imagined as "gendered nations", East European attributes are borrowed from their men's and women's essentialized characteristics, Oriental or Balkan. That is why Romania is

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[41]    Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London, 1983.

characterized either by the Balkan backwardness, violence, brutality, and unreliability of its men and the dangerous, deceiving invitingness of its women, the very symbols of the Orient[42]; or by the Oriental idleness and corruption of its men and the Balkan endurance, unspoiled beauty, devotion, obedience of its women.

Romania is both mysterious and dangerous, and the only chance to understand its enigmas is to find out the truth about a mysterious hyperintellectual – the poet – or a sensuous woman. They become what John Armstrong calls "symbolic frontier guardians", emblems of national character.[43] To understand them means to comprehend their country, that is, Romania, and to find his/her own inner resources both as an individual and as a British citizen confronted with a strange and hostile environment.

Reality in communist and post-revolutionary Romania is in Alan Brownjohn's novel *The Long Shadows* (1997) very complex, ramifying in obscure and profound labyrinths. The biographer Tim Harker-Jones strives with dramatic perseverance to reach the very center of this reality. His destiny in an unfamiliar and unfriendly Romania is identified with the creative act itself.

The development of his biographical work closes a first circle around the target of the investigation – the relationship between the couple Philip Carston and Carolina Predeanu. This equation, if eventually solved, would elucidate the

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[42] See Alex Drace-Francis, "Sex, Lies and Stereotypes. Romania in British Literature since 1945", in Goerge Cipăianu, Virgil Țârău (eds), *Romanian and British Historians on the Contemporary History of Romania*, Cluj-Napoca University Press, Cluj-Napoca, 2000, pp. 88-109.

[43] John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1982.

Romanian realities. Caught in a trap through the clause of his friend's will, the writer Philip Carston, Tim Harker Jones has a moral obligation to write his biography. Everything seems clear until Carston comes to Romania. That is why Tim has to repeat his friend's periplus.

The second circle – support of the textual tissue, the novel *A Time Apart*, written by Philip Carston – offers the raw material for the biographer. Yet, as if to complicate Tim's work, a mysterious feminine character makes an appearance. Her name is Katrin, she is probably of Romanian origin and probably personifies the enigmatic and charming Carolina Predeanu, the translator of Carston's novel into Romanian. For Tim, who has had to come to Romania, the bright center of truth will be identified with this character. Once he discovers that truth he will find the authentic history of Philip Carston's stay in Romania. However, Carolina's confession reveals the nature of her relationship with Philip only gradually and in fragments.

The impression of a country full of contradictions lasts until the end of his investigation. With no power of discernment, fear turns into paranoia. Who is the friend and who is the spy, who the authentic character and who his double? Who is the British agent and who is from the Securitate? The only points of reference are the lessons acquired at home as to how he is supposed to defend himself in Romania – the British clichés and standards well imprinted upon his mind.

To write a biography meant an act of insubordination, of revolt: to grasp the reality of a character, to separate him from the shadow, in a world which cultivated depersonalization: "'There's not many biographies of writers published here. Not much biography full stop'. (Was this true?) 'Or certainly not recent lives. No one's life can possibly be as full of achievement

and wisdom as our hero President's, and it would be invidious – or dangerous – to suggest it could'."[44]

Though apparently chaotic, the textual tissue closely follows a scheme thought out in the smallest detail and elaborated as the paranoid net in which Romanians' destinies were struggling under the eyes of the British writer. The reversal of Jonathan Harker's onomastic formula, concentrating all the British prejudices, taboos and anxieties transplanted into an inoffensive Transylvania by Bram Stoker, is one of the keys in decoding Alan Brownjohn's message. That is why Tim Harker-Jones fights with himself, with his expectations, obsessions and subconscious fears, in order to reconstruct himself in a many-sided foreign environment.

It is the very will to know the Other as a premise to self knowledge that saves Tim Harker-Jones from Jonathan Harker's mediocrity, a character that needed a true army of crusaders in order to escape from the subterraneous and subconscious meanders of Transylvania. Jonathan does not have the strength by himself to fight all the obsession and dangers that menaced him. In compensation, his modern hypostasis, a Don Quixote fighting with imaginary or real shadows – British or Romanian, from the present or the past – defies and provokes them, by bringing them to the forefront. The shadows devoid of substance in Bram Stoker's novel – characters devoid of individuality and will, populating the theatrical scenery of the Transylvanian village – now acquire substance and spirituality, aspiring to emerge by their own strength from the communist labyrinth. Together with them, the British visitor also frees himself from the prejudices and expectancies implanted in his subconscious by so many past generations of travelers: identities which

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[44]   Alan Brownjohn, *op. cit*, p. 18.

reconstruct themselves from the distorting pieces of the old images.

Alan Brownjohn's novel represents a spiritual quest, though the average liberal mind would still prefer to interpret it as a dramatic love relationship or an act of political defiance. The whole question of interpreting reality and stereotyping the Other is discussed in the novel. As Paul Bailey's *Kitty and Virgil* and Helena Drysdale's *Looking for George*, *The Long Shadows* is in fact built around an impossible love affair across the Iron Curtain between a poet whose free spirit defies borders and a woman whose passion may become a threat. This is also true for *The Long Shadows* because Philip Carston is in fact the alter ego of the British poet Philip Larkin, Alan Brownjohn's much-regretted friend.

Paul Bailey's novel, *Kitty and Virgil*, describes the romantic love between a Romanian refugee poet and an Englishwoman. His name, Virgil, stands not only for his Roman origin but also for his role as a kind of modern guide to the underworld. Despite succeeding to escape from communist Romania and finding his great love in Britain, despite getting news of the Romanian Revolution and no longer being threatened by the Securitate, Virgil cannot escape his past and commits suicide. Thus begins Kitty's investigation into the mysterious circumstances of his death, which leads her to Romania. If she could learn more about the country, she thought, she would be able to understand him. But the country kept reminding her of Virgil's Romania: the place of his dreams and nightmares. He was torn between his hate for a degrading present and his pride and love for a legendary past. Virgil's sometimes pathetic descriptions of his native country with Oltenian carpets, plum brandy, icons, village museums, Romanian sayings, national poets (Eminescu, Blaga) and writers (Ion Creangă), legends (Miorița), Brancuși and Roman ancestry create the image of a

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folklorized, legendary, idyllic country no closer to reality than British negative stereotypes of Romania.

Not much closer to reality is Helena Drysdale's ambiguous Romania, a strange mixture of poetry and murder, beauty and dirt, love and treason. She travels to discover not just herself, but the other side of Europe in all its dazzling perplexity. While on a trip to Romania as a student in 1979, she meets a young dreamer called Gheorghe Cupar, an aspirant poet-priest from a peasant family who had taught himself English. For one gloriously liberated week, Gheorghe, defying the authorities, travels with Helena and her two friends through the remote forests of the Carpathian Mountains. One night he tells Helena that he loves her. After she returns to Cambridge, she begins receiving long, impassionate letters from Gheorghe, the "Mad Monk". In his letters, he hints cryptically at trouble with the police, existential frustration and his longing to leave Romania. She responds with diminished enthusiasm. The letters stop and she hears nothing more of him.

In 1991, after the fall of Ceausescu, Helena returns to Romania to find out what had become of him. *Looking for George* begins as a conventional travel account – young woman searching for one of Ceausescu's victims – but slowly deepens into something stranger and more mysterious, a metaphysical quest, in which truth shimmers brightly but elusively.

Helena Drysdale knew from the beginning what she was looking for in Romania since "of all Eastern Europe, the prospect of Romania was the most romantic. It was the legend we were after, the forested crags of Transylvania haunted by vampires and Count Dracula.... There was also the charm of Romania's remoteness, buried as it was in the back regions of Europe, deep down in the icebox of the Cold War. I knew no

one else who had been there"[45]. What she found there was not much different: "Romania was a frozen country, frozen in time: the remoter villages were medieval, but the drabness of the cities was pre-war".[46] She was proud of having "penetrated as deep into the wildest corner of Europe as we could,"[47] at the crossroads of past empires where "the result was an Austro-Hungarian-Ukrainian-Romanian-Jewish-Russian-Ruthenian melting pot."[48]

George was totally different: he was "serious and intense," "he had none of the aggressive/defensive hostility/charm of those who wanted something from us, yet despised us for having it… Instead he welcomed our foreignness, and in his grandiose way saw our meeting as a bridge over the political breach."[49] Meanwhile, Helena "felt like a character in a children's book set in the exotic mist-swathed East, full of warring counts and heroic but displaced monarchs."[50] She came from "a place of facts, of proof, of decoded mysteries", while George was "a dreamer,"[51] a poet, an artist: "He was Romania with all its exoticism and cultivation and refinement and intensity."[52] Their love was as "lyrical, romantic and un-English" as his style. It was melodramatic and romantic, and so was Romania. She was only 19 and she could love and leave, "flirting with the country, flirting with him, mobile and free." But she came back to compensate for her faults: "the difficulties of communication and gulfs in understanding of

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[45]  Helena Drysdale, *op. cit.,* pp. 10-11.
[46]  *Ibidem.*
[47]  *Ibidem*, p. 14.
[48]  *Ibidem*, p.16.
[49]  *Ibidem*, p.14.
[50]  *Ibidem*, p.16.
[51]  *Ibidem.,*p. 26.
[52]  *Ibidem*, p. 30.

each other's lives."[53] As in *The Long Shadows*, nobody could know "what was paranoia and what was truth" even after the fall of communism.[54] It was partly, she thought, because of Romania's poetical "way of suggesting things, hinting," like George himself, revealing "what he chose in his own way." And it was partly because of the Securitate led machinations. The difference between a free spirit like George and the rest of Romanians was their "will to conform," which she hurriedly associates with the Byzantine spirit.[55] Her investigation into the circumstances of his imprisonment and death, his pilgrimage from one asylum to the other as a punishment for having spent that week with a foreigner and having written those letters, was hindered by a net of lies and conspiracy, real and imagined, like the long shadows. What mattered was that he lived and died like his model, the last romantic, Eminescu, the lonely evening star, the genius facing madness and death in an asylum. Romania's destiny seemed comparable to the poet's fate: always evading brutal reality in a legendary past. Bel Mooney's narrative (1993), *Lost Footsteps*, bears a similar message. The author imagines the Romanian English-speaking young woman Ana Popescu, whose son was the result of a love affair with a visiting American archaeologist in the 1970s. In 1989, before the Revolution, she has her son taken to Frankfurt where he arrives alone as a refugee seeking asylum. The novel chronicles her dramatic suffering following her own failure to escape and, after the Revolution, her Odyssean wanderings in the West in search of her child. Now Romania embodies a woman's destiny. In fact, women in particular are forced to bear "the burden of the representation" because they

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[53] *Ibidem*, p. 39.
[54] *Ibid.* p. 94.
[55] *Ibid*, p.149.

are constructed as symbolic bearers of "collective identities."[56] Romania is consequently portrayed as a helpless, victimized woman, equally let down by the sympathetic but uncommitted West and the brutal, abusive East.

Like Virgil and George, she cherishes memories of Oltenian rugs, horas, Moldavian monasteries, folklore, Miorița, and poetry (especially Ana Blandiana). However, Romania is not always represented in British literature as the purest embodiment of poetry. Sometimes, it is the very quintessence of absurdity: "The truth about this country, meditates Ana Popescu, is that there is no truth. Absurdity is deep with us: it babbles in the first sounds our children make and in the groans of the dying."[57] Numerous writers, including Bel Mooney, Alan Brownjohn and Helena Drysdale, feel obliged to mention Ionesco and Dadaism as some kind of invariable explanation for the incomprehensible character of Romanian life.

