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Slobodan G. Markovich

BRITISH–SERBIAN RELATIONS

FROM THE 18TH TO THE 21ST CENTURIES

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WRITING BETWEEN CULTURES: REFLECTIONS OF AN ANGLO-SERBIAN WRITER

Abstract: This paper looks at two books Vesna Goldsworthy published before she turned to fiction writing: *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (1998), and *Chernobyl Strawberries: A Memoir* (2005). Both titles deal with representations of the Balkans and are in some ways complementary in terms of content. Goldsworthy reflects on the ways their different genres affect their mediation between Serbian and British culture.

Keywords: Balkans, Britain, memoir, Ruritania, Serbia, Yugoslavia

The Map of Ruritania

Few postgraduate students of English literature are as lucky as I was in my choice of a doctoral research project a quarter of a century ago. *Representations of the Balkans in English Literature, Their Romantic Origins and Their Development Between 1894 and 1965* may sound like a typically dry academic title, but the analysis of the Balkans as constructed and then exploited by the British entertainment industry turned out to be timely; so much so that I weighed offers from several publishers even before my viva voce examination in June 1996. The thesis was published as a book by Yale University Press two years later, in May 1998, under the title *Inventing Ruritania: the Imperialism of the Imagination*.

My choice of focus was influenced by autobiographical factors. Having settled in Britain in the mid-1980s as a graduate in comparative literature from the University of Belgrade, I was understandably drawn to the works of English literature set in the places I left behind. I wanted to understand the ways in which my adopted homeland (Britain) saw my native country (Yugoslavia) and the broader Balkan region. I started with mid-twentieth century classics: Rebecca West's masterful travelogue through Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), and the two great trilogies of novels – Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy* (1960–66), set in Romania and Greece, and Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* (1952–61), inspired by his time with Tito's partisans in wartime Yugoslavia. For their very different political reasons, these books were not available in Serbo-Croat translation before I left Yugoslavia and were unknown to me when I was a literature student at Belgrade.

As I worked my way back through English literary history, I discovered more and more novels, stories, plays and poems with Balkan settings.

Although some of these – like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) or Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) – continued to represent hugely popular entertainments worldwide, brand names known to millions of people who may have had no idea that their locales in Transylvania and Slavonia were real places, dozens of yesteryear's bestsellers were forgotten even in Britain. Tracking them down in those pre-internet days was often a major undertaking and I wondered, given the prejudices many of these books exhibited, about the wisdom of resurrecting them.

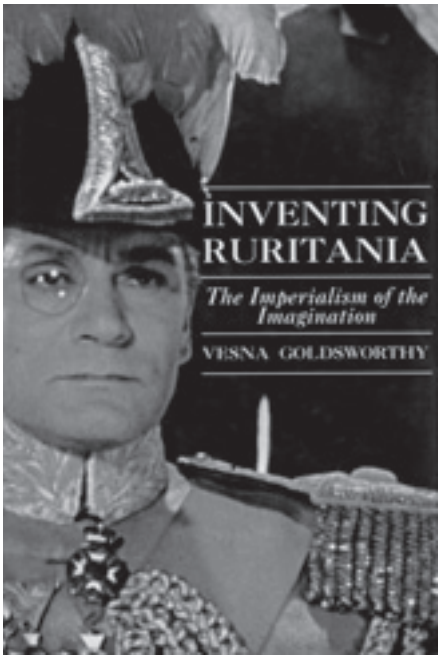
Even as the enormous scope of my project became clear, I remained fascinated and very frequently appalled by the continuous attraction the Balkans have exerted on the British imagination ever since the floodgates were opened by Byron's *Childe Harold* in 1812. The appeal was particularly interesting in view of the fact that Britain was, if we exclude a three-year spell on the island of Vis between 1811 and 1814, rare among the European powers in neither occupying nor governing any part of the peninsula. *Inventing Ruritania* turned into an account of two centuries of imaginative possession: gothic fears of Balkan threat alternating with fantasies of benevolent British influence.

Luck, however, is a doubly misleading word when it comes to the ultimate relevance of my research. On the one hand, I started gathering material in the late 1980s, the dog days of the Cold War, when the Balkans – like the continent's Jekyll and Hyde — were temporarily hibernating in the guise of Europe's sleepy backyard. The American historian Barbara Jelavich has rightly observed that the region "had usually impinged on Western consciousness only when it has become the scene of wars and acts of violence".[1] Although I was certain that an analysis of Balkan constructions in a dialogue with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) was both necessary and long overdue, at those early stages I also thought, mistakenly, that the Great Power military intervention in the region was a matter of history, and not something that would affect my generation.

