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Border Crossing and Exile in Vesna Goldsworthy's *Iron Curtain* (2022)

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The novel *The Iron Curtain: A Love Story* by the British and Serbian writer Vesna Goldsworthy is set in London and in the capital of an unnamed state-socialist country behind the Iron Curtain. It follows the fate of young Milena Urbanska, a privileged "red princess" but also a victim of the communist regime, both in exile and on her return to her homeland. The protagonist leaves her homeland in pursuit of freedom and love, but her return becomes an act of vengeance, casting her in the role of a latter-day Medea. This article focuses on the themes of border crossing and exile, which are central to this exophonic novel.
Keywords: exile, border, exophonic/translingual literature, Iron Curtain, Vesna Goldsworthy.

Vesna Goldsworthy, née Bjelogrlić, was born in Belgrade in 1961. After earning a degree in Yugoslav and Comparative Literature from Belgrade University in 1985, she relocated to London. In London, she earned a Master's degree in Modern English Literature in 1992 and a PhD in 1996. Goldsworthy started her career in publishing in 1986 as an editor and spent ten years at the BBC after joining in 1990. She embarked upon an academic career in 2000. Goldsworthy previously taught English literature and creative writing at Kingston University and the University of East Anglia and is currently a professor of Creative Writing at the University of Exeter. In addition, she has held positions as a visiting professor in the United States, specifically at St. Lawrence University in New York and Bucknell University in Pennsylvania. *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*, a critical assessment of images of the Balkans in British literature and travel writing, is widely regarded as her most famous work. Published by Yale University Press in 1998, it was reissued in a revised format by Hurst & Company in 2013.

Goldsworthy's second book, *Chernobyl Strawberries* (2005), is subtitled a "memoir." However, the Serbian writer Vladislav Bajac defines it as a genre-bender "spanning various forms: diary, memoir, and fiction" ("O knjizi").[1] *Chernobyl Strawberries* presents Goldsworthy's life in Belgrade and London, and in a way marks her transition to fiction. Interestingly, in 2014, Grupa 484 of Belgrade[2] released a 44-page excerpt from the Serbian version of the book as a standalone novel. Following her collection of poems, *The Angel of Salonika* (2011), Goldsworthy has published three novels. The first two re-write literary classics: *Gorsky* (2015) is Goldsworthy's version of *The Great Gatsby*, and *Monsieur Ka* (2017) may be seen as a sequel to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Her third work, *Iron Curtain: A Love Story* (2022),

[1] All translations from Serbian and Bulgarian are mine, unless stated otherwise. S.S.
[2] On Grupa 484 (Group 484), see https://www.grupa484.org.rs/en/.

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is in fact her first fully independent novel, in the sense that it does not re-write any other literary work, although some of the heroine's choices, according to Goldsworthy herself, have their parallels in the story of Medea (see Rhodes).

Goldsworthy wrote her poems in both English and Serbian, and she translated the novel *Gorski* into Serbian herself. Nataša Tučev, a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Niš, translated her last two works, *Monsieur Ka* and *Iron Curtain*, with the author's assistance. *Iron Curtain* was first published in Serbian in Tučev's translation in 2022, with the novel's English version released shortly afterwards (Matković). One of the questions that this article asks is whether, and to what extent, *Iron Curtain* can be regarded as part of contemporary Serbian literature.

Goldsworthy was awarded the "Momo Kapor" Award in 2022, which caused some controversy. Several people asked why the prize for literature in the Serbian language was awarded to a translated book. Even the President of the jury, Muharem Bazdulj, stated that "his only objection to the book [was] that it was first published in English," which, as indicated above, is not technically true. "The prize is awarded alternately one year for literature and one year for the visual arts. It is awarded to artists from Serbia, Republika Srpska, and Montenegro, and to books published in the Serbian language" (*Politika*). It should be noted that it says *published*, not *written*.

Goldsworthy considers herself a British and Serbian writer (her Montenegrin origin through her father is also occasionally referenced, especially in *Chernobyl Strawberries*), but her literary works are most easily and accurately classified as what has been called "exophonic literature" (see Wright, *Literary* 15). It is, as it is most commonly and simply defined, literature written by authors in a language other than their mother tongue. Exophonic literature, it should be noted, is not a universally accepted term. There are many terms for what Dubravka Ugrešić (1949–2023), an ex-Yugoslav writer who left Croatia and moved to the Netherlands in the 1990s, called "writing in the grey zone" (qtd.in Wright, "Writing" 27): axial literature, transnational literature, migrant literature, in Germany also *Gastarbeiterliteratur* and *Ausländerliteratur*, and there are some theorists who classify this kind of literature as postcolonial (see Wright, "Writing"; see Kellman 32). Chantal Wright argues that these terms "have shown themselves to be unsuitable as descriptions of writing by non-native speakers on the grounds of being thematically prescriptive, utopian or, in the case of postcolonial, inappropriate from a historical point of view" ("Writing" 38). According to Wright, exophonic literature is the best descriptor:

> The term "exophonic" has the advantage of describing a linguistic state of being rather than prescribing any theme(s). It does not imply anything about a writer's background… It also allows for comparative study of the phenomenon of exophony across linguistic boundaries, while always bearing in mind "the local" … , and encourages acceptance of exophony as a natural and growing phenomenon worldwide. In focussing on style and how meaning is generated by it, the term "exophonic" represents an important shift in how we approach writing by non-native speakers, and a return to the of late somewhat neglected relationship between form and meaning in literature. ("Writing" 39–40)

Steven G. Kellman (32–52) has proposed yet another term: *translingual writing*, which effectively captures the notion of *moving* from one language to another, and thus also describes "a linguistic state" without necessarily "imply[ing] anything about a writer's background." Both terms will be used in this article.

It is not in any way surprising that literary works categorized as exophonic or translingual share common themes such as mobility, border crossing(s), cultural differences, language switching, and the enormous challenges of exophony. On the other hand, theorists of such writing encounter a major problem: that of classification. Should authors who write in a language other than their "native" tongue have their literary works included in both the literature of their cultural heritage and the literature of the language that they write in, regardless of the degree to which their "mother" tongue has influenced their use of that language? A significant example is Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), who was originally named Józef Korzeniowski. He achieved renown as a prominent British author and is currently acknowledged as a figure of importance in both Polish and British literature. On the other hand, the self-definitions of

contemporary translingual writers show varying degrees of identification with either the “native” context or with the “receiving” one. Thus, the Bulgarian-born writers Kapka Kassabova and Miroslav Penkov live in English-speaking countries, Kassabova in the UK, and Penkov in the USA, and write in English. Whereas Penkov usually describes himself as a Bulgarian writer, who writes in English and Bulgarian, Kassabova shies away from being defined by her country of origin. In fact, she has explicitly stated in an interview that “we are not necessarily the place we come from” (qtd. in Kostova 173). Obviously, what may be termed “the Conrad formula” does not easily apply to writers like Kassabova, but her texts can certainly be defined as *exophonic* or *translingual*. Conversely, Goldsworthy seems to have a somewhat stronger sense of belonging to the country of her birth, therefore I will go ahead and call her an exophonic writer who is a part of both Serbian and British literature.

Significantly, the plot of Goldsworthy’s most recent novel also “wavers” between two cultures, taking place in the British capital in the 1980s and the capital of an unnamed state-socialist country behind the Iron Curtain. *Iron Curtain* begins with a dedication: “To all my friends who, like me, grew up east of that line from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic” (v). The dedication includes the former Yugoslavia and seems to place it on the “eastern” side, even though in the past most Yugoslavs did not consider their country to be on the “wrong” side of the Iron Curtain. Readers from outside the ex-Yugoslav context may assume that the novel’s unnamed country is Yugoslavia because of the author’s background, while Serbian or other ex-Yugoslav readers may think it is Yugoslavia because of certain aspects of the book, such as the reference to the country’s deposed king and his government in exile (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 229). The book’s heroine’s first name, Milena, may potentially hint at a connection with Yugoslavia, although it is also a common female name in Bulgaria. Besides, Bulgaria had its own famous – or infamous – “red princess”: Lyudmila Zhivkova (1942 – 1981), the daughter of the country’s communist leader Todor Zhivkov, who enjoyed privileges inaccessible to ordinary Bulgarians. In addition, she was something of a rebel against “orthodox” Marxism-Leninism, having developed an interest in mysticism and Agni Yoga.

Overall, Goldsworthy appears to be playing a clever game with her readers, challenging them to guess the name of Milena’s state-socialist homeland. The country has a multi-layered past marked by a wide variety of foreign dominations and religious affiliations: “Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Islamic; Byzantine, Ottoman, Habsburg, Tsarist Russian, Königliche Prussian, regicidal Serbian, or even theocratic and tribal Montenegrin” (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 10), which suggests Yugoslavia once more. On the other hand, that the country *is not* Yugoslavia is explicitly stated by one of the characters who describes Yugoslavia as “a capitalist country with a little Communist make-up” (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 16). However, the country is also said to have “melded both Latin and Phanariot ingredients in a soup of Slav blood” (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 10), and this alludes to Romania with its Romance language mixed with words of Slavic origin and Phanariot princes in the past. Needless to say, various other details may lead readers to interpret the book’s setting differently. Nor is this the only invented eastern or central European country in Anglophone literature. The tradition of invention goes back to the nineteenth century at least.

In addition to the name-guessing game, Goldsworthy’s readers are involved in an intertextual game: besides the obvious connections to the story of Medea (see Rhodes), other texts are also invoked in the novel. For instance, it brings us back to Goldsworthy’s early literary-critical study *Inventing Ruritania*. This view is supported by Chapter Twenty-Seven (312–320), which is entitled “Return to Zenda,” and predictably, in it, Milena returns to her state-socialist homeland. The reference is to Anthony Hope’s adventure novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), which is discussed at length in *Inventing Ruritania* (50–58). Zenda is a castle in Ruritania, an *invented* country in central or eastern Europe that has become a generic metaphor for countries thought to be on the outskirts of Europe.

In the text’s state-socialist Ruritania, Milena Urbanska is the daughter of the second most powerful man in the country and, as the author herself says in an interview, “she has all the privileges, except one – to decide her own destiny” (Goldsworthy, “Srbija”). As the daughter of a high-ranking communist party functionary, she is imprisoned by an oppressive regime that enforces stringent rules about what constitutes “proper” behaviour for a young woman of her special social group. Her movements, actions, and behaviour are monitored, and all travel that she may undertake must be approved in advance.

Significantly, both Milena and her father pretend that this surveillance does not exist. After a body art act, which is in fact a repetition of Marina Abramović's performance in Belgrade, everyone in the audience is arrested – except, of course, the children of high-ranking party officials such as the heroine. In the morning, Milena and her father engage in their usual "pretend play":

> 'How was your evening, Mimi?' Father asked.
> 'Fine,' I said. 'We went to some boring arts event, then to Misha's.'
> That was as much as I was going to say. Father knew what I was doing as well as or, given my hangover, even better than I did. (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 18)

But Milena is more constrained by the past than by the system. She is constantly caught between a contradictory past and an uncertain future. The past that oppresses her is both personal and social. She is aware that her father runs an undemocratic state, but she is also aware of the fact that he is a war hero, and his fight and victory against the fascists casts a heavy shadow on her, as she and her friends often feel dwarfed by their fathers' achievements and feel too weak to reach the heights imposed by this heroic past. Her first boyfriend, Misha, is also the son of a high-ranking party functionary, that is to say, a descendant of the privileged "red bourgeoisie." He commits suicide in a game of Russian roulette because his frustration with the system and his own position in it has reached a breaking point.

