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Introduction

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Southeastern Europe, a region with a rich and complex history marked by numerous conflicts between political, economic, and religious forces, along with migrations, ethnic intermixing, and diverse cultural entanglements, has been the focus of a multitude of literary representations by both local and foreign writers. Literature has played a major role in constructing and disseminating specific images of the region. This special issue comprises literary-critical studies exploring the various ways in which southeastern Europe is imagined and re-imagined in/through literature, from both external and internal perspectives. Prior to discussing the contributions to the issue's special topic, I will present a brief overview of research on southeastern Europe.

Ever since the 1990s, the study of southeastern Europe, a region also called "the Balkan peninsula" or simply "the Balkans," has been growing.[1] Scholars in the humanities have made a major contribution to the field by elaborating a methodology to explain how "regions are being discursively made" (Mishkova 1). Basing their work on representations of southeastern Europe in literature, film, travel writing, journalism, diplomatic reports, and so on, and selectively "borrowing" insights from the area of postcolonial studies, they have uncovered some of the mechanisms of hegemony and power that have shaped the region's image for both people in it and beyond. Their critical interventions, especially in the 1990s, were timely: the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia were being approached by some western politicians and key figures in the media as demonstrations of primitive tribal hatreds. Moreover, the conflicts were consistently labelled as "Balkan," thus unfairly implicating the whole region in them. In her seminal book *Imagining the Balkans* (1997; 2009), the Bulgarian-American historian Maria Todorova examined and criticized the implications of such an approach to southeastern Europe.

Todorova coined the term "Balkanism" for "the popular western discourse positing an ontological and epistemological distinction between European 'Self' and Balkan 'Other'" (Mishkova 1). Balkanism not only has various expressions in the public domain but also operates at the level of language. Todorova, diagnosing the negative image the region gained in the early twentieth century following the Balkan Wars (1912–13), wryly notes that Europe expanded its collection of derogatory terms with a new addition: "balkanization" (3). Apart from denoting fragmentation into small, antagonistic segments, the word has become "a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian" (Todorova 3). Todorova further mentions its decontextualization and a deplorable tendency to apply it to "a variety of [other] problems" (3).

[1] I do not mean to imply that the region was not the object of scholarly investigation in earlier times. For a lucid commentary on the study of the region, see Diana Mishkova's book *Beyond Balkannism. The Scholarly Politics of Region Making* (2018). The excellent chapter on the interwar period, "The Balkans as Autospace" (pp. 70– 03), is of special interest.

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For Todorova, Balkanism is distinct from Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (3–20). In her work, she systematically stresses the *Europeanness* of the Balkans: the region may be "the dark side of a collective Europe" (53), but it definitely belongs within the "old" continent. While Balkanist bias has shaped a fair number of western texts and commentaries on the Balkans, in all fairness, it should be noted that derogatory attitudes are not exclusive to "the Big Bad West." Thus, a number of denizens of the region insist on distinguishing between *the Balkans* and *southeastern Europe*, with the former referring primarily to areas that had undergone Byzantine cultural and religious influence as well as full-scale Ottoman dominance. Countries under Habsburg domination or with limited autonomy from the Ottoman Empire are deemed "non-Balkan" (see Boev's article in this issue) and so "truly" European. Needless to say, such a distinction does not take into account the instability of imperial borders and changing spheres of influence in the past (see Calic 4), or, for that matter, the porousness of state borders and the unavoidable flow of cultural and other elements across them. Under the circumstances, using the terms "southeastern Europe" and "the Balkans" interchangeably appears to be the most effective strategy. This would dispel some of the negative connotations of the latter, allowing it to be used as a neutral geographical term. As Diana Mishkova has demonstrated, earlier examples of this kind of usage can be found in some early twentieth-century left-wing contexts (71).

Instances of Balkanism within southeastern Europe have been fruitfully analysed through Milica Bakić-Hayden's concept of "nesting Orientalisms" (917–31). Drawing on the situation in the former Yugoslavia, she speaks of "a gradation of Orients," or "a pattern of reproduction of [the Saidean] dichotomy" between east and west (918). Within this pattern, Asia would appear to be "more 'East' or 'Other' than Eastern Europe," "within Eastern Europe itself …the Balkans [would be] most 'Eastern'" (918), and within southeastern Europe, certain ethnogeographical spaces would be classified as more "Eastern" than others.

Todorova ends her analysis of Balkanist disparagement with an appeal to Europe to uphold its heritage of developing effective "antidotes" to the harmful ideological "poisons" that it has previously generated: "If Europe has produced not only racism but also antiracism, not only misogyny but also feminism, not only anti-Semitism, but also its repudiation, then … Balkanism has not yet been coupled with its complementing and ennobling antiparticle" (189). The coupling of Balkanism with its "ennobling antiparticle" should be the joint task of Europeans from all over the continent, including the Balkans. And the process has already begun, as evidenced by the work in the humanities discussed briefly above. Scholars such as Todorova and Bakić-Hayden paved the way for others to follow.

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Two of the articles in this special issue analyse texts that approach southeastern Europe from an external perspective. Galina Devedjieva's essay focuses on Robert Southey's long narrative poem *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), which at first glance appears to be totally unconnected with southeastern Europe and reflects Romanticism's fascination with what Eva Hoffman has facetiously called "the Oriental East" (342).[2] However, the inclusion of the earliest depiction of vampirism in British literature within the poem underscores southeastern Europe's significance in it. In a lengthy explanatory note, Southey quotes reports "by competent and unsuspected witnesses" testifying to vampirism in the Serbian provinces of the Habsburg Empire and further adds that "such a superstition [also] prevails in Greece" (238; 239). Vampirism has traditionally been seen as a sign of the primitivism of the Balkans, one of the areas that long remained untouched by Enlightenment rationalism, and for this reason, harboured superstitions that had been abandoned elsewhere in Europe. According to Devedjieva, the vampire in Southey's poem takes on a different role than later literary vampires. Nonetheless, the genesis of this monster traces back to the same source as its successors: the Balkans, Europe's most notorious "vampireland."

Saša Simović analyses *The Pobratim: A Slav Novel* (1895), authored by an obscure writer, who identified as "Prof. P. Jones." The book reveals that the author – most likely of British extraction – must

[2] Maria Todorova also noted Hoffman's neologism. See *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 59.

have been fascinated by Montenegro, the Montenegrin way of life, and local beliefs and traditions. In the nineteenth century, Montenegro garnered significant attention due to its perceived preservation of the unique characteristics of a bygone heroic era. In an essay that William Gladstone produced about the country, he assigns it to the same level of civilizational development as Agamemnon's unknown "antecessors" and praises its inhabitants for their primitive vigour and military prowess in having opposed the Ottoman Empire and preserved their independence (see Kostova 169). Jones appears to have been attracted by Montenegro's primitivism rather than by the heroic exploits of its inhabitants, and in any case, the novel is predominantly a love story, with some Gothic touches, rather than a tale of valiant deeds in the past.

While Southey and Jones clearly exoticized the Balkan locales they included in their books, the following two essays look at contemporary writers whose depictions of the region are far from exotic. Hristo Boev focuses on some autobiographical elements in two works by the Romanian writer C. G. Balan (born 1972). These elements are an effective tool for developing culturally significant autofictions that serve as testimony to pivotal periods in the author's life. Furthermore, the autofictions are enmeshed in larger social contexts with historical relevance, particularly those pertaining to Romania's communist past and early democracy. Balan's method of illuminating these events through the satire of influential figures symbolizing authority, coupled with the narratives' deep personal experiences, creates striking contrasts. These poignant literary depictions capture life under a totalitarian regime and the fragile onset of democracy – a period when numerous Romanians opted to emigrate or move to the nation's capital in search of a better life. The experiences depicted in Balan's works bear similarities to the lives of "real" people from the region, particularly Romanians and Bulgarians, whose countries became part of the European Union but were unable to completely overcome the debilitating flaws that their political systems had inherited from the past.

The final essay on the issue's special topic presents a reading of Vesna Goldsworthy's novel *Iron Curtain: A Love Story* (2022). Born in Belgrade when it was the capital of Yugoslavia, Goldsworthy now lives in the United Kingdom and produces fiction and literary criticism in English. She is one of several writers of southeastern European heritage, who write in English, including Aleksandar Hemon, Kapka Kassabova, Miroslav Penkov, and Téa Obreht. Taking his cue from the translation theorist Chantal Wright and the literary critic Steven G. Kellman, the essay's author Sava Stamenković describes such writing as "exophonic" or "translingual." Contemporary exophonic writers show varying degrees of identification with their countries of origin. However, Goldsworthy's identification looks strong enough to deserve inclusion in both British and Serbian literature.

The plot of *Iron Curtain* takes us back to the past: it is set in the 1980s and centres on the life of the novel's heroine Milena in London and the capital of an invented communist country, located on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. Goldsworthy is the author of one of the key studies of the representations of southeastern Europe in British literature, *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination* (1998; 2009). In satirical imitation of the late Victorian writer Anthony Hope, she creates her own Ruritania, whose history incorporates elements from the pasts of the former Yugoslavia, Romania, and (perhaps) Bulgaria. Her heroine is a privileged "red princess," who abandons her homeland for love, rather like the mythical Medea, daughter of the mighty King Aeëtes of Colchis. Milena's life with her duplicitous British husband, who is appropriately named *Jason*, is a catastrophe, and she chooses to return to the state-socialist Ruritania of her birth with her twin sons in tow. She makes her formidable father promise that Jason will never be permitted to enter the country and be reunited with their children. The text satirizes both British culture and the political system of the unnamed southeastern European country. Stamenković's skilful analysis of the novel does full justice to its complexity.

The four essays on the issue's special topic provide valuable insights into the literary representations of southeastern Europe that they engage with. They delve into a range of themes that capture both the historical and contemporary facets of the region, such as exoticism, survival and maintaining one's integrity in challenging political and social circumstances, and the contentious life choices of privileged "red princesses." Overall, a peculiar yet culturally and politically significant assortment of themes!

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The current issue also returns to the theme of mediation and mediation practices, which was the focus of a previous edition of the journal (see vol. 6, issue 2, 2022). Three essays explore mediation within contexts as varied as Joseph Conrad's unique literary output, English language teaching, and Nigerian drama. They offer deeper understanding of the articles on the issue's special theme and create links with articles from previous issues. Joanna Skolik's article provides valuable insights into Conrad's position as an exophonic writer, situated both "inside" and "outside" English culture, and, as a result, forming a truly critical perspective on the social and political evils of his time, such as colonialism. In her excellent contribution to the issue, Irena Dimova strongly supports the incorporation of intercultural mediation skills into English language teaching. Michael Olanrewaju Agboola broadens the horizons of European readers by offering his perspectives on the social role of contemporary Nigerian theatre.

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