On the other hand, as the "project Ruritania" neared its completion, the reason for renewed topicality of the Balkans was personally upsetting to the extent that I would gladly have given up on much more than my own research to make the attention go away. My native country, Yugoslavia, was disintegrating in a succession of interethnic wars which made headline news around the world. The fact that the wars were called Balkan rather than Yugoslav, even when most of the Balkans remained peaceful, confirmed my hypotheses but I did not get much satisfaction from that.

My research agenda was driven from the start by a species of "less-is-more" principle, in many ways the opposite of a historian's approach. I was less interested in specialist accounts than in the way the Balkans were represented in the works of popular novelists who, like Dorothea Gerard or S.C.

1 Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans. Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. IX.



Grier for example, often wrote a couple of novels a year or more, and who enjoyed wide readership. Not knowing anything – or not very much – about the Balkans yet maintaining that ignorance is not an obstacle to depicting a Balkan locale, at least as far as my research went, was an ideal case scenario. It showed what the British knew about the Balkans when they thought they knew nothing.

Although I was not researching the present, it was impossible to avoid noticing the persistence of a certain type of imagery which was being employed in relation to the Balkans long after it had become unacceptable elsewhere. Here's just one example, reported by the *Guardian's* John Henley from Kosovo as recently as in 2003:

> In John's Kukri Bar, a smoke-filled late-night dive opposite Unmik's high-rise headquarters, one adviser comes clean. 'It's like dressing a child,' he says. 'You have to give it the trousers of an economy, the shirt of an education system, the jacket of democratic processes, and so on. And all the time, the kid wants to run out and play in its underpants. If we let it, it'll get hurt.'[2]

Who is entitled to dress the Ruritanian child and who decides what clothes it should wear? The quote is perfectly "Balkan" in its seemingly benevolent sense of Western superiority. It would have been seen as racist and unutterable in relation to Africa or Asia long before 2003. It also relies on an idea of Ruritanian innocence which sees Balkan conflicts as infantile

2 John Henley, "Kosovo 1999", *The Guardian*, May 29, 2003. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/may/29/balkans.foreignpolicy (accessed 24 March 2018)

squabbles because they don't represent either a terrorist or a nuclear threat to the Western speaker. The child-like imagery here seen as appropriate for the Serbs and the Albanians would not have been employed in relation to Syria or North Korea.

This kind of imagery is also quintessentially Victorian. Its anachronism explains why, once I established the typology of stereotypes and the power relationship that underpins them, I saw little benefit in bringing my research endlessly up to date by adding new examples of the same paradigm to the bibliography.

By identifying such stereotypes I wasn't seeking to blame Britain – and even less the writers of its popular fiction – for all the Balkan woes. It would have been naïve and futile to claim that Balkan nations have no agency in their own destiny, or to assert that none of the stereotypes I encountered hold even a grain of truth. If I saw an advantage in speaking truth to (British) power I also knew that the same truth could easily be misappropriated at the Balkan end, for protestations of innocence or self-pity which deny responsibility for one's own actions.

Chernobyl Strawberries: Through the Looking Glass

Since its publication, *Inventing Ruritania* has been translated into Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian and Greek and it has enjoyed a number of editions in its original English. It remains on the reading lists at universities worldwide. While it has inspired many follow-up studies, my own work took a somewhat different turn. Personal circumstances – a long period of illness – led me to produce not another academic study, but a memoir entitled *Chernobyl Strawberries* which was published in 2005. Because it depicts my growing up in the socialist Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 70s, this book could be seen as a response to *Ruritania*, my own attempt to represent the Balkans in English literature.

The mirroring effect is most evident in those passages which confront mutual stereotyping. If *Ruritania* looked at British images of the Balkans, including Serbia, in intricate detail, *Chernobyl Strawberries* dealt with the Balkan, and in particular Serbian, perceptions of the British. It did so humorously and more succinctly, but with the same aim to show how and why national stereotypes arise. One particular passage became a successful feature of my public readings. I will quote it in full:

> Back in Belgrade, however, my forthcoming marriage and the distinct chance that I might soon be giving birth to little English people (with everything that implied) brought to the surface a veritable hotchpotch of ideas of Englishness, most of them mildly or not so mildly negative. Most Serbs I knew used the word English to mean British, so there was no let-off for the Welsh or the Scots either. Thus, for example:

- The English were perfidious and treacherous. Winston Churchill supported the royalist resistance in 1941 only to dump the entire Serbian nation unceremoniously into the hands of the commies without a second thought. This reflected the fact that the English had never been our true friends but had always simply used us in whatever was the great power deal of the day.
- The English were, on the whole, ugly. For every British born Cary Grant and every Vivien Leigh there were literally hundreds who looked downright weird. Belgrade television, with its endless repeats of programmes such as *The Benny Hill Show*, *Are You Being Served?* and *Hi-de-hi*, did not help. Neither did the fact that members of the royal family were somehow thought of as 'typically English'.
- The English were either arrogant, cold aristocrats or boorish, beer-drinking football hooligans. The latter 'needed a war, badly, to get the violence out of their system', according to my practical grandmother.
- England had, quite possibly, the worst climate in the world. The entire history of England could be viewed as a series of attempts to escape the weather. The English climate was likely to make me suicidal sooner or later. A neighbour turned up with a copy of *Wuthering Heights*, in which she had highlighted some pertinent descriptions of rain for my delectation.
- English sex was an oxymoron. We were too polite to discuss this, but there were hints that English couples were supposed to sleep in separate bedrooms after the birth of their children...
- England had perhaps the strangest cuisine in the world. They were reputed to have developed a special jam for every kind of meat, and they smothered their lamb with mint and vinegar. (This made Granny laugh, for Montenegrins are connoisseurs of fine lamb.) The English did not know what to do with vegetables, other than roots, as could be expected of northerners. 'And God only knows what their patisserie is like,' worried one aunt, while everyone tried hard to remember an English kind of cake.

'Reform Torte,' said a neighbour, referring to a fine confection of praline and walnut sponge, but no one was convinced that it was English. We imagined medieval bricks of dough which had to be soaked in milky tea. When Simon sat down to eat, Granny kept wondering whether any of the jars of jam from the larder – plum, rosehip, greengage, strawberry, melon – should be brought out to accompany his main course.

In fact, anything Simon did, anytime, anywhere, was examined as an example of 'what the English do'. He was not so much himself as a photo-fit for different aspects of Englishness. On a Danube pleasure cruise, two people came up to me to enquire about my travelling companion. 'I knew from his shoes that he was English the moment I saw him,' remarked a plump Yugoslav diplomat. 'Is it true that they are very cold?' asked a woman in a tight silk dress with a corsage of peonies, smiling broadly towards Simon in a vain attempt to obscure the line her enquiry was taking. He smiled back and muttered something about 'the lady's very fine pencil moustache'. I was, for perhaps the millionth time in my life, engaged in creative interpreting.

> Others patted his shoulder more benevolently, repeating, '*Srpski zet*!' ('Serbian son-in-law') as though he were somehow marrying the whole nation. In a sense, he was. '*Da, da*,' Simon replied in an impressive show of Serbo-Croat fluency.[3]

Confronted with a litany of Anglophobic images I gathered (with some pleasure, I admit) largely from the members of my broader Serbian family, my British audiences responded with laughter and often with recognition, contributing their own reflections on the same ideas, and explaining their historical roots. It was clear that the absence of political power behind the discourse in the opposite direction – Serbia to Britain – took the sting out of stereotyping. Unlike British ideas of the Serbs, Serbian ideas of the British are, it would appear, a curiosity of little practical consequence.

It is unsurprising, given their varying forms and tone, that *Strawberries* and *Ruritania* had very different impact. Although *Ruritania* was read relatively widely by the standards of an academic study, its readership was nonetheless minuscule compared to that of *Strawberries*. The memoir was translated across Europe, from Portugal to Poland, with fourteen editions in German alone, and it was serialised in the *Times* and on the BBC. Any single episode on BBC Radio 4 would have been heard by over a million people, i.e. hundreds of times the readership of *Inventing Ruritania*.

Yet, in so far as I am, in my writerly role, sometimes referred to as a literary mediator between two cultures, what do these numbers really amount to and how does one measure influence? Non-specialist books aimed at general readership, including fiction, can and do change policy as effectively as specialist briefings. Thus, for example, former US president Bill Clinton's stand on the Balkans is said to have been shaped by his reading of Robert Kaplan's travelogue *Balkan Ghosts* (1993), and John F. Kennedy was inspired by Barbara Tuchman's novel *The Guns of August* (1962) in his handling of the Cuban missile crisis.

To want to read *Ruritania* a person is likely to need an a priori interest in, and some knowledge of, the Balkans; whereas, as my conversations at literary festivals have taught me, the readership of *Chernobyl Strawberries* was far from limited to such an audience. The memoir was often read by people whose grasp of Balkan geography and history was uncertain, although a desire to learn more may then have been sparked off by the text itself. Some suggested that a map of Yugoslavia and a chronology of historical events my book referred to would have been a useful component in the print edition. I wrote the memoir with literary impact in mind, but it was expected to deliver educational value beyond the personal, in the way of a historical account or a travel book. Indeed, it is telling that many British bookshops shelved it in their Eastern European travel section.

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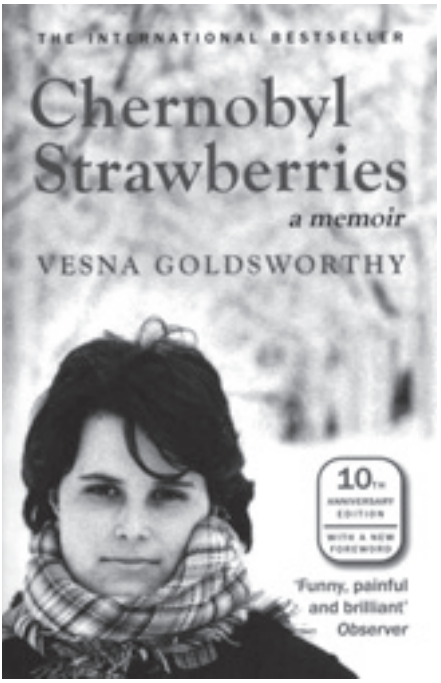
3 Vesna Goldsworthy, *Chernobyl Strawberries: A Memoir. Tenth Anniversary Edition* (London: Wilmington Square Books, 2015), pp. 221–224. Originally published by Atlantic Press in 2005.



If I were to judge by the post I received, *Strawberries* also provoked a much more passionate response than *Ruritania*. After *Ruritania,* most of my mailbag consisted of messages from journalists, postgraduate students and researchers engaged on similar Balkan work. In the aftermath of *Strawberries*, I started receiving pages of sometimes very intimate correspondence from people writing in a private capacity: readers' own life stories, memories of Balkan holidays or Balkan friends, arguments in favour and against the continuing existence of Yugoslavia, and attacks on or expressions of support for its socialist president Tito. I garnered praise for describing Yugoslavia well and criticism for misrepresenting it or for omitting to describe certain places and events. Some readers suggested it was my duty to tell a detailed story of the disintegration of Yugoslavia although I was already in Britain some years before it started happening. The memoir inspired travellers: a few British tourists decided to visit Belgrade on the back of my story, and the most determined of them even ventured into the suburb where I lived before I moved to London.

My life, in its published form, no longer felt entirely my own. Although it was written in English and for a British audience, and although it had precious little to teach a Yugoslav-born reader about Serbia and Yugoslavia, its Serbian and former Yugoslav readership was considerable. There is an understandable curiosity about the projections one's own image: I myself had tended to rush to buy similar books whenever they appeared in English. I realise that I could not avoid becoming what is known in postcolonial studies

as a "native informant", a betrayer of secrets, however benevolent those secrets may have been.

The correspondence I received from my compatriots, Serbian but also other former Yugoslav, both "at home" and in the diaspora, was understandably marked by heightened attention to each detail. For a little while this correspondence was so plentiful that I had trouble keeping up with it. It was overwhelmingly supportive, yet there were complaints and disappointments too. My sense of an instantaneous globalised audience, consisting of a multitude of groups with conflicting agendas, was overwhelming and direct: I am an academic and my e-mail address is in the public domain so I was particularly easy to contact. I sometimes envied an early Victorian writer like Alexander Kinglake for not having had to deal with e-mail reactions from across the Balkans, including from the press office at the Sublime Porte, when his *Eothen* was published in 1844.

The role of a mediator between cultures was not something I could choose or refuse as a writer. It was imposed on me by the fact of my migration to Britain and my choice of English as the language of my writing. That choice defines me in unexpected ways and it renders my identity unstable. In Serbia, I am often described as an "English writer of Serbian origin", a definition which always surprises me. In Britain, where the language is less of a marker of identity, I am always mentioned as a Serbian writer.

I am not sure how far that description affects my book sales. Writing about a very small country, like Serbia, certainly has its challenges in marketing contexts. In publicity meetings I have been asked, and with more than a modicum of anxiety, if my next work would be "about Serbia again," the implication being that one of a kind is enough to satisfy the market. I don't believe that Salman Rushdie would have been asked if he is writing "about India again." An Italian publisher turned down *Chernobyl Strawberries*, although they claimed to have loved the book, with the explanation that they had already had a Serbian book on their lists that year. My London novels never get this kind of reaction.

"As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world," Virginia Woolf wrote in *Three Guineas*, her 1938 polemic which blamed the patriarchal order for the rise of fascism in Europe. Growing up with the relative wealth of a privileged Yugoslav urban generation which crossed borders freely and often, I saw myself as cosmopolitan in a way which in most practical terms turned out to as hollow as Woolf's was: a declaration of desire, never a reality. I feel lucky to have two countries, even though each of them upsets me politically in its own way. I would be happy to hear that my work has eased the conversation between them in its small way, but I would not want that facilitation to be seen as either my task or my duty as a writer. The best of us are quintessentially irresponsible.

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