The search of truth is not always dramatic in British literature about Romania. At times it is like a detective investigation like in Barbara Wilson's *Trouble in Transylvania*, another piece of popular fiction where the threatening and mysterious Balkans becomes the Eastern location for Western adventures. The difference is that the most eccentric sexual relationships take the place of romantic love, murder takes the place of (real or symbolic) suicide, and the realm of poetry becomes Gothic scenery. As in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1939), Barbara Wilson exploits the Gothic stuff of which the "Wild East", particularly Transylvania, is

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[56] See Amrita Chhachhi,"Forced identities: the state, communalism, fundamentalism and women in India", in D. Kandiyoti(ed.) *Women, Islam and the State*, Macmillan, London, pp. 144-175.

[57] Bel Mooney, *op.cit.*, p. 264.

made.[58] Ironically, while the plots in the works of Christie and Wilson hinge on the idea of being stuck in a threatening Balkan space (a small Croatian town for Christie and a Romanian health spa, Sovata/Arcata, an idyllic spot reminiscent of the mythical Arcadia Felice, for Wilson), the "murderer" is a group of Westerners or one Westerner (Frau Sophie, in Wilson's version), conveniently sharing the guilt with other Westerners. Sharing their Balkan deed in the same way, a group of crusaders (an Englishman, an American and a Dutchman) destroys the Transylvanian count in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in order to save Britain (Europe) from a vampiric reverse imperialism. The only difference is that in Barbara Wilson's mystery, the crusaders do not commit murder in a concerted action: the murderer is the prime suspect in the investigation led by the British lesbian detective and professional translator of American origin, Cassandra Reilly, although she, together with her American traveling partner Jacqueline, alias Jack, keep this secret. The victim is a modern vampiric variant, one of the ex-Securitate men and director of the Arcata Spa Hotel, an arcane character with an exotic hybrid name, Pustulescu (fabricated from the Hungarian "pustulni" – to die – with the Romanian ending "escu"). He deserved death; he was an "evil spirit malevolently alive". The act of justice takes on cosmic proportions: Frau Sophie becomes a goddess of the underworld, while the army of women, more or less lesbian, fighting against some evil representatives of Romanian masculinity, become her priestesses descended from an original matriarchal world. It is a general form of protest against everything the Balkans stand for: dictatorship, patriarchalism, violence, prejudice – organized by a group of very determined

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[58]  Vesna Goldsworthy," Invention and In(ter)vention:The Rhetoric of Balkanization", in Dusan I. Bjelic and Obrad Savic, *op.cit.*, pp. 25-38.

bearers of the collective Western feminism, coming by chance to this "buffer zone": "Traveling into Romania from the West, philosophizes one of them, was like leaving the wealthy drawing room upstairs for the downstairs servants' quarters. Hungary might be a butler, able to mix both worlds: Romania was the scullery cook."[59] Love and death, sex and politics, poetry and murder, dirt and purity, vampires and Securitate agents – all these stereotyped oppositions related to Romania's Balkan-Byzantine ambiguous vein are concentrated in the novel, but without reflecting dramatic conflicts. Barbara Wilson knows how to write from a feminist perspective in a politically correct manner without stooping to polemics. "Great fun!" says one book review. But, unfortunately, it is not always that much fun. Both in British and Romanian representations of the country, the combined culture-national identity, gender-ethnicity or race are exploited within the political dynamics of national differentiation.[60] Political dynamics may be different in the West than in the East, but such discursive constructions, which combine in many ways the concepts of culture, identity, ethnicity, gender, and race automatically lead to controversies surrounding the notion of "authenticity" and its supposedly fixed, essential, homogeneous constructions of cultural identity. And authenticity can give birth to what Kubena Mercer calls "the burden of the representation."[61] Acceptance of cultural diversity, in-betweenness and interference would instead free the representation from its burden, giving way to communication beyond any skepticism.

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[59] Barbara Wilson, *op.cit.*, p. 65.
[60] see Alexandra Alund, "Alterity and Modernity", in "Ada sociologica", 38, 311-22, p. 17.
[61] Kubena Mercer," Welcome to the jungle: identity and diversity in postmodern polities", in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1990.