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TRAVELOGUE, PETER HANDKE AND THE IMAGE OF THE BALKAN REGION

A travelogue, also called a travel journal, is a record of the traveller's experiences written his/her journey and later edited for publication. It is a literary-scientific genre that includes subjective notions, comments and thoughts of the traveler. The Austrian author Peter Handke is very skillful in this genre and describes Serbia and the Balkan region from a different angle, which is contrary to the Western view and the stereotypes of Balkan people. Handke's work is confronted with newspaper articles that report in a distorted way the events in former Yugoslavia, which makes the author a media target. He devotes an entire opus of his work to Serbia and the Balkan region, which includes eight books, of which four belong to the travel genre.

This paper analyzes Handke's four major travelogues as one large travel narrative of the former Yugoslav realm. Analyzing these travelogues, particular attention is paid to Handke's description of landscapes, his observations of war and his portrayal of the media. He presents a different picture of the Balkan region and in his travelogue provides a harmonious picture of this area. This motif of harmony and search for peace can be found in all of his travelogues, so he can rightly be given the title, which in an ironic way was attributed to him by the Western media, the author of peace.

Keywords: *travelogues, Balkanism, Western media, Yugoslavia, otherness*

Introduction

The paper examines Handke's image of the Balkans through his travelogues. Firstly, we will analyze the role of travellers, who are the key for the travelogue discourse. Not only are they responsible for creating a stereotypical view of the country and people, but also they create a knowledge corpus of that country.

In order to understand the Western view of the Balkans, we need to shed light on the terms Orientalism and Balkanism. The theoretical framework of those terms will be given through the work of Edward Said and Maria Todorova. The dominance of the West has put the Balkans in a subordinate position, labeling it as primitive, non-civilized and barbaric. This picture of the Balkans remained unchanged until today and it's confronted with Handke's travelogues, which give a diametrically opposite picture of the region.

This paper shows Handke's impressions of the land, landscape and people on the Balkan peninsula and presents a harmonious picture of this part of Europe. He goes this place with the intention of seeing the land of his ancestors, but he finds there a second homeland that gives him a feeling of serenity.

The travelogue and its place in literature

The travelogue, although dating back to the 2nd century BC, with Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, has never attracted so much attention as other literary genres, such as novels or narratives. In the field of literature studies, travel writing is usually perceived as a subspecies, a branch, which is totally insignificant, because of beliefs that it does not require a "creative mind". As it is not easy, precisely and without dilemma, to define which work can be called travel literature, or to distinguish it from close literary types (e.g. diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, etc.), the issue has been the subject of numerous debates and analyzes of literary theoreticians (Popović 2016). Travelogue or travel writing is a literary-scientific genre in which the travel writer strives to describe objectively the places he travelled, but it also includes subjective notions, comments and thoughts. Travel literature often intersects with essay writing, as in Rebecca West's work on Yugoslavia. In her *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, she shows the troubled history of the Balkans, simultaneously describing the beautiful landscape of Yugoslavia.

Today it is believed that travel literature organizes the world through a series of predominant discourses, housed within the framework of seemingly indisputable reality. The study of travel writing has also raised the significant issue of representation of Otherness, which led to the establishment of a new branch in literature – imagology, a branch of comparative literature that deals with the study of literary images of foreign countries and nations, as well as with images of their own country and people (Dukić 2009: 9). From a marginal genre, travelogue has become a central one by offering rich material for new readings and interpretations.

Orientalism and Balkanism

Prolific contribution to the study of travelogue gave the paper *Orientalism* by Edward Said, who deals with the construction of the noun Oriental. In addition to the academic definition of Orientalism as a study of the Orient, Said also defined it as "the style of thinking, based on the ontological and epistemological distinction drawn between Orient and Occident". Orient has played a central role in constructing the European culture and "helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience". He points out that in the writings of the Western authors about the Orient, the views and perceptions of Europeans are promoted as universal and superior to the values and way of life of the Others (Said 1978: 36).

On the trail of Said's research, the Bulgarian theoretician Maria Todorova introduces the term *Balkanism*. Todorova's Balkanism is defined as "a specific discourse that determines attitudes towards Balkan and actions directed at him". While the Orient appears as Other in relation to Europe, the Balkan region has a liminal position, showing itself as a "bridge" or as a "crossroad" that connects the East and West. This interposition between Europe and Asia leads to the labeling of the Balkans as semi-civilized. Thus, while Orientalism is a "discourse of the imputed opposition", Todorova thinks that "Balkanism" is "a discourse of imputed

ambiguity”. The Balkans does not seem to be the Other but as an “incomplete self” of Europe. Orientalism and Balkanism have one thing in common, they are both used to denote the opposite of the notion of Europe, which symbolizes purity, order, self-control, sense of law and justice (Todorova 2009: 17–19).

The genres that are the most important channels for the spread of Balkanism are travel books, political essays and academic journalism. Maria Todorova gives special attention to travel journals and reports from political observers and diplomats because they can reveal the beginnings and gradual shaping of the notion of the Balkans as a separate geographical and cultural entity. Additionally, these travellers played the role of today’s journalists – they formed public opinion, expressing the dominant tastes and prejudices of their time. Their descriptions shaped the existing stereotype of the Balkans (Todorova 2009: 137).

Images of the Balkans

“Balkan” is a word that Europe added to its repertoire of curses, synonymous with returning to the tribal, the primitive, the barbaric. It is described as the Other in relation to the Europeans, where the laws of the civilized world are not applicable. The word “Balkan” is used as a metaphor for dangerous, destructive, exotic places. If Balkanization is a metaphor for something dangerous, what is with the geographical place called the Balkans? Maria Todorova brought up this question, asking how a geographical concept can be transformed into one of the most powerful mischievous labels in history? Todorova states that the West has isolated this region into a ghetto, raising impoverished economic and administrative barriers, categorizing the Balkans wars as bestialities, while forgetting their crimes from the Second World War (Todorova 2009: 159). The words that best describe the relation between the West and the Balkans, and are often used by Todorova, are double standards and political amnesia. It is clear that economic power and domination are factors for determining the rules of the game which the Balkans have lost at the beginning.

Peter Handke and the Image of the Balkans

“The best time to visit the Balkans is spring. It is located just behind the Central European Alps. The landscape of the Balkan Peninsula takes on a color that is so green, and so blue in the sky, that even nature haters are attracted to the mountains, the sun, the rivers, the trees and valleys... the air is fresh in the morning and not too warm in the afternoons. Therefore, nobody should be surprised that these beautiful months, in the recent history of the Balkans, have always been the wildest¹”.

The Balkans has changed, it is not the place that Europe should be ashamed of. For the West, the image of the Balkans has stayed the same since the *National Geographic* wrote in 1915 – “Balkan is the powder keg of Europe²”. “Pictures

¹ Cufaj, Beqë. *Der Balkan im Frühling*. Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 13.03.2009.

² Willam, Joseph. *The Kingdom of Serbia*. National Geographic, Volume XXVII Number Four, 1915.

and words can be used to create the greatest deception³”, said Handke, but what is with the reality, the truth? “The so-called world knows the truth. This is why the so-called world is absent today, and not only today, and not only here. I don’t know the truth. But I look. I listen. I feel. I remember. This is why I am here today, close to Yugoslavia, close to Serbia...⁴”.

Not only because of his Slavic roots Peter Handke developed a deep admiration for the country when he went there in 1996. Simultaneously, he developed an even deeper disgust for the western media, for misinterpreting his writing. Handke devoted an entire opus of his work to Serbia and the Balkan region, which includes eight books, four of which belong to the travelogue genre. In chronological order: *A Journey to the Rivers Danube, Sava, Morawa and Drina: Justice for Serbia* (1996), *Summer Postscriptum to a winter Journey* (1996), *Asking through the Tears. Belated Chronicle from two Crossings through Yugoslavia During the War, March and April 1999* (2000), *The Cuckoos of Velika Hoca* (2009).

A Journey to the Rivers Danube, Sava, Morawa und Drina: Justice for Serbia

Handke’s first travelogue was published in 1996⁵ and describes his journey to Serbia in the late autumn of 1995. The author gives his opinion of the way the media have falsified perceptions of the war in the Balkans and gives his impressions of the land. The questioning of the aesthetic value of his text, given the political questionability of Handke’s position, has led to an ongoing debate: are literary quality and ethical-political incorrectness mutually exclusive? Not only has Handke’s work been known better for its subtitle *Justice for Serbia*, but also he was attacked by the Western Media for having an opinion that is contrary to the majority, that gives us another subtitle to his Balkan opus *Justice for Peter Handke*.

Two key points in this travelogue should be highlighted, the mentioning of the movie *Underground*⁶ and the often used word *Niemandsland*⁷ that gives a closer picture of the Western view of the Balkans that Handke wants to change. The movie *Underground* takes an important place in the first part of the book, not only because

³ Reinhardt, Bernd. *The Austrian writer Peter Handke, European public opinion, and the war in Yugoslavia*. World Socialist Web Site. Published by the International Committee of the Fourth International, 11.8.1999.

