

# Mythistory and Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans



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Edited by

Tatjana Aleksić



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## INTRODUCTION:

# MYTHISTORICAL GENRES OF THE NATION

TATJANA ALEKSIĆ

The work on this collection began almost two years ago, with a panel on Balkan literatures and nationalism that I organized at the MLA Convention in Washington D. C. The fact that I used the word *literatures* in the title of the session in place of *literature*, speaks more of my desire to avoid the conflation of the whole region into an easily manageable category, as has often been done in the past, rather than to put an accent on the differences, real or imaginary, that have, regretfully, come to color the perceptions of the Balkans. From the beginning it has been my idea to bring to the forefront various ways in which the literary poetics of Balkan nations interrelates with their national poetics; through what modes and forms Balkan nations “narrate” *themselves*, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s expression, rather than render themselves to narration. Most of all, I was interested in recent and innovative explorations of literature and film which actively engage with national poetics, a kind of *mythopoiesis* of the modern Balkans.

In dealing with the subject of nationalism, however, it is never easy to avoid the obvious pitfalls from the one side, or stereotypes from the other, especially if national poetics is from the start labeled as *mythistorical*. Due to the great sensitivity of the subject of nationalism the very act of writing about it is equal to walking on thin ice and becoming an easy target for accusations of different kinds. Most of all, any focusing of interest on the national poetics in the Balkan context runs the risk of being *a priori* assigned the attribute of *destructive*, rather than *creative* poetics. I wanted to publish a collection that offers new perspectives on Balkan nationalism without falling into either self-denouncing or self-vindicating discourse; without the need to explain that the Balkans and their peoples *are* a bit different from the rest of Europe, but that this particular difference does not render them incompatible with ‘civilized’ norms of behavior, or with democratic social organization; that Balkan history is not any bloodier than that of nations who define themselves as *civilized*; that the Balkans are being defined as the uncanny other by the West which needs an imaginary dark opposite in order to occlude its

own darkness. Enough has been said on this subject during the decade of the 1990s, in the light of a renewed interest in the Balkans that saw the revamping of the age-old discourse which Maria Todorova designated as *Balkanism*.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, the rhetoric about the Balkans consists of a dialogue between a patronizing/accusatory discourse and a self-defensive one. The first was created with haste to respond to the critical situation during the ex-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and betrays that peculiar arrogance that originates from insufficient research and compulsion to offer a quick remedy for the crisis before the targeted audience loses interest and its attention shifts to a different locale in need of immediate consideration. It is this kind of simplistic pseudo-analysis of the aftermath of the break-up of the former Yugoslavia that can be most blamed for the latest dispersion of semi-truths, misinterpretations, or even deliberate untruths that still distort the picture of the whole region. I say “latest” because, as Todorova’s research shows, most of that discourse was at least a century old before being recycled in the 1990s to fit the new context. The virtual interlocutor with essentialist qualifications of *Balkanism* exists in texts by theorists and critics who have engaged with its critique.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence of this textual and media debate, there is a feeling that the personified Balkans seem permanently absorbed in the rhetoric of defense from essentializing designations necessitated by other cultural and national self-definitions. Forever safeguarding themselves against negative representations, the Balkans rarely ever leave the cycle of repetitions of what often sounds like a pledge of their innocence.

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Literature, whose role in the definition of modern nationhood has been analyzed at length and breadth appropriate to such an important subject, is one of the pivotal channels for national invention. Developing the connection between nationalism and the literary genre of the novel, Timothy Brennan in “The National Longing for Form” says: “Nations [...] are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (49). Brennan, as many before and after him, recognizes literature as one of the principal elements in the construction of national identity both in 18-century Europe and in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century postcolonial liberation movements.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, it is his spatio-temporal situation of these developments that is problematic, being reminiscent of Fredric Jameson’s controversial “national allegory” theory whose validity has since been brought into question, although it remains a powerful metaphor for non-Western developments, literary and otherwise.<sup>4</sup> The question arises of how this collection relates to such problematic claims since Balkan literatures would most likely fall under the ‘Third-World’ category in Jameson’s division and since its main concern is the national question and its narrative representations. Suffice to say, though, that the articles published

here are not representative of the totality of Balkan literary production. They treat Balkan nationalism(s) at particular historical periods crucial for their (trans)formations, a perspective that by no means relegates the Balkans to some unhistorical time or arrests the development of its literatures at the stage where the European novel began.

There are two prominent approaches to the problematic of the nation that this collection brings together. Perhaps the most established in the current theoretical environment is the one that tends to interpret the nation as a myth, an artificial creation, an invention, even a “dream.”<sup>5</sup> Such treatment of the subject is championed by some of the leading poststructuralist thinkers. It examines the nation as a modern phenomenon (or a modern myth) that emerges at the time of industrial revolution and has no real continuity with preceding forms of social organization, although it is all too busy seeking its imagined origins in antiquity.<sup>6</sup> The other, much less common argument nowadays, is a historical mapping of the nation that considers its historically progressive role, but also searches to establish its origins in much older ethnoscapes.

Not explicitly against the theories of national mythopoiesis but insistent that modes of historical representation be given equal importance, Gregory Jusdanis in *The Necessary Nation* (2001) wishes “to restore history to the study of nationalism,” by which gesture the nation would stop being interpreted purely “as an invention, a fantasy, or a narration,” a mythical and mimetic narrative of a “search for origins” (4-5). He rejects the poststructuralist project of “writing of the nation” because its ultimate goal is to “unwrite” it. Not catering to either pro- or counter-nationalist factions, and fully aware of nationalism’s latent murderous power, Jusdanis urges the reader to reconsider the historically creative role that the nation played at its time as a progressive and positively homogenizing force (in European bourgeois, just as in postcolonial liberation movements), rather than uncritically reject it on the grounds of its adverse energies.

Neither of the two methods of describing the nation, however, can prove satisfactory by itself. If the nation is merely a figment of our certainty-starved imagination brought about by the collapse of religious systems, then we ourselves and our universe are probably parts of somebody else’s dream. The purely historical elucidation of the problem, on the other hand, gets complicated by the impossibility of proving many postulates of ethnogenesis because they belong to the times that precede any solid forms of historical documentation. This collection proposes an approach to the national question that lies distinctly in the liminal space best designated as *mythistory*. The choice of the term *mythistory* in defining nationalist narratives in general, as well as those discussed in this collection, is based on the impossibility of delineating a clear-cut distinction between the historical as opposed to the mythological origins of nations. Its application, although not determined by the exact term, can be traced as far back as Herodotus,

whose *History* was a compendium not only of historical events, accompanied by dates and related facts, but also of foundational myths of the then known nations, of the sacred stories of their national beginnings that define the spatio-temporal continuity, interpret the future, and have been integrated in their historical narratives.<sup>7</sup> People believe in them, and their appeal ensures their persistence in national traditions. “Myth,” as Stathis Gourgouris observes, “is always co-incident with history,” due to the fact that “societies constitute and negotiate their identities out of an expressly creative/destructive force, animated in humanity’s deepest psychic reservoir.” Moreover, he identifies the ability of societies to “control their destinies” with “the extent to which they recognize the effects of their own mythopoetic production” (2003, 43). Mythistory thus emerges as the discourse applied both by fictional and historical-nationalist narratives, and is profoundly involved with both the individual and collective aspects of memory. The adoption of the term *mythistory* as a key concept in defining nationalist narratives in this collection is more than appropriate amidst the growing disillusionment with the lessons of history and an intensifying disbelief in its scientific and factual claims. Itself a liminal construct of two apparently opposing concepts, mythistory adds even more uncertainty to the recognized ambivalence of the “Janus-faced discourse of the nation.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, its very designation returns us to the spoken origins of national narratives as evidence that *writing the nation*, at least in the Balkans and in much of the postcolonial world, has never replaced the oral means of its creation, but rather that the two have joined forces in the process of national definition.<sup>9</sup> Despite all the common associations of ‘myth’ with ‘distortion’ or the reverse of the ‘truth,’ it is clear from Malinowski’s inclusive definition why some of its aspects appeal to nationalisms of various kinds: “myth acts as a charter for the present-day social order; it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief, the function of which is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than being discredited, through the above attributes myth assumes a paradigmatic value of a past to be remembered and looked up to. Equally so, however, and this aspect of myth is by no means less appealing or less often employed by nationalists of different colors, it is one of the best mediums for callous manipulation and divisiveness.

In his Introduction to *Nation and Narration* (1990), Homi Bhabha proposes that “Nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being” (1). We should seek for the roots of the national imaginary in the sedimented layers of collective knowledge rather than in the daily events that seemingly alter the political (and geographical) landscapes beyond recognition. The former roughly falls under the denominator of ‘tradition’ that comprises collective memory and empirical knowledge and that

likewise includes certain aspects of what could be designated as ‘mythical’ or ‘primordial.’ It is this traditional knowledge that circulates within a culture and is transmitted through generations that generates a deeply human anxiety about change, all the while attenuating it by demonstrating that our everyday reality is rarely altered beyond recognition, but is only modified. The latter element, the one we hold responsible for the seeming mutation of the familiar universe, is what we commonly ascribe to history. Political events, elections, crises... in short, everything that threatens to disturb the delicate balance of peaceful existence and brings to the fore nationalism’s destructive potential. Contrary to commonly held belief, however, this is not the time when the full perniciousness of nationalism is generated. Such historical circumstances only create a favorable medium for the full manifestation of its latent capacities. Instead, national consciousness should be traced back to the more constant aspects of tradition that permeate the historical existence, and that are frequently relegated to the legendary or the mythical. Salman Rushdie, whose own writing is thoroughly informed by myth, says that the whole history of humanity is a bloody battle over the prevalence of *the* story; namely a battle about whose story is older, greater and better.<sup>11</sup> One could argue that by this interpretation history becomes permanently and inextricably underscored by mythical subtext as its basic motivation. Moreover, making the mythical a foundation of something so tangible and ‘real’ as history adds an extra dimension to the long-denied truth value of myth while, in turn, the truth value of history suffers an inevitable deflation.

One of many confirmations of this idea that the true history of mankind should be searched for in traditions rather than history books or daily events is found in the words of one of the Nobel Prize laureates from the Balkans, Ivo Andrić, who thought that “[t]he true history of mankind is contained in fairy stories, they make it possible to guess, if not to discover, its meaning” (1992, 16). Following in Andrić’s footsteps, Danilo Kiš will later state that only myth can make any sense of the confusion of history. Yet, the sensitivity to the mythical foundations of history is not a specifically Balkan or non-Western modern cultural trait. It is enough to remember that T. S. Eliot likewise believed that it is only myth that can help us understand and cope with history. It is, therefore, the multifaceted dynamics of these two that brings to the foreground the unique national poetics, which is in this collection referred to as national mythopoetics.

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In full accord with the view that the study of nationalism necessitates a cool-headed approach that will consider its positive as well as negative side, this collection is built around the idea that the mythical subtext of the national narrative is equally significant as its historical one; hence the insistence on the mythistorical approach to the subject. Mythistory is, therefore, explored through

its multifold engagement with the text: as a major element in the universal nationalist discourse, a concept that is not nation-specific; as a narrative strategy extensively utilized in Balkan literary and film narratives; and as a particular technique in approaching the interpreted texts. Through the insights gained from literary and critical theory, historical analysis, and cultural anthropology, this collection seeks to reveal the application of mythistorical discourse upon narratives responding to nation-forming historical events. However, mythistory is not simply a persuasive rhetoric of nationalism, but also a narrative style that subtly promotes the political without dogmatic intentions. Instead, the texts considered in this collection articulate very distinct agendas of gender, identity, culture, philosophy, and aesthetics, all interwoven with national problematic, but steer away from the definition by which mythistory is relegated to the transparently propagandist.

Marcel Cornis-Pope focuses on the Danube corridor as a mediator of the encounter between Central Europe and 'Turkish' Europe (the Balkans), an encounter that produced many violent frictions but also new cultural syntheses. In literature, the Danube has been conceived of as a border—disputed, defended, and crossed-over—but also as a relatively successful cultural interface. By positing the river as the central locus, his reading complements and illuminates that of the Balkan bridge metaphor which commonly overwrites the river in Balkan narratives. Does the bridge truly facilitate the crossing or, perhaps, impose even further obstacles? Which one of the two represents the imaginary border? Why does Heidegger 'accuse' the bridge of even further dividing the river banks rather than connecting them?<sup>12</sup> This introduction to the literary production of the region, a unique 'Danubian library,' raises the issue of the representation and acceptability of multiculturalism by the literatures (and populations) south and north of the Danube. It seems that writers south of the Danube embrace the idea of multiculturalism more readily than those in the north, where it is only grudgingly acknowledged. The implied idea of hybridity, however, is much less welcome inasmuch as it implies the presence of the non-European (commonly Ottoman/Turkish) Other. This notion of the 'uneasy neighbor,' thus introduced in a general survey of literary narratives in the Balkans, is further developed by Julia Musha, who concentrates on the Albanian case of literary and political self-definition amidst European integrations. For the most prominent Albanian writer, Ismail Kadare, multiculturalism still seems to be a problematic concept, while his literary opus uncovers a tension concerning the Other's proximity incarnated not only in the Ottoman Empire, but in other territorial neighbors as well. Questioning the possibility of maintaining the in-between position between contrasting worlds, his Albanian Eurocentric imaginary perceives Balkan multiculturalism in terms of spatial expansion and linguistic contamination. Even while clearly invested in producing Albania as Europe proper and thus creating its own mythology of the

nation complete with claims of original authorship over shared Balkan myths, Kadare's writing represents a lucid examination of the workings of ideology and of historical narrative as error and falsification.

Not all approaches to mythistorical aspects of literature, however, interpret myth as its *content*. Some are distinctively interested in the performative aspects of myth.<sup>13</sup> Such approach is congenial to Alexander Kiossev's reading of a literary-political dialogue as theatrical discourse taking place on an imaginary 'stage' where actors in the play rehearse their respective parts. The text interprets the tensions of a minor historical event whose mythopoetic impact nevertheless succeeded in eclipsing a major one that actually brought about Bulgarian independence. The article presents nationalist rhetoric as a constantly-revolving stage play of emancipation, freedom, and sovereignty. Every element in this historical play is imaginary—from the rhetorical site of the 'stage,' to the audience which is, in reality, absent from the spectacle, but whose 'absent presence' is constantly addressed in the 'script' as it is perceived to be pivotal in the staged nation-forming performance. While this article envisions the nation through the agency of a theatrical spectacle, therefore, belonging to the genre of drama, Jessie Labov presents us with three more nation-creating narrative forms. Her reading of the *Leksikon Yu-mitologije*, a modern myth-in-the-making about the myth of Yugoslavia, proffers various interpretations of the creation of a cyber-myth that feeds itself on the nostalgia for the lost country; while the article simultaneously exposes various mechanisms involved in the actual process of mythmaking. The article proposes three ways of reading the *Leksikon*—as a work of fiction, as a museum, and as a *wiki*—suggesting that the creation of mythology is a never-ending process. Despite the fact of utilizing various methodologies over time its essence remains unaltered. It is appropriate to designate the kind of mythmaking found in the *Leksikon* as 'virtual mythopoetics' and read it as yet another nation-narrating genre. Its specificity lies not only in its medium but also in the absence of limitations on memory. After the fragmentation of the actual territory was accomplished by the multiplicity of competing national mythologies, the virtual space of cyber-Yugoslavia and the *Leksikon* represents, perhaps, the last remaining space in which memory and counter-memory of the former common narrative may cohabitate without wreaking havoc with their tensions.

Despite many known interpretations of the most compelling of all Balkan metaphors—that of the bridge—it seems that the full repertoire of its meanings and associations can never be exhausted. As such the bridge has been constructed, deconstructed, crossed, defined, and described, while some more recent times have witnessed attempts at its physical or metaphorical annihilation.<sup>14</sup> It is, therefore, expected that a collection concerned with the mythistorical narratives of the Balkans should pay its due to this powerful *topos*. Artemis Leontis's topographic approach to the subject, relying as much on architecture as on history,

reconstructs the concrete object behind the legendary edifice. Crucial for the Modern Greek identity, yet overlooked by the admirers of the Classical, Byzantine/Ottoman/Balkan Greece remains largely neglected. This particular bridge recreates the broken link between the singular Greek identity invented for the Greeks and necessitated by Europe's own national self-interrogations, and the multicultural and hybrid Greek identity originating in centuries of post-Classical historicity. A literary bridge, whose purpose was to connect the two temporally distant Greek nations, was created by Nikos Kazantzakis in 1909. In my article his play is examined alongside two other texts that rewrite the pan-Balkan legend of the immurement of a female body. Although the legend possesses recognizable mythical-ritual origins reflecting the struggle of culture and nature, male and female principles, and so far has been interpreted through that particular lens, the narrative distinctively reads as a national allegory. In conjunction with ample textual evidence this claim is further substantiated by the fact that the legend's multiple oral versions were recorded all over the Balkans at the time when the fascination with folkloric production emerged as a direct result of nationalist movements all over Europe. Its innumerable interpretations range from mythical-ritual to feminist; from psychoanalytical to overtly chauvinist whose main concern is the primacy of one version over others. My reading of the immurement motif, however, designates the female body as the locus of nationalist desire where the ancient legend imagines the nation as a construct predicated on the removal of the female from the visible social space. The article traces the gradual substitution of the female victim by sacrifices of male bodies, as the discourse underlying the nationalist enterprise mutates and becomes responsive to immediate threats. Continuing to build on the metaphor of *entombment* of the male narrative subject inside liminal spatiality, Meta Mazaj investigates the nation-forming potentials of alternative spaces. Relying on the Foucauldian theory of "heterotopic" spaces, her essay reconstructs 'other' narrative loci of national imagination—neither real nor completely imaginary. The heterotopic space in the films she analyzes serves as a deliberate strategy to reflect the mythical construction of the Balkans, as well as the ambiguous discursive and ideological pressures of Balkanism. A kind of a conclusion, but not the full closure to the bridge story arrives in Vangelis Calotychos's interpretation of the perpetual dynamics of the edifice's construction and destruction as a struggle of competing narratives which, however, can easily lend itself to various misinterpretations and manipulations. Constructing the bridge is thus seen as the impulse of overwriting the preceding narratives and the establishment of one's own national/religious/political agenda. In this function it counterpoises storytelling which arises as an act of resistance in the local community and assumes the meaning of a defense of the narrative in danger of erasure. Seen in this light, even the latest attempts of the international

community's various bodies and NGOs at stabilizing the region can easily be perceived as a resolution to "'bridge' populations and interests from *without*."

Marinos Pourgouris's essay approaches the Balkans through the gaze of a modern Odysseus who traverses the war-torn Balkans in search of the "first gaze." Various episodes in Balkan history represent a backdrop for an otherwise personal journey, but are also a cautionary tale of the impossible task of the individual's extrication from history. The mythical subtext further complicates the historical journey and begets a true mythistory brimming with dialectical tensions between mythical/historical, present/past, male/female, personal/collective, imaginary/real. Perhaps the most vivid manifestation of the unresolved outcome of these tensions lies in the historical rectification of the mythological obliqueness of events. Inasmuch as the mythical motion is coercively cyclical, the 'eternal return' is never complete as the circle is never round.<sup>15</sup>

Voicing K. E. Fleming's critique of ever more common, albeit insufficiently correlating applications of Edward Said's premises in *Orientalism* to the Balkans, Tomislav Longinović prefers to discuss the Balkans as a post-*Oriental* rather than post-colonial space. Instead, he proposes a bold multifold cultural translation of mythistorical content into a global system of signs in which the respective past and present traumas of (arguably) 'marginal' and powerful nations get abstracted to a new level of meaning. Such transcription of national anxieties enables the battle of Kosovo to meet 9/11 inside a common "memoryscape of collective martyrdom" in which the Orientalized object of anxiety acts as a catalyst for collective cohesion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maria Todorova's book *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), written in the wake of Yugoslav civil war, universally interpreted as another 'Balkan war,' was among the first texts to draw the attention of a limited audience to the intentional oversight with which the war contained within the borders of several formerly Yugoslav republics was represented as Balkan. Starting from that latest occurrence of *Balkanist* discourse, Todorova goes on to expose a whole history of rhetoric congenial to Orientalism and applied to the Balkans at various periods. Todorova's caution not to equate Balkanism with Orientalism, however, has not been heeded by some scholars who find the parallel too attractive and tend to interpret the Balkan situation through the lens of postcolonial discourse. In "*Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography*" K. E. Fleming argues that neither the historical circumstances nor the consequences of the two colonial situations—the one inflicted by the Ottoman occupation of the Balkans, and the post-colonial state of former European colonies—are comparable to the extent that justifies a direct application of the premises of Orientalism to the Balkan territories.

<sup>2</sup> To mention just some of the most influential texts of the period: *Imagining the Balkans* by Maria Todorova; "Nesting Orientalisms" by Milica Bakić-Hayden; *Inventing*

*Ruritania* by Vesna Goldsworthy; *Balkan as Metaphor*, eds. Dušan Bjelić and Obrad Savić, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best-known among the texts that clearly define the nation as an imaginary idea and literature as a pivotal element in its creation are *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), eds. Terrence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm and *Imagined Communities* (1991) by Benedict Anderson. Also applicable may be articles collected in *Nation and Narration*, especially Simon During's "Literature—Nationalism's other? The case for revision," 138-153.

<sup>4</sup> The reference is to Fredric Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1985): 65-87. His controversial argument of virtually *all* non-Western fiction reading as 'national allegory' denies any development to non-Western fiction which he sees at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggling with the same issues that Western fiction treated in 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the time of the emergence of modern nations in Europe. This act of confining literature to forever reproducing the same kind of *collective* identities by extension denies subjectivity to non-Westerners as well, as they are never seen evolving beyond members of a nation into individual citizens, which seems to be the prerogative of Western readers. *Nation and Narration* also treats the subject of national definition from the point of comparison of much older Western texts and current postcolonial production, although the accent is on the parallel between the actual political-historical moment of the nation and the role that literature plays in it, rather than on stereotypes that are found to be so problematic in Jameson's argument.

<sup>5</sup> Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> See Antony Smith's *The Antiquity of Nations*, which offers a cross-section of various interpretations of the origins of the nation, both those insisting on its modern derivation and those that tend to see it as evolving from a much older *ethnie*.

<sup>7</sup> For an introduction to the discourse of *mythistory* see Joseph Mali's *Mythistory*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. Cf. Paul Veyne's *Did Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* investigates the measure of belief that the ancient Greeks showed for their myths which were thus freely and with little weeding of the 'truth' from 'fiction' incorporated in historical sources and cultural traditions. He concludes that the survival of the mythical tradition was enabled not by the uncritical belief in the fantastic stories, but by the "authentic kernel that over the ages has been overgrown with legends" and in this form entered the collective memory of the people (14). The marvelous element in mythical stories should thus be considered an allegory, an example of achievements worthy only of heroes and unattainable to the common people.

<sup>8</sup> Homi Bhabha appropriates Tom Nairn's designation of the nation as a "Janus-faced" construct to define the language and discourse of national construction and cohesion. *Nation and Narration* (3).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, and Homi Bhabha's collection *Nation and Narration*.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Timothy Brennan, "The national longing for form." *Nation and Narration*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Salman Rushdie offered this idea in his speech I listened to at The College of New Jersey Writers' Conference on April 10, 2003. His exact words are not quoted here as a transcript of this speech is not available.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger was fascinated with the significance of bridges and their diverse symbolism. See his "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

<sup>13</sup> In one such interpretation, Stathis Gourgouris links literature's theoretical capacities to myth, but refutes that it means "to explore myth as content (the recirculation of narratives of particular myths or the allegedly archetypal *Gestalt* of mythical tales). Rather, it takes myth to be a matter of performative action: literally, according to what takes place in the theater, but also, metaphorically, according to the tireless capacity of humankind to create fables, legends, and stories in order to dramatize the otherwise incommensurable puzzle of human existence" (2003, 30-1).

<sup>14</sup> I refer to the physical destruction of bridges during the 1999 NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia and the reference to the 'blowing-up' of the bridge by Dušan Bijelić and Obrad Savić in the Introduction to their *Balkan as Metaphor*.

<sup>15</sup> A., the protagonist of Angelopoulos's *Ulysses' Gaze* repeats Odysseus' words "in my end is my beginning," yet the final destination of his journey fails to provide the expected outcome while the searched object that motivates it reflects the unattainability of desire. Milčo Mančevski further explores this collapse of narrative closure in *Before the Rain* (1995).

## CHAPTER ONE

# DANUBIAN BRIDGES AND DIVIDES: BALKAN MULTICULTURALITY NORTH AND SOUTH OF THE DANUBE

MARCEL CORNIS-POPE

The Danube is German-Magyar-Slavic-Romanic-Jewish Central Europe, polemically opposed to the Germanic Reich. It is a “hinternational” ecumene, for which in Prague Johannes Urzidil praised it; it is a hinterworld “behind the nation.”

—Magris, 9

According to Claudio Magris—himself a product of several cultures—the “hinternational” Danubian region opposes the idea of coherence and ethnic purity, encouraging a continuous redefinition of reality and identity. Ironically, what is missing from Magris’s otherwise perceptive picture is the acknowledgement of the role that the Ottoman presence played in this fluid multicultural matrix. The Danube corridor mediated for several centuries the encounter of European and Ottoman (Oriental) cultures, an encounter that produced many violent frictions but also dreams of new cultural mixtures such as a Roman-Muslim Empire. There is also a significant difference in the way the Danube corridor has been perceived up-course and down-course: this difference has been most often expressed as a hierarchical opposition between a ‘Mitteleuropa’ Danube and an ‘other,’ more Oriental Danube. While Magris recognizes this difference, he still maps the Danube along primarily a West-East axis, neglecting for the most part the river’s role as a north-south interface between Slavic and non-Slavic populations, including the Turks.

For writers south of the Danube, multiculturalism has been a more useful concept. While these areas were not spared violent ethnic conflicts, there is some truth in Ivo Andrić’s metaphoric suggestion in *Na Drini ćuprija* [1945;

The Bridge on the Drina] that the Slavic and non-Slavic populations south of the Danube were oftentimes able to coexist in spite of their different ethnic and religious identities (Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, and Judaic), learning to accept the transcultural bridge originally imposed upon them by the invading Turks. The novel's linguistic complexity further bridges the various facets of southern Danubian culture: the Ijekavian dialect of Andrić's youth in Bosnia is present in the direct speech of the characters; the narrator, on the other hand, speaks in the Ekavian dialect specific to Serbia proper; both discourses are further interwoven with Turkisms and with traces of Ladino. The fact that the bridge over Drina is finally destroyed at the end of the Austrian era seems to suggest that the decentered Ottoman imperial model of multiculturalism was more advantageous, though no less contradictory for the Balkan cultures than the unifying Austro-Hungarian model.

The role of the Ottoman occupiers in enhancing rather than undermining this cultural hybridity is recognized by Maria Todorova in her seminal book on *Imagining the Balkans* (1997). The Ottoman administration used Greek in their correspondence with the occupied countries, facilitated the preservation of Byzantine books in libraries, and encouraged the exchange of scholars, ideas and publications in several languages, both 'Oriental' and Western. Acts like the 1856 *Khatikhumayun*, which stipulated that all ethnic and religious groups living in the Empire had equal rights and opportunities, replaced monologic ideas of Europeanism with a cultural heterotopia. The career of Naim Frashëri, now widely regarded as the national poet of Albania, is an apt illustration of this successful multiculturalism. He studied Turkish, ancient and modern Greek, French, and Italian and was tutored privately in Oriental languages. Of his twenty-two works, four were written in Turkish, one in Persian, two in Greek and fifteen in Albanian. His brother Sami, published—in addition to important lexicographic works on Turkish language—the first Turkish novel which was also the first novel published by an Albanian, *Taaşşuk-u Tal'at ve Fitnat* [1872; *The Love of Tal'at and Fitnat*].

Valorizing this cultural heterotopia, Todorova simultaneously deemphasizes the nationalistic movements against the Turkish occupation and defends the "mongrel," "cross-bred" identities of the Balkans from those Western scholars who see them as a "corrupted" version of Europeanism. She praises the efforts of those writers who turn the "handicap of heterogeneity" (133) into a positive cultural feature, foregrounding the region's different legacies (Byzantine, Orthodox, Ottoman) and the role of the latter in allowing the first two to develop further. But in her effort to retrieve the hybrid middle ground of the Balkans, Todorova creates her own divisions between Balkan people (primarily Bulgarian) who accept their multicultural heritage and others (Romanians, Hungarians, Serbs) who reject it. Her opposition is challenged by the

contradictory responses that Bulgarian writers have offered to the Ottoman legacy. For example, the leading figures of the Bulgarian Revival—Hristo Botev, Lyuben Karavelov and Petko Slaveikov—described Tzarigrad—and by extension Turkish culture—as foreign and un-homely, the negative other of the true Bulgarian Homeland. The impossibility of living a normal life outside the “Bulgarian lands” is thematized, for example, in Karavelov’s early short novel, *Turski pasha* [1866; Turkish Pasha]. This narrative follows the fate of two Bulgarian children, a boy and a girl kidnapped and sold as slaves in Tzarigrad. Karavelov’s novel suggests in no ambiguous terms that entering Turkish society is devastating for Bulgarians. The uprooted heroes are doomed from the beginning: marriage in the foreign environment provides no support, the home is a place of estrangement and vices, even the food is not nourishing. In stark contrast to this negative view of Turkish culture, Turkophile Bulgarian writers like Stoyan Chomakov and Nikola Genovich regarded the Ottoman Empire as a dynamic mixture of Oriental and Western elements, praising the efforts of the reformist Turkish government to spread modernity towards the peripheries.

North of the Danube, the impact of Turkish culture was acknowledged more grudgingly, and usually as a negative influence. The Ottoman Empire was regarded as ‘evil,’ dysfunctional and yet enslaving, non-Christian, irrational and mystical. The alternative representations of the Ottoman Empire, coming from Jewish culture or from the Balkans, acknowledged ‘Oriental sensuality’ as a positive feature, but could not blend with it. There were also important exceptions, such as the pioneering work of Prince Dimitrie Cantemir of Moldavia. Raised and educated in the Ottoman capital, in a blend of Oriental and early modern Western culture, Cantemir contributed directly to the modernization of the Oriental canon, inventing a revolutionary musical notation system for the transcription of traditional Ottoman music and writing an influential history of the Ottoman Empire, *Historia incrementorum atque decrementorum Aulae Othomanicae* [1716; History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire]. Other members of the northern Danubian elite were more circumspect. A century later, in 1853, Timișoara’s first modern mayor, Johann N. Preyer, praised his city for looking East, “out of a noble impulse,” but was happier with the city’s nostalgic glance towards the West:

Timișoara, almost the furthestmost bastion of contemporary civilization towards the Orient, a few hours away from the Ottoman border, is the last carrier of the culture that emanates from European civilization. Out of its noble impulse, the city looks across the border of Mahomet’s people where the big waves of the ancient Danube carry the diligent commerce of Germany’s and Austria’s flourishing cities, but where the brilliant spirit of modern civilization is still struggling to take root. But the city also likes today to glance nostalgically in the opposite direction, towards happier cities, where [...] the interests of greater

countries and empires come together, and the spiritual formations of an entire section of the world are reflected in a converging mirror. (256)

Like so many commentators since, Preyer deemphasized the Eastern inheritance of the city, attributing all efforts to ‘civilize’ Timișoara to Western influences, and deploring the decay of the city under the one hundred and sixty years of Turkish occupation. For Preyer and later scholars of the region, ‘Homo Otomanicus’ remained Central Europe’s Other, often as ‘inassimilable’ as the Gypsy and occasionally the Jew. Fear of an Eastern Other reemerged periodically whenever the multiethnic balance of the Banat area was weakened by nationalist passions. Ironically, every ethnic group seeking hegemony over its neighbors tried to reduce the latter to a stereotypical Other, describing the Romanian, Hungarian, or German cohabitants as Turkified or Gypsified. The Turkish heritage was not entirely erased, functioning as a visible trace in the palimpsestic history of the area: the Latin engraving on the Old Timișoara Town hall, which praises Prince Eugène of Savoy’s liberation of Timișoara from the Turks (on Oct. 13, 1716), overshadows to this very day the Turkish inscription by the main gate that reminds the reader that this palace was built on the site of a former Turkish bath. As Ioan Hațegan argues in his Afterword to Preyer’s monograph, contemporary historiography needs to recover (without counter-idealization) the contribution of the Eastern strand not only to Timișoara’s multiculturalism (Preyer, *Monographie* 295), but also to the entire area between the Danube and the Don that Karl Emil Franzos called *Halb-Asien* [1876; Half-Asia].

Recent scholars have been more willing to recognize the multiculturalism of the region north and south of the Danube. According to Victor Neumann, beginning in the eighteenth century, the Banat region embracing the two sides of the river and inhabited by Romanians, Serbs, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, Slovaks, Turks, and Armenians, developed the rudiments of a ‘transethnic’ East European civilization (see *Identități*). As the great ‘turning plate’ between Vienna and Constantinople, the Banat area redefined Europe as an intercrossing of multiple traditions, rather than a homogeneous cultural space. The *Temptation of the Orient*, analyzed by Daniel Vighi (1998) under its various guises, has equally concerned novelists, forcing them to open their narrative forms to the play of hybrid geocultural identities. For example, Livius Ciocârlie’s *Un burgtheater provincial* [1985; A Provincial Burgtheater] presents a collagist view of Timișoara and the Banat region, pieced together from historical chronicles (Turkish, Romanian, and German), newspaper clips, letters and personal reminiscences. Both the status of the author (reduced to an assembler and rereader of texts) and that of his narrative subject (the cultural spectacle of a multiethnic provincial city, summed up in the metaphor of a “burgtheater”) are redefined in this narrative mosaic. Identity (individual and collective) is enmeshed in the play of cultural differences also in Miloš Crnjanski’s epic novel, *Seobe* [1929; Migrations],

focused on the fate of eighteenth-century Serb refugees from the Turkish occupied territories to the Austro-Hungarian province of Vojvodina, on the Danube. In return for their military service to the Empire, the Habsburgs allow them to use their own language and practice their Eastern Orthodox religion, but they feel estranged from their roots and the majority of Serbs who continue to live under Turkish occupation. The main character, a colonel in the Austrian army, dreams of one day living in a free Slavic country like Russia. Vuk's dream comes true for his son Pavle, in the second volume of the novel, *Druga knjiga seoba* [The Second Book of Migrations], published by Crnjanski only in 1962, after years spent in exile. But the Serbian colony in Russia gradually erodes until only a few Serbian village names survive. The novel suggests that the only chance the representatives of small Danubian nations have for maintaining a modicum of identity between the Eastern, Western, and southern empires, is to be continually on the move, in constant migration (the word "seoba" can be translated also as "wandering," "moving to a new place").

A good portion of the literature of the Danubian corridor written in the last two centuries emphasized Oriental escapism and hedonism (as in the 'Turkish' novels of Mór Jókai, especially *Törökvilág Magyarországon* [1853; The Turkish World in Hungary], or in the picaresque novels of Panait Istrati), the tense encounter between European and Ottoman cultures (Ivo Andrić, Miloš Crnjanski, Zaharia Stancu), cultural and narrative multivocality (Péter Esterházy, Danilo Kiš, and Sorin Titel). Typologically, this literature was often populated with 'Danubian peasants,' 'hajduks' and trickster/sages, but also figures of 'others' (Gypsies, Jewish, Greek, and Arab merchants, Turkish administrators, or 'German' travelers—see Vighi 103-123, 125-27). The hajduks—outlaws, freebooting soldiers, rebellious shepherds, or thieves—featured in the folk and high literature on both sides of the Danube (see Muthu, "Haiducul"); reinvented and localized in the works of Lyuben Karavelov, Hristo Botev, Mihail Sadoveanu and Panait Istrati, the haiduks had, among their missions, the defense of the Danubian 'frontier' from Turkish incursions.

One particular character, the crippled sage Nastradin Hodza, exceeded national borders, being popular north and south of the Danube and also in the Near and Middle East. A storyteller, wise man and sometimes a trickster, Hodza was perfectly adapted to the spirit of the place. The Turks considered him one of theirs but, in fact, he was alternatively Christian and Muslim and took on the nationality of every country he dwelt in. His more distant brothers are the equally wily and resourceful Hitar Petar (Sly Peter) in Bulgaria and Păcala in Romania. These characters represent not only the metamorphic nature of Danubian identity but also the essential permeability of boundaries (national, cultural, and ethnic) in this region. However briefly, they take attention away from the ethnic and national conflicts that have historically separated the cultures along the Danube, promising

a utopian federation of nations—something along the lines imagined by Baron Miklos Wesselény in 1842, by Aurel Popovici in 1906, and by Oszkár Jászi and László Németh after World War I.

However, no amount of utopian thinking can obscure the “string of battlefields, past, present, and future” and divisive fortifications that stretch along the river (Magris 33, 155). The Danube has often been conceived of as a border—disputed, defended, crossed-over—between Central Europe and the ‘Turkish Europe’ or the Balkans. The emerging national literatures of 19<sup>th</sup>-century South-Eastern Europe sought bridges with the West but anxiously resisted them in the Turkish Balkans. In Mihai Eminescu’s “Scrisoarea a treia” [1881; Third Epistle], the Danube is thrice crossed in 1394: first in the Turkish sultan’s arrogant dream, as his empire extends its shadow over the Tigris, Euphrates, the Nile and the Danube (*Poezii* 154); then in reality, as Bayazid’s armies cross into Prince Mircea the Old’s Walachia, “darkening” with their numbers the battlefield north of the Danube (155); and finally one last time as his hordes scurry back defeated and end up engulfed by the “furious Danube” (157). The Romanian and Bulgarian towns along the Danube were the sites of other important confrontations with the Turks such as the failed April 1876 Bulgarian uprising in Rousse, reflected in Ivan Vazov’s novel, *Pod igoto* [1899; Under the Yoke] and in Zahari Stoyanov’s three-volume *Zapiski po bălgarskite vazstaniya* [1884-1892; Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings]. This and other clashes with the Turkish occupiers were honed into archetypal narratives of the emerging national states in the region. For example, the story of Prince Michael the Brave’s defeat of the Turks at the Battle of Călugăreni (1593), north of the Danube, interested many writers, moving gradually from history into a self-legitimizing national narrative. Ion Budai-Deleanu had contemplated at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century an epic on him, but found both himself and the Romanian language inadequate for the task (*Ţiganiada* 69-70). The first major work on Michael the Brave, Nicolae Bălcescu’s *Românii supt Mihai-Voievod Viteazul* [1878; Romanians under Prince Michael the Brave], already presents Michael as a half-mythic figure, comparable to Homer’s demigods but fallible in his social options. In the twentieth century, Nicolae Iorga devoted not only historical pages but also a play to him (*Mihai Viteazul*; 1920). Under Ceauşescu’s regime Michael was deftly exploited as a symbol of the nation. Radu Theodoru’s two-volume *Brazdă şi paloş* [1954-56; Furrow and Sword] and his tetralogy *Vulturul* [1971-74; The Eagle], focus on the social and political life during Michael’s reign. The voivode features in the former as a picturesque character traveling through the country disguised as a tradesman, occasioning interesting social observations, but also heroic exploits that oppose Walachians to the Turks. Another Transylvanian writer, Titus Popovici, wrote the screenplay for Sergiu Nicolaescu’s *Mihai Viteazul* (1970), which mobilized the techniques of epic cinema in the service of Romanian nationalism.

Nationalism or defensive localism often mix with a phobia of bridges, especially when these bridges are imposed by imperial powers from the outside, as in Ismail Kadare's *Ura me tri harqe* [1978; *The Three Arched Bridge*, 1997], which conflates the fourteenth century Balkans under the first Ottoman invasion with the fate of Sovietized Albania six centuries later. Against the wishes of the local population, a bridge is built over the river Ujana e Keqe ("Wicked Waters") but it threatens to collapse until a volunteer is immured in its structure. Even then, the bridge remains 'a stranger,' plagued by mysterious cracks that exacerbate the local community's uncertainties and superstitions.

However, the localities along the Danube were not only sites of conflict but also relatively successful sites of cultural exchange between the Turkish world and Central Europe. Towns like Vidin, Rousse, Giugiu—or Plovdiv further south—had a richly layered culture, with various civilizational imprints. Consider the following passage from Ivan Vazov's *Nova zemya* [1896; *New Land*]:

How could I describe Rousse? Take Kiev off its hills and splash the Crimean Bahtchisarai onto them, not forgetting to add a few European-style houses. Narrow alleys, slumfulls of lepers, cafés where the hookah gurgles, filth—an eastern world. As *couleur locale*, pour a measure of shoddy houses, pocked roofs, minarets truncated by our shells, [...] and dust, dust [...]. Dust and wind [...]. The Danube, however, flowing down the high banks, the Danube redeems it all. A magnificent river!" (43)

It helps to know that this description comes from the letter of the Russian Count M. to a girlfriend in Russia, so its negative view of Rousse's Oriental eclecticism should not surprise us. Rousse's mix of cultures and languages fares much better in Elias Canetti's autobiography, *The Tongue Set Free*. In the writer's childhood Ruschuk (Rousse), Bulgarians, Turks, Romanians, Sephardic Jews, and Albanians lived side by side. As he remembers, one could hear simultaneously seven or eight different languages in its street: "As a child, I had no real grasp of this variety, but I never stopped feeling its effect" (Canetti 1977, 6).

While it is true that the Ottoman cities especially south of the Danube were multicultural in a medieval rather than a modern sense, allowing for simple cohabitation rather than for intercultural exchange, their hybridity was genuine. These multiethnic cities along the Danube, that included an important Turkish component, made the river a porous boundary, an enabler of cultural contacts more than a divider. Dr. Kien's twenty-five thousand-volume library in Elias Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé* is an appropriate metaphor for the richness of this 'Danubian library.' The complex cultural exchange between the local cultures and the Turkish legacy is memorably symbolized also in Mór Jókai's short novel, *Az aranyember* [1872; *A Man of Gold*], in the form of a recycled treasure. Mihály Timár, whose boat is capsized in the troubled waters of the Iron Gates, between

the Turkish-subjugated Serbian, and the Habsburg-dominated Hungarian sides of the river, discovers a fabulous wealth stashed away in one of the recovered wheat sacks. The treasure belongs to the ship's escaping Turkish official who dies on the trip and it should have gone to his young daughter. Timár, however, keeps the gold for himself and marries the girl out of guilt, but the marriage is never consummated. Timár becomes a real Midas, investing the money into brilliant schemes that allow him to climb socially and even be knighted. But he finds happiness only on the little island of Ada Kaleh (at the time inhabited by Muslim Turks and Sephardic Jews), with another woman who leads a rustic life outside society. Timár shuttles for years between the two women, as well as between the upper and the lower Danube, until he vanishes together with part of the multicultural he had known.

The shuttling between the Turkish (Oriental) tradition and the Western one informs much of the twentieth-century literature written on both sides of the Danube. Mateiu Caragiale's *Craii de curtea veche* [1929; Old Court Libertines], especially Paşadia and Pantazi, mix oriental hedonism with Western cultural ambitions. Paşadia, whose name has Turkish echoes, is an erudite aristocrat, a historian and genealogist whose own genealogy is multiple, including Sicilian, Norman, as well as Greek ancestors; he reads and writes during the day and indulges in debauchery at night. Pantazi, whose family came a century before "from the Turkish lands" (the Balkans), also mixes debauchery with erudition, reading Cervantes and Camoëns in the original. In spite of their foibles, these culturally hybrid "old court kings/philanderers" are more sympathetic than Gore Pirgu, a perverse lower-class upstart recruited from the "brawlers and cutthroats" of the Bucharest slums. Under its ironic motto from Raymond Poincaré, President of France between 1913 and 1920 ("What do you want, we are here at the gates of the Orient, where everything is taken lightly..."), the novel presents in the "craii" both a universe of Oriental decay, promiscuity, and failed Europeanization, and the sublime freedom to reinvent oneself as a freewheeling Balkan dandy.

Ion Barbu's poetic cycle "Isarlîk" in *Joc secund* [1930; Second Play] represents a more positive cultural topography at the intersection of the Orient and Occident. Going against the prevailing view of "Turkish Europe" (the Balkans) as a retrograde vestige of an orientalized past, Barbu turns the Danubian town of Isarlîk (an imaginary representation of Giurgiu that echoes Hisarlik, the name of the Turkish village under which Schliemann discovered Troy) into an integrative metaphor that brings together contradictory facets of existence. Situated "halfway between Evil and Good," the city of Isarlîk experiences simultaneously a tranquil immobility and a secret rhythm of change and dissolution. This utopian city of the sun welcomes mythic figures from Turkish literature, like Nastratin Hogeia, who refuses the pasha's invitation to partake of the city's gifts, preferring instead to

take small bites of his own “holy body.” Like this oriental sage/poet/clown, the city itself thrives on its own dissolution.

The prolific Romanian novelist Mihail Sadoveanu wavered between historical novels focused on the confrontations of the Romanian principalities with the Turks, in which Romantic pursuits blended with realistic descriptions of battles and idealized, larger-than-life heroes, and mythic-symbolic narratives that valorized the multicultural mix of the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Under the pretext of rewriting the story of the old philosopher-teacher Sindipa, *Divanul persian* [1940; *The Persian Divan*] offered a genuine cross-section of Oriental narrative lore (Turkish, Syrian, Arab, Mongolian), demonstrating the value of intercultural dialogue and tolerance at a time of sharp political polarization during World War II.

The Danubian multiethnic culture was submitted to a process of erosion and leveling through much of the twentieth-century, as a result of nationalistic pressures and of right-wing and left-wing dictatorships. The easternmost region between the Danube and the Black Sea, Dobruja lost its multiculturalism after the Turkish and Bulgarian inhabitants were forced to leave; The Bulgarian cities south of the Danube, including Plovdiv, were also streamlined, losing their multicultural traditions. The cosmopolitan capitals in the Danube region—Budapest, Belgrade and Bucharest—also lost some of their cultural hybridity. The gradual erosion of Bucharest’s heterotopia during the communist years is well suggested in Eliade’s *Pe strada Mântuleasa* [1968; *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*, 1979], which focuses on the Stalinist years, and in Bănulescu’s *Cartea de la Metopolis* [1977; *The Book of Metopolis*], which reflects the later phase of Ceaușescu’s nationalist communism.

As the river prepares to turn towards its destination, the Black Sea, it “merges with the meadows in a vast, inextricable jungle of water, dense trees overhanging the river to form liquid caverns, deep flowing lairs, dark green and blue as the night, in which it is impossible to tell the soil from the water and the sky” (Magris 386). Magris’s description suggests very well the amalgamated and inclusive nature of the Danube’s lower course. Indeed, Balta Brăilei (the Brăila Pond) and the Danube Delta further east were until recently a lively natural refuge. They functioned also as a historical place of refuge, the nearby city Brăila being a haven for the Bulgarian revolutionary exiles during the nineteenth century, for the Greek merchants, and for the wanderer-genius, Panait Istrati. Called by Romain Rolland the “narrator from the Orient,” Istrati reconstructed the life of the small Danubian port of Brăila, where Romanians, Turks, Greeks, Jews, and Gypsies lived side by side in an imaginary feudal Balkania. The motley origins and social status of his characters suggested a utopian multicultural space along the Danube, whose fluid boundaries and uninhibited behaviors contrasted with the increasing divisions of Europe. But drama was not absent from his narratives: Istrati’s cycle *Viața lui*

*Adrian Zografi/La Vie d'Adrien Zograffi* [1938; *The Life of Adrian Zograffi*] is marked by violence and decay, with the dust of Brăila as an overarching metaphor for the waste of civilizations. We are reminded of the similar role that the Pannonian mud plays in the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža's novel *Povratak Filipa Latinovića* [1932; *The Return of Philip Latinowicz*, 1989].

Sulina, the port where the main branch of the Danube allegedly ends without forming a proper mouth is a destination place for European human destinies, a place of decadence and broken promises as in the novel of Jean Bart (Eugeniu P. Botez), *Europolis* (1933). The writer offers a monograph of the provincial port Sulina, a place where East and West meet to produce a motley multinational humanity, resembling that of Istrati, caught between sudden passions and dramatic disappointments. In this motley cultural background, identity is continually renegotiated.

As Magris reflects, "It may be that Danubian culture, which seems so open and cosmopolitan, also creates [...] feelings of anxiety and shutting things out," of attraction and "obscure terror of the Other" (Magris 389). In many cases the "Other" was the Turk, the Oriental, the foreigner; but in just as many cases the "Other" was one of the local group's neighbors, as its challenge and complement. The 'other' in this region is often already inscribed in each ethnic group, questioning its claim to a single identity and singular destiny.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *LEKSIKON YU MITOLOGIJE:* READING YUGOSLAVIA FROM ABRAMOVIĆ TO ŽMURKE

JESSIE LABOV

#### **Introduction**

A lexicon is by definition more flexible in its approach than a dictionary or an encyclopedia. It professes only to be a guide to the vocabulary or specialized terms of a particular area of interest, without the promise of a comprehensive knowledge implicit in the other two concepts.<sup>1</sup> The prescribed subject of a lexicon, therefore, has a profound effect on its final form and audience, whether it is about butterfly collecting, military terminology, or a completely fictional world such as Tolkien's Middle Earth. In the case of the recently published *Leksikon Yu Mitologije* (literally, the "Lexicon of Yu Mythology"), the very subject presents a riddle: what realm is it describing? who is its intended audience? and what form will it therefore take?

Upon examining the book we learn quickly what it concerns, as the first item after the table of contents is a comprehensive timeline from 1943 ("birth of the new Yugoslavia") to 1991 ("the disintegration of Yugoslavia"). The events listed correspond to known historical markers ("1948: Tito's "no" to Stalin"), while focusing mostly on literature and culture ("1961: Dušan Vukotić is awarded an Oscar for his animated film *Surrogate*"). The *Leksikon* is the result of a joint publishing project between the publishing house "Rende" in Belgrade and "Postscriptum" in Zagreb, and it is an unprecedented cultural artifact. The 500-page volume contains over 800 entries on Yugoslav popular culture; a brief glimpse beyond the chronology into the alphabetized contents reveals entries on comic books, female arm-wrestling champions, hairstyles, and the automotive blueprint for the Yugo (Fig. 1). There is an extraordinary number of entries