Some of the novel's charm stems from the author's tendency to leave many things ambiguous or fill them with tragicomic overtones. For example, Misha comes up with the notion of playing Russian roulette after serving in the army. There are numerous conceivable explanations for this. Despite being a vegetarian, he was compelled to eat sausages in the barracks, which sounds ironic. On the other hand, the fact that he does not want Milena to touch him during his brief breaks from the army has prompted some online users to allege that he was raped in the army. There are few justifications supporting this, but such readings show that the author made a wise decision in "blurring" parts of the events in the novel.

Milena's future is shrouded in uncertainty. Her father and her country's repressive regime seem poised to dictate her destiny, rendering free choice practically impossible. While her position as a "red princess" can provide an economically secure and comfortable life, happiness seems unattainable in a state and a society that the protagonist frequently perceives as a cage. After her boyfriend's suicide, Milena sinks into passivity. Following her graduation from the university, she gets a job at the State Corn Research Institute – possibly another of the author's satirical jabs at communist society – and settles into a routine. But all this is shattered by the arrival of Jason, a young British poet. This left-wing poet, to whom she is assigned as an interpreter and who initially appears absurd to her, manages to fill her mind with visions of a different future: a future beyond her country's borders, a future in Britain, a foreign country that promises freedom from the social and political restraints of her homeland. His proposal and invitation to join him in London allow Milena to consider alternative options for the future, beyond a tranquil existence in the communist Ruritania's capital and a tedious job in a government institution.

Joining Jason in London would be a form of exile. The heroine initially rejects the possibility of exile. It does not sound realistic to her, nor is it necessary. However, she has sex with Jason, thus crossing a border that is both physical and symbolic: "sex with a Western man" (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 80). The crossing of physical/symbolic borders is a key motif in many works of exophonic fiction. Milena gets pregnant with Jason's child, which is a mistake because he is a foreigner and she is someone who must be a role model to others. Besides, she has sex with Jason on her father's metal bed, apparently a relic from his early days as an anti-fascist fighter (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 81). Obviously, this is an act of rebellion against paternal – and patriarchal – authority, undertaken not because she is madly in love with Jason but because she is tempted to cross yet another line and violate yet another social and political taboo. Despite the early and discreetly performed abortion, everyone in her privileged social milieu knows about her pregnancy. Following the abortion, her father imposes a rather bizarre punishment upon her: she cannot have any imported tampons, and so, like ordinary women in the state-socialist Ruritania, must make her own. At this point, going to the west seems like a great solution. Deceiving her parents that she is "reverting to … normal behaviour" (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 125), she is permitted to travel to Cuba, but via

London. Of course, she stays in London, determined not to return to her country, that is, determined to make Britain her new home.

It should be noted, however, that she decides to go into exile not only because of the situation she finds herself in but also because she is in love: “I loved him and I was determined not to be afraid” (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 154). However, settling in London, straightening out her documents, finding a job, and even living with Jason forces her to reconsider her original goal and reflect on the past and what she has left behind on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Despite her desire to be free of everything from her previous life, the British Security Service agent who interviews her keeps bringing up her father in their conversation and suggests that she speak about him at meetings of people who either emigrated during the Second World War or defected from her country after the communist takeover. She refuses, and even when she meets an elderly couple who speak her language, she avoids contact with them. Her initial plan to integrate into British society is foiled at practically every turn, leaving her with a constant reminder that she is a foreigner. Although she is married to Jason and has adopted his surname, Connor, she continues to think of herself as *Urbanska*.

And the quality of Milena’s life in England is also, paradoxically, worse than in her supposedly “backward” country. Soon, what was once abandoned as squalid, backward, and oppressive becomes better than glitzy, western, progressive London. A good example is the way Jason’s parents live in the country. The room that she and Jason sleep in is freezing cold because of the high heating costs. Milena sarcastically concludes: “The poorest workers in my homeland had warm homes to go to” (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 175).

Milena seems to be losing what she had in her previous milieu as she finds herself increasingly rejected by her new one. Like many other characters in exophonic fiction, she struggles with language. She has a university degree in English, but completely loses her command of the language while she gives birth to her twin sons, and the thought of losing even her mother tongue makes her anxious:

> Ever since I had felt betrayed by it while in labour, I found my English much slower and more halting than before. It was fine for writing and for translating, but it was as though spoken words were slowly deserting me. I’d heard of my compatriots abroad losing their knowledge of their mother tongue, sometimes without achieving true mastery of another language, because it failed to offer the omnipresent embrace that the English language did. It was a terrible fate, being literally lost for words. I spoke to the boys in my mother tongue all the time, and that was strange and new, the words flooding back after so many months of using them only in my thoughts. Sometimes, particularly when Jason was out, the rooms filled with my voice. (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 264)

Milena has a different perspective on the past and hopes for the future in her own country and in Britain. Jason also has concerns about the future; he expects renown as a poet and a bright future, but such ambitions are not matched by hard work. Additionally, he grapples with a historical issue, as he is an Englishman who fervently wants to identify as Irish. Moreover, he claims he “rescued” his wife from a totalitarian dictatorship, yet she achieved this independently. Although he has pledged to provide for her, in truth, she is the one supporting him. She contributes financially with the funds she brought upon leaving her country and the earnings from various jobs she does. In their relationship, he is “the poet, the eternal student, the charmer who refuses to grow up, Peter Pan” (Goldsworthy, “Srbija”) – a role that contrasts strongly with Milena’s initial expectations. Her parents send her money, even though she has practically betrayed them and the communist state that they represent, while Jason’s parents refuse to help them. In the west, relationships between parents and children are different from the ones in Milena’s home country. Overall, Britain turns out to be a great disappointment to the heroine, and the only ray of hope that keeps her going is her intimacy with Jason (see Smart) But even that intimacy will not last forever.

The unidentified state-socialist country and Britain have significant differences, but also share parallels. Jason’s parents, Paddy and Clarissa, understand their son’s personality and treat Milena like their own child. Paddy consoles her and tells her she is brave in the same way her father Stanislav did

(though much more tenderly), and Clarissa describes her son almost like Gertruda Urbanska when she says she "fears he'll prove unreliable, in every possible way" (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 192). It is later revealed that Clarissa has been corresponding with Dara, who is Milena's father's secretary and effectively her second mother. The relationship with Clarissa is particularly important, and their final meeting is moving. It is the first time that Milena feels that she has breached "that strange English shell," that she has managed to transcend the traditional British coldness, and has truly bonded with someone from that culture:

> Something was shifting in my mind. I was very fond of my mother-in-law. I could have learned to love this England, I thought, but it might well be too late. I hugged Clarissa tightly because I wondered if we were seeing each other for the last time. I was not sure yet, but I felt guilty all the same. She responded in kind and we held each other briefly as the tannoys announced final destinations and whistles blew. I caught again that simple sweet scent she was so fond of, and which I now knew was stephanotis. Having seen what was under that strange English shell, I now also knew she was a good and strong woman. Sadly, her son had neither quality. (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 295)

Why is this the last meeting between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law? Because Jason has also crossed a few symbolic borders: he has begun a relationship with Artemis, a young aristocrat and BBC journalist. The most plausible reason is self-interest: she can launch Jason and open doors for him in both society and the media. Jason's infidelity, however, does not shake Milena as much as his betrayal. She can come to terms with the fact that her husband has a mistress, but not with the fact that he has practically "sold" her life story, in which, of course, her homeland and her past are only painted in dark tones. In fact, Artemis calls Milena and asks to make a show about her, all the while mispronouncing her name, calling her "My-leena" (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 297). Jason has obviously been using her; now he is just going to dump her and find someone else to exploit. However, he appears to have already made up his mind to get the most out of her before that.

Milena, disgusted by her husband's transgression of the metaphorical boundaries of love and trust, chooses to cross politically created state borders once more. Milena Connor's departure from Britain heralds Milena Urbanska's return to her homeland. The heroine makes the sardonic observation that "[l]eaving Britain was much easier than entering it" (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 317), implying that Britain is a society that excludes rather than welcomes foreigners. Returning to her homeland (and her language) seems to her the best solution, but it is also the worst retribution on Jason, as she is also motivated by a tremendous desire for vengeance. One of the inspirations for the novel, as was already remarked, came from Euripides' *Medea* (see Goldsvordi, "'Gvozdena'"; see Rhodes). By seeking vengeance, Milena is thus transformed into a Medea of sorts. By changing her sons' surname from Connor to Urbanski, she negates Jason's paternity. Besides, on her return, she makes her father promise that Jason will be banned from entering the country (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 320). The British counterpart of the legendary Jason is thus left childless. Despite the stark contrast between her retaliation and the horrific vengeance of the mythical Medea, Milena still finds empowerment in taking action: "I may not have had much choice, I thought, but I felt powerful again. My power was the power to hurt Jason and that was all I still wished for" (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 320).

Milena does not kill her children, as Medea does, but separates them from their father. As already indicated, reviewers have drawn attention to the parallels between *Iron Curtain* and the myth of Medea. Thus, Milena's husband's name is the same as that of the leader of the Argonauts, Jason's collection of verses, dedicated to Milena, is called *Argonauts*, and his mistress is called by the Greek name of Artemis (according to the myth, Jason leaves Medea, a foreigner, for a Greek princess). In his betrayal of his foreign wife, the mythical Jason is also motivated by self-interest. The ancient Greek myth and the play, like Goldsworthy's novel, are primarily concerned with cross-cultural interactions and tensions.

The unfaithful Jason, on the other hand, eventually benefits from the fact that his sons are behind the Iron Curtain and – for the time being – inaccessible to him. This is clearly demonstrated in the novel's Prologue, which is in fact the last event in its plot. Several years following her act of vengeance, Milena

watches the renowned poet Jason Connor on television, as he is being honoured with an award against a background provided by the dismantled Berlin Wall. He dedicates his award to his sons and expresses the hope of seeing them in Britain soon. Milena cannot stand the hypocrisy that accompanies this (illusory?) collapse of borders and concludes that Jason is "every centimetre his dishonest self":

> I used to love this man.
>
> I could not bear to witness the eagerness with which he glided in the slipstream of political power, a cultural opportunist performing like a circus dolphin. How well he did it, and how uncritically and enthusiastically his audience accepted him for what he wasn't. His skill was in striking the precise chord they wanted, to stroke their desire to feel simultaneously cultured and virtuous. I knew his power to seduce. I had been just as gullible once.
>
> A crystal orb and fifty thousand Deutschmarks: that was the prize, they said. The performance was worth every pfennig. It was a betrayal of everything poetry should stand for.
>
> I could not bear the sounds of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' rising under his words, deployed in that sentimental way that only the Germans seem capable of when they want to mask their own might. And I definitely could not bear to hear Europe mentioned once more.
>
> I used to love Europe too.
>
> I switched the television off. (Goldsworthy, *Iron* 2)

Milena's final act of turning off the television, while seemingly a clear sign of her disgust with Jason's speech, could also be interpreted as her wish to silence the new Europhile propaganda ushered in by the fall of the Iron Curtain. The end of the novel is, of course, open, and invites speculation about Milena's future. In some of the former state-socialist countries, the communist party elite succeeded in preserving – and even augmenting – its economic power while changing its ideology. Perhaps Milena and her sons will inherit Stanislav's power and be safe from any economic changes. The question remains: will the modern Medea's vengeance be mitigated or negated by the fall of the Iron Curtain? That is, will the symbolic dismantlement of (some) borders and the new perception of the past it provides genuinely result in a different future? Or will things remain basically the same, despite the high hopes accompanying the fall of communism? Judgement is apparently left to the reader. The fascinating narrative of the "red princess," who traverses national, cultural, and linguistic borders twice, along with the author's deliberate choice to challenge readers' expectations by positioning the ending of the story at the very outset of the novel, renders this book a significant literary work in both Serbian and British literature.

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