⁴ On 18 March 2006 Handke gave a speech in Serbian at Milošević’s funeral, which sparked controversy in the West.

⁵ Initially it was published in the newspaper *Süddeutschezeitung* with the controversial title “Justice for Serbia”. In the same year, only few months later, the publishing house *Surkamp* published Handke’s work, but with the title “A Journey to the Rivers Danube, Sava, Morawa und Drina” and adding the originally controversial title “Justice for Serbia” as the subtitle.

⁶ Directed by Emir Kusturica. The movie from 1995 portrays Yugoslav history from the beginning of World War II until the beginning of the Yugoslav wars.

⁷ *Niemandsland* (germ.) comes from the Latin expression *Terra Nullius*, meaning nobody’s land.

of the content (it describes the war), but also because of characteristic name. This is the edge of Europe or “the Other Europe” that Handke wants to get to know better. He does not give a war picture of Serbia, nor does he visit the places of conflict. Warfare that the media attributed to the Serbs does not coincide with Handke’s descriptions of passers-by in Belgrade, the locals of Porodin and Bajina Basta. He describes the rivers – Serbia the land of rivers, without sea in sight. The majestic rivers which are carrying all the dirt and sludge that Europe has brought to this region. With this metaphor Handke wants to give us a harmonious picture of Serbia – crystal clear water that carries away the memories of the war, the victims and cleans the land, leaving peace and harmony on the Balkan Peninsula.

The compound noun No man’s land (germ. *Niemandsland*) is often used in the description of Serbia and Balkan. It is a legal term used by ancient Romans that indicates a territory/area that does not belong to anyone, for international waters, or areas between the fronts in the war. Does Kosovo/Serbia or the Balkans represent such a war zone between the fronts, or has it lost its affiliation to someone or something? Not only is it the Other Europe, but it also represents a fatal mix of the Orient and the West that threatens to spread and infect civilization.

How Handke sees Serbia in his first journey? Does it match the stereotypical picture that is attributed to the Balkan people? Although Serbia is not his homeland, he states that he does not feel like a stranger at all or someone who does not belong here. The hospitality of the Balkan people is something that Europe cannot meet. He attacks the media reports and condemns the war, but not the people. The war is not a permanent stage for the Balkan region, war is everywhere, and every war has an end. The war on the Balkan Peninsula ended and now it is time for peace. Handke describes a nation that is aware of the image that Europe and the entire world has of them, but nevertheless they are building a new reality, that every traveller that comes to Serbia can see and feel. He gives a nostalgic tone in his descriptions of Serbia, although it was his first visit to this country. His journey was described as an attack on the Western media, and a cry for attention, while the literary aspect of his work has been neglected. Handke’s battle to show the new picture of the post-war Balkan has failed and his travelogue has become and stayed a political writing that is against the West.

Summer Postscriptum to a Winter Journey

As Handke states in the first sentence of the book – “after six months, perhaps another visit to Serbia is needed⁸” – the translation of his latest book into Serbian is an occasion for a renewed journey. This time Handke goes even further, he visits Visegrad and Srebrenica, the conflicted areas. In his first journey to Serbia, Handke was attacked by the Western media for just seeing one side of the “story”, so this time he goes to the other side, beyond the border.

⁸ Handke, Peter. *Sommerlicher Nachtrag zu einer winterlichen Reise*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1996.

“The poet merely describes what he sees, and he/she does not want to know what he does not see. As a result, he relativizes the massacre...⁹” – that was just one of many critiques that followed after publishing his *Summer Postscriptum to a Winter Journey*. Should a traveller write something that he does not see? Wouldn't that be fiction? Peter Handke, as in his first travelogue, writes just his impressions of the land he visits, the places and people that he had contact to, and gives his opinion of the situation in the Balkans. Considering that his first travelogue had a purely political aspect for the Western media, the second one could not be interpreted differently. Handke was again a media target and his writing was no longer seen from a literary angle.

This journey differs from the previous one because Handke shows failure and inability of any conclusion about “everything that has happened”, about “the future, the present and the past of that historical and geographical space”. A travelling subject in this “space” and especially beyond it (in Europe or anywhere), thinking about the prospects of writing in the world he is currently living in. Although this travelogue shows lack of coherence, it builds a larger picture of the wild history of the Balkans, showing that peace has finally arrived.

Asking through the Tears. Belated Chronicle from two Crossings through Yugoslavia During the War, March and April 1999

His work *Asking through the Tears* was first published as an essay in the newspaper *Süddeutschezeitung*, in June 1999, and then as a book in December the same year, where the subtitle *Belated Chronicle from two Crossings through Yugoslavia During the War, March and April 1999* was added¹⁰. Handke's third literary journey to the war zone brings the same media reaction. Once again, he attacked Western media for misunderstanding the causes and consequences of the war.

This travelogue is different from the previous ones, as it is not a Postscriptum, something that he wrote after his travel. Handke marked date and location on every page because he wanted to show that he was a witness, not just a passenger. This travelogue is synchronized with his journey during the war, it is not written after it. Not only that he wanted to show to the rest of the world that people from Yugoslavia were completely powerless against NATO forces and attacks from the stratosphere, but also he wanted to point out that nobody questioned this action of establishing peace with violence.

What stands out in this travelogue is the author's focus on the state borders. Handke counts them, lists their exact location and gives a description of the situation in which they found them. Although the break-up of Yugoslavia took place in 1991,

⁹ Althen, Michael. *Es sei Krieg gewesen*. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1.10.1996.

¹⁰ Handke undertook his journey in March and April 1999 and created the travelogue in only 13 days (20.5. – 2.6.1999). Parts of his travelogue were published as an essay in the newspaper *Süddeutschezeitung* 5.6.1999.

for the author these borders are only a formality. He sees the outline of those former countries, whose republics still feel the consequences of its collapse. In a once-unique country, a federation of six republics, state borders divide these republics, but only in a geographical sense, as they do not separate different nations, cultures, or languages. Handke shows that he has not yet reconciled with the breakup of Yugoslavia, because it is also a loss of his second homeland.

“It’s about time that Handke came up with something new to make headlines...¹¹” that were the first reactions considering the title of the book. Although Handke deals with the causes of the Yugoslav war, the descriptions of the land and people have also a significant part in the book. As in his other travelogue, he tries to change the stereotypical view of the the Balkans. It’s war not only in the Balkan Peninsula, nor the people are barbaric, “The war could take place anywhere¹²”. In the interviews he gave after *Suhrkamp* published his book, most of his words were misinterpreted. Handke states “I am here to feel the country”, which the newspaper *Süddeutschezeitung* translated as “to smell the aroma of the war¹³”.

The Cuckoos of Velika Hoca

“War and peace under the cloak of nature: so is Handke’s work been read by his faithful readers, who do not have too much sympathy for the Balkans. They will find here an imaginary, nostalgic Handke seeking peace – with himself and with the world¹⁴”.

Handke’s travelogue is a journalistic literary portrait of the locals of Great Hoca and their living conditions. Between hope and resignation, they are struggling and expecting better times. Handke also gives a panoramic view of other parts of Kosovo and adopts the role of a field researcher in linguistic, historical and journalistic terms. Although this travelogue seems to be different from the previous ones, it still belongs to an opus, it is the continuation of his post-war travels across the Balkans.

Even though he is not a journalist, he tries to make a piece that gives an objective view of Kosovo. Handke declares that the majority of war reporters confuse their role as a journalist with that of a judge and “are just as nasty as the dogs of war on the battlefield¹⁵”. Instead of making a research of the war, what counts is only the sale of the paper, booming headlines and disturbing war pictures. Handke wants to show a different picture, that is not related to the war history, he seeks peace and reconciliation.

¹¹ Selzer, Sabine E. Rezensionen. Schreibkraft das Feultionmagazin, 18. Oktober 2000.

¹² Handke, Peter. *Unter Tränen Fragend*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2000.

¹³ Handke, Peter. *Slawes Bruder. Ein kurzer Brief zum langen Krieg*. *Süddeutschezeitung*, 16.4.1999.

¹⁴ Cufaj, Beqë. *Der Balkan im Frühling*. Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 13.03.2009.

¹⁵ Handke, Peter. *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa, und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1996.

Although it is not easy to look away avoiding the scars that the war left on Kosovo, Handke deals with it only in a few places in the book, among which the most significant is the picture of the bridge over the river Ibar in Kosovska Mitrovica. Although the primary role of the bridge is to connect, in this case the northern and southern shores of Kosovska Mitrovica, the image that Handke describes gives a completely new perspective. This bridge represents a borderline, the opposite of its primary use, separating two nations, two cultures, two religions. The bridge in Kosovska Mitrovica connects with the bridge in Visegrad (that Handke described in his *Summer Postscriptum*) and builds a picture of “invisible” borders. A borderline that does not exist on any map, but for the locals in Kosovska Mitrovica and Visegrad, it is a borderline like any other, a crossing to another country. Handke does not focus on the architecture of this seemingly insignificant architectural piece but gives a deeper picture of the stuttering land: tangles of barbed wire and army garrisons on the bridge (borderline), although the country is not in war. Handke uses the interrogative mark to ask the readers and himself: is Kosovo still in war? Crossing over the bridge, that has no name, or that does not belong to anyone, leaves the readers questioning the temporary peace in Kosovo.

At the very beginning of the book, Handke presents the language differentiation of the name of this area – *Kosovo* and *Kosova*. Through the whole book, he compares Serbian and Albanian toponyms, as well as certain other words (writer, journalist, cuckoo). This connects not only with the dominance of one letter, but also compares two different cultures. He states, that since the establishment of the independence of this area, each sign has lost its Cyrillic form. He pointed out, that these two languages cannot simultaneously survive, which brings us to the debate of multilingualism as a cultural utopia. Only the language of the ruling ones is surviving, as it is known through history, while the defeated ones are deleted and only remain in historical records.

He tries to compose elements of all three cultures and compares languages of three different linguistic families. This creates a new linguistic picture that points out diametrical differences in the cultures of these nations. As an example, it is necessary to distinguish the cuckoo noun, which is mentioned in the title itself – *Die Kuckucke* (ger.), *Quqe* (alb.) and *Kukavica* (srb.). Although these birds have different names in the above-mentioned languages, they make the same bell-shaped sound, so it can be said, that they receive a bilingual note in this book. Cuckoos can be heard in both parts of Kosovo, the Serbian and the Albanian part, hovering over the fate of these nations and reminds both of the victims of the war. Handke adds the cuckoo sound to every description of the land and people of Velika Hoca. These bring a disturbing tone to the harmonious descriptions of the land as if Handke wants to say, the war is over, but its smell is still in the air. Both entities have not forgotten the turbulent years in Kosovo and now they have a daily reminder of that with the KFOR forces that are “regular guests” in Kosovo.

The bird cuckoo symbolizes suffering but also hope. In many European countries, the return of the cuckoos means the beginning of spring. Springtime

refers to ideas of rebirth, rejuvenation, renewal and regrowth. That is what Handke sees or wants to see in Kosovo in his spring visit. The enclave of Velika Hoca was encountered through an entire “Parliament of Cuckoos¹⁶”, which accompanied the author through his entire journey. For Handke, who earlier focused on the war period, now looks for peace. There is a time for war and time for peace, and now it is time that peace comes to Kosovo.

Conclusion

Austrian novelist and playwright Peter Handke is one of the most influential and thought-provoking German writers in the second half of the 20th century, who created a splash in the world of elite literature in the 1970's with his avant-garde plays and groundbreaking novels. Due to his political views, he has lost (or returned) many high-profile literary prizes. His Austrian colleague Elfriede Jelinek, who won the Nobel prize in Literature in 2004, suggested Peter Handke as a better candidate for it¹⁷. With the withdrawal of the Heinrich Heine Prize, because of the speech he gave at Milosevic's funeral, Handke stated “Heine doesn't deserve Handke and Handke doesn't deserve the Heine Prize. But there's no doubt that Heine would have rejected the political control of a jury. This form of censorship would be much worse than awarding the prize to the wrong person¹⁸”. Even the international Ibsen award nomination in 2014 was accompanied with controversy and was comparable to awarding the Immanuel Kant Prize to Goebbels.

His writings about the Balkans and the Yugoslav wars have caused many controversies, and affected the reception of his literary work. Although his travelogues became the target of many negative critiques, as if they were written only to provoke the Western media and as in their opinion have no literary value, Handke believed in his writing and did not stop with the first book in 1996.

For him “Balkan” has a nostalgic tone, not only because of his family roots, but because of the stories of this great part of Europe, that he dreamt about his whole childhood. The Balkans has a special smell to him, and even though it is not familiar, it feels like home to Peter Handke.

In his journey, he found harmony and peace in this “non-civilized part of Europe”, a kind of harmony that flies in the air and occupies everything and everyone. The mountains, the rivers, the roads, everything looks like a fairytale to the author, who did not expect such an image of the Balkans that was created by the West. As a traveller, he becomes more and more drawn to the idyllic landscapes of Yugoslavia and more disillusioned with the world outside its borders. Handke rejects the image of separation, loss and destruction, trying to eliminate borders between the former republics that were once a unique country. Handke creates a safe space, a new

¹⁶ Handke, Peter. *Die Kuckucke von Velika Hoča*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2009.

¹⁷ Solomonov, Deborah. *A Gloom of Her Own*. The New York Magazine, 21.11.2004.

¹⁸ Unknown author. *German Politicians to Block Prize for Milosevic Sympathizer*. Deutsche Welle, 31.5.2006.

homeland, where he feels serenity. The Serbia that he sees has a romantic tone, it is the last holdout of the former Yugoslavia.

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