

An identity question: us, the Balkans, Balkanism

Asist. univ. dr. COSTEA Alina
Ovidius University of Constanta

***Abstract:** The studies that made this research possible and that have provided the perspective for us are the comparative literature and cultural studies of Mircea Muthu, *The Romanian Literature and the South-East European spirit*, and Maria Todorova's volume, *Imagining the Balkans*, an American researcher of Bulgarian origins who analyzes the evolution of the Balkans and their image in relationship with the West and with itself, from a historical point of view. Despite the fact that the Balkans continue to be considered the "powder barrel" of Europe, their historical and cultural significance is not to be neglected, especially in connection with the European spirit. Considering the harsh conditions in which the East-European intellectual was obliged to face and to create, his works have become nonetheless, a reconfirmed way for the power of man to overcome his limitations. More than any other European, the East European has met the worst invention that has ever been invented to oppress the human mind: the communist regime (a possible avatar of the Ottoman oppression in the past). With all due challenges that have been forced on him, the East European intellectual's creations have gained symbolic value, that of salvation through culture, through the ability of detaching oneself from the cruel everyday reality, aiming at spiritual detachment.*

What we are trying to achieve through this paper is to advance a discussion regarding some key concepts which can help us better acknowledge our role and function in life, and most of all, gain conscience of our nature. What we are and what we are going to be has an indestructible connection with what we used to be. Our cultural identity must be permanently validated, reminded, mostly for the younger generations.

Key-words: *identity, history, the Balkans, Orientalism, Europe*

A handful of concepts

What does South-East European spirit mean? Is it a timeless *foma mentis* or can it be historically circumscribed to a certain era? Can we cleave some concepts to define it? These are the questions that Mircea Muthu in his research *Romanian literature and the South-East European spirit* is trying to find answers to and they can be the starting point in shaping our common identity, seen in coherence with the geographical space within which it has been born, together with the collective unconsciousness, iconic for the space in question.

The year that the above mentioned critic proposes when unwinding the historical stages supporting the searched concepts is 1453, a date that, together with the expansion of the Crescent and with the rising of the turks, had turned „the South-East European spirit into an impact between the Ottoman force and the South-East European communities on one hand, and into a shared battle field, ideologically speaking, for the fight against an empire being at the beginning of its edifice.”(Muthu:1976, 20)

In such circumstances, the very existence of the peoples in the Balkans would have been impacted by heroism in constantly trying to keep themselves in the shadow of the Greek traditions, having as unique reference point the Byzantine Empire, which became, afterwards the symbol of Lost Paradise. Still, the turks must be integrated into the South-East European spirit, not only for the reactions that they had provoked, but also for the Oriental wisdom- manifested in the folk creations- that the South-East spirit has incorporated and adapted to the characteristics of each people. For us, Anton Pann and Mihail Sadoveanu knew how to fully harness the Oriental wisdom, and for that, they stand as Romanian writers, first of all, and then as South-East European writers.

Because of the fact that by „South-East European spirit” Mircea Muthu understands a unity in diversity, an ethnical concept, specific for the period of the Ottoman domination, the researcher has propounded that the concept should be replaced with the one of „Balkanism”. From a historical standpoint, the term „Balkanism” designates the period of time when the Crescent ruled. Thus, the two concepts mentioned so far are not overlapping, but describing a historical continuity. The logical question that arises when acknowledging that is, therefore: what does Balkanism encompass? The answer can not be but a vast one, furthermore, it can be reduced to the following features: „the data for a common axiology for the peninsular peoples in the XVIth and XVIIIth centuries: the anti Ottoman attitude which had flourished in numerous artistic expressions, the morality, the folk rhetorics, the elements of thinking and the Orthodox-Christian mentality and the secular mentality, the relationship between the aulic level and the folk one.” (Muthu:1976, 20)

The Balkans as a history circumstance can be of interest as long as they generate „a series of aesthetic concepts in the same category with literary motives and themes” (Muthu:1976, 21) those being accountable for „the literary Balkanism”, identifiable, up to a point, to the distressing feeling caused by the cruel history of the peninsula. The researcher cited makes it clear that „looking through the lens of history, the Balkans do not connote artifice, nor decorativism or billingsgate, but a drama that has been stamped by tragedy, not only once.” (Muthu:1976, 21)

Balkanism coded as an aesthetic reality or as an artistic literary fiction, is to be separated from the Balkans and from the South-East European spirit,

defining itself as „an art of speech that recovers and buys back- in a tragical or in a parody manner- a dramatic national history, giving us the feeling of being permanently rooted here, in time and space” (Muthu:1976, 21). An easier definition would be that of a synthesis between our Latin essence (a fact that tells us apart from the other peoples in the Balkan Peninsula) and the forms of epos, of folk, of Oriental narrative.

With Romanian literature, Balkanism as an aesthetic project, has been announced by Dimitrie Cantemir and has been consolidated, as a style of writing, by Anton Pann. In the XXth century, the literary extensions of the Balkanism had not ceased to make a statement through the works of authors such as Ion Barbu, Mateiu Caragiale, I.L. Caragiale, Eugen Barbu, and not in the least Vasile Voiculescu in whose literary creations the phenomenon was rehabilitated and approved from an aesthetic point of view. And literature, as well as the other arts, can speak about who we are, who we were and, inevitably, about who we are going to be.

Balkanism as a concept has to be charged as a very intricate notion image which has been generated as a result of the spiritual and political cohabitation of the populations in the Peninsula, cohabitation having at its core the idea of a wretched feeling induced by a tragical common history. What can be decoded, at a first glimpse, as a superficial and ignorant attitude, of Oriental origins, it is only a typical manner for the inhabitants of the Peninsula to impose their detachment from a tragic destiny, through embracing the mask of picturesque and of carnival. Eventhough Nastratin Hogeia laughs at everybody and about everything, his laughter is nothing but a means of salvation from the tragic. Ion Barbu’s lyrics „Holy body and food to him, Hagi was feeding on himself” summarize the whole ordeal that hides behind the mask. The moral and the satire represent the two major components of the literary Balkanism which needs to be perceived as „a drama, historically rated, first of all” (Muthu:1976, 107) and which is not to be restricted to boorish man, burlesque, pointless humor, empty rhetorics. The last two features are to be found in colloquial speech, in slang, in every day language, so they actually define us all.

If until 1821, we can talk about „Balkanism” in the sense of a cooperation, of a shared Greek-Romanian agenda, once the anti-Phanariotic reaction had exploded, the term started to accumulate negative meanings, as it is illustrated in the works of the writer Heliade Rădulescu. The Balkanism, an artistic reality and a historical mentality shows a subtile association of contrasting reactions and it can be labelled as Mircea Muthu does, „an aesthetic redemption.” (Muthu:1976, 107)

Discussing the issues of the cultural identity of the Balkans could not be complete without differentiating between the concept of „Balkanism” and that of „Orientalism”. Two are the historical moments that have marked the birth of the

Balkans: the age of the Byzantium and the Ottoman rulling from the XIV-XVth centuries to the beginning of the XXth century. Maria Todorova demonstrates that „Balkanism” and „Orientalism” are two different notions, with different evolutions. The arguments that we can rely on are religious and geopolitical. The Balkans have always assumed the position of crusaders against Islam, reaction which definitely breaks them away from the Orientals.

On the other hand, gender disparity can also be a starting point in profiling them differently. The „masculity” of the Balkans is notorious, given by the allure of medieval chivalry, the cult of weapons, the conspiracy obsession, while, at the other end of the spectrum, the „feminity’ of the Orient is placed, inprinted by sexuality and passion, factually represented by lush harems, grand public baths, exotic slave markets. From the West’s perspective, the standard Balkan male is an uncivilized man, lacking manners, with his hair blowing in the wind. The Balkans have been depicted as a medieval space, full of outlaws and thieves, stealing in broad daylight. The mistery aura does not stand as a salient Balkanic feature, but being inhereted from the Orient.

What links the Orient to South-East Europe turns out to be the affair that both of them had been built, almost from the very start, as a projection of Western Europe. Both the Orient and the Balkans had been seen and portrayed through the eyes of the Western traveller who had been fascinated by the romanticism and the primitivism of Eastern lands. Thus their outlook has always been limited, incomplete.

Struggling to correct the vista errors towards the Orient, Edward Said observes that the Orient is not only adjacent to the European space, the place where Europe had its richest and oldest colonies, sources of civilization and language, but that it has been Europe’s „cultural opponent” (Said, 2) and one of the most persistent images of the Otherness. So, the West, as well as the Balkans have contributed to defining Western Europe by contrast : „The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture.” (Said:1978, 2)

The term that Said operates with and which actually gives the title of his book, „Orientalism”, reveals a multitude of senses. One of them would be the academic meaning, used by the institutions where this field of study is taught. Still, the concept of „Oriental studies” is preffered, together with others such as „area studies”, because the first term might be too vague and might express the collonial attitude of the XVII-XIX th centuries. „Orientalism” can also be regarded as „a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident” (Said:1978, 2). Subsequently, the most frequent image is that of a dominant Western perception, restructuring and maintaining the authority over the Orient, hence a clearly negative view which needs to be modify, sometime, in the future.

In the same manner as Balkanism, Orientalism is essentially, a discourse about the otherness, without which one can not understand the way Western Europe had succeeded in dominating the Orient, politically, sociologically, military, ideologically, scientifically and imaginative, starting with the end of the Enlightenment. Stating its opposition related to the Orient seen as an inferior surrogate, the European culture had gained power and had consolidated its position, Said argues: „The relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony..” (Said:1978, 5)

Like the Balkans, the Orient did not have the chance to portray itself using its own perspective. Thus, Said considers symptomatic, Flaubert’s encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, an Egyptian courtesan, whom, being dominated by him, in every aspect, was described as typical Oriental, without allowing his exotic partner to paint her own picture. This does not necessary mean that Flaubert’s view is wrong, but it means that the other side of the coin has to be looked at, too: „why would it not be possible to employ both perspectives together, or one after the other?” (Said:1978, 8), the forementioned researcher asks, rhetorically.

The superposition of the two categories- Balkanism and Orientalism- is still frequent today, but it does not correspond to an objective reality. There are, of course, large areas of juxtaposition between these two precepts, but there is no absolute equivalence either. The apparent pointless action, the famous Oriental laziness, the wise stories and sayings are only a few of the specks of convergence of the two concepts under discussion. Beyond the reciprocal influence, permitted by both the geographical position and by the common historical, cultural, social background, what is specific to the Balkans, apart from the Orient, is called Christianity which had been constructed as a shield against the Ottoman domination.

The mark of etymology

The word „balkan” has entered the Peninsula together with the Ottoman rule, because a previous attestation is not known for it. In most of the Turkish dictionaries, the word is connected to the notion of mountain and it is explained by „mountain”, „mountain range” or „wooded mountain”. Diachronically, the word has become polysemantic and it has started to name either a geographical reality, a sociological one, a political or a cultural one, depending on the angle embraced by the speaker. Actually, the word is currently undertaking a process of continuous changes, semantically, as the Bulgarian researcher Maria Todorova points out : „at the same time that “Balkan” was being accepted and widely used as geographic signifier, it was already becoming saturated with a social and

cultural meaning that expanded its signified far beyond its immediate and concrete meaning” (Todorova: 2009, 21).

At the beginning of the XXth century the word „Balkans” has started to take on, more and more, a political conotation, and between the years 1930-1940, the discrediting of the term had increased dramatically. One notion that had been either its equivalent or its opponent is „South-East Europe”, depending on the geographical, historical, political criteria employed.

The most important notion that derives from that of „Balkan” is „Balkanisation”. At the end of XIXth century and at the beginning of XXth century, the Balkans had increasingly gained a political conotation that designated the states that appeared after the fall of the Ottoman Empire: Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, Bulgaria. Therefore the verb „balkanisation” became similar with the process of national divisions of the former geographical units into smaller states.

The term „balkanisation” has also been put in relationship of substitution with the word „multiculturalism” for expressing excessive specificity, as a metaphor for postmodernism and for postcommunism. Harold Bloom in his book *the Western Canon* draws attention to the danger of „balkanisation of literature” (Bloom:1995, p.2), understanding by this an unlimited multiculturalism, along with the break of the Western canon that triggers imposing the marginal, turning the accidental into norm. So, transformed into a „linguistic weed” (Bloom:1995, p.3), the term has facilitated the deformed perception of South-East Europe’s space and culture, in a degrading way, still.

The deprecatory perspective related to the Balkans has created a two-way repulsion, from the West towards the South-East, and the other way round. The „balkanisation” has not only come to mean the division of some large and viable political units, but it has also become to connote the return to tribal, to barbary. The concept has been decontextualized (especially in the USA) for depicting the „otherness” in general, having considered the so-called refuse of the people in the Balkans to comply with the European and universal norms of civilization.

Us, seen by the others

The first documents regarding the existence of the Balkans and their „discovery” by the Europeans are dated at the end of the XVIIIth century in the travel notes of some Western adventurers. These observers from the outside found with surprise that the possessions of the Ottoman Empire had particularities and treating them as simple provinces was not enough. So, the travel notes had a great impact on forming the perception of the people in the West about the Balkan Peninsula because those writings functioned similar to media today, shaping opinions and creating expectations.

Initially, the outlook was not a negative one, but it was oscillating between the feeling of mystery, exoticism and that of primitivism or tribalism. The romantic attraction exercised by places such as Bulgaria or Greece, transformed the East, as seen by the West, into an exotic realm, full of fantasy, the land of legends and fairy tales. The fascination that these undiscovered places had aroused to the Western travellers permitted them to be labelled as lost paradises as those at the beginning of the world.

Maria Todorova cites a text belonging to such a traveller, Joseph-Marie, baron of Girando, who encourages travellers to go back to the origins of times by visiting countries in the Balkans: „...we shall in a way betaken back to the first periods of our own history...The philosophical traveller, sailing to the ends of the earth, is in fact travelling in time....These unknown islands that he reaches are to him the cradle of human society...those peoples....recreate for us the state of our own ancestors, and the earliest history of the world” (Todorova:2009, 63). But are the newly discovered places really harmonious or is it an illusion that contradicts the idea stating that even the most primitive peoples have a history of their own?

As surprising as it might seem, the myth of the Lost Paradise is not a „production” of the civilized world, but it can be traced back in the mentality of the archaic man, namely Balkanic man. The image of the Good wild (man) is strongly connected to the image of his exemplary world. The travel notes from XVI-XVIIIth centuries placed at their core, the profile of the Good wild man. The recently discovered lands revealed a happy humanity, protected against the disasters of the civilized world. These travel stories offered models for utopian societies and utopian was the belief of those early travellers that they had discovered the Golden Age of mankind because „the good wild of the travellers and ideologies of the XV-XVIIIth centuries was already familiar with the myth of the Good Wild; that was his mythical ancestor who had truly lived a heavenly existence: he could indulge himself in all bliss and in all freedom, being absolved of any effort” (Eliade, 37) remarks Mircea Eliade in one of his works, *Myths, dreams and misteries*. The Balkan man seems to be the main character of the myth of the Good Wild, created by the Westerners.

We argue that considering only the present moment when you assess the degree of civilization of a people is a major mistake. Claude Lèvi-Strauss votes for comparative study of ancient societies and for granting consideration to history:

„When, in addition, one completely limits study to the present period in the life of a society, one becomes first of all the victim of an illusion. For everything is history. What was said yesterday is history, what was said a minute ago is history. But, above all, one is led to misjudge the present, because only the study of historical development permits the weighing and

evaluation of the interrelationships among the components of the present day society.” (Levy-Strauss: 1963, 12).

A primitive people is not a community without history, even though its past does not unfold easily, but it rather needs to be deduced. The problem of the archaism of a society appears when there are huge differences between that society and its neighbours. By that we mean, the cultural difference. Similar to the South American societies which are „pseudo-archaism” cases (Levy-Strauss:1963, 113), the idea is valid for the peoples in the Balkans because they do not differ greatly from their more emancipated neighbours „ in all aspects, but only in some, while in other respects numerous analogies exist” (Levi-Strauss:1963, 112).

The definition that Claude Levi-Strauss gives to primitive society clarifies the fact that the Balkans are not as primitive as they might look: „ A true primitive society should be harmonious, a society, so to speak, at one with itself” (Levi-Strauss:1963, 113). There is no track of such a heavenly harmony in the Balkans, permanently torn between the East and the West, traumatized by its ambiguous status, that of a „bridge” over two types of divergent cultures. What Levi-Strauss has observed with the South American societies is current for the Balkan peoples, namely those societies which seemed to have been archaic, were, in fact, troubled by disputes, so putting a great stress on the event which means placing focus on history. The major historical event that have stamped the very existence of the Balkans and their cultural identity, has been the invasion and the ruling of the Ottoman Empire.

The image in the mirror. Conclusion

It is utterly necessary that a discussion about the Balkans be double-oriented. As far as the others see us, the conclusions are not that positive. The way we perceive ourselves is, by comparison, more shaded. The peoples in the Peninsula have always been the passive receivers of the labels that others had stuck on them. In the majority of cases, the negative view was internalized, giving birth to frustrations which had stressed the stigma of a less fortunate history for us. Many denigrating tags, in force today, have led to the thought that we are less worthy than our Western counterparts, less smart, less educated. The inferiority complex has to be seriously considered, on a larger scale, for the sake of our health as a nation.

A common phrase, that of „going to Europe”, in the Balkan languages in the XIXth century, as Maria Todorova analyzes, could be regarded as a milestone in decoding the internal perception that we continue to have. At the end of the XIXth century, W. Miller writes down that the inhabitants of the Peninsula talk about travelling to Europe when they mention any of the countries in the West and in this manner they exclude themselves from it, not only

geographically, but mentally. The inferior status that the peoples in the Balkans undertake is the unmistakable result of early low-esteem in comparison with Europe which proudly defines itself by progress, order. Europe does not only stand as a difficult target to reach for the South-Easterners, but barely impossible.

Romanians have always considered to be an integrated part of the European culture, deed strongly pronounced by the interwar intellectuals of the 30s for whom the only possible measure was the Occident. Inferiority complexes have persistently existed and they continue to exist. There were also exaggerations determined by the desire to eliminate such a long lasting stigma. For example, Eugen Ionescu's opinion, a well-known interwar writer, about the Balkans and the Balkanism tends to be very outright, as cited by Maria Todorova : „ An original and authentic Balkan culture cannot be really European. The Balkan spirit is neither European nor Asiatic. It has nothing to do with Western humanism” (Todorova: 2009, 47)

The latinity of the Romanian space has functioned as a tough argument for the intellectuals of our country to differentiate us from the Balkans, from the negative perception associated with the Orient. One of our obsessions, as a nation, was the messianic role that we believe it has been granted to us, obsession having its roots in the deep frustration of us being a mixture between the Latins, the Turks and the Slavs as Maria Todorova sees it: „The theme of Romania's uniqueness was continued in the postwar period and reached its frenetic culmination under Ceausescu, as a compensatory mechanism for the self-conscious and troublesome feeling of being trapped in an ambiguous status, the in-betweenness of East and West.” (Todorova: 2009 48) So, the Romanian messianism has survived the dictatorship of Ceausescu, turning to different other forms of manifestation, and indicating a severe identity issue.

Regardless of the fact that it can be detected in small or in big portions, the inferiority complex of the nations in the South-East has been intensified by the stereotypes cultivated in the West. The desire to become Europeans, to integrate into what is called the civilized world. The desire looks to be still valid nowadays.

Denigrated or not, one thing is quite sure about the Balkan Peninsula: its existence. None of the populations living here, in this geographical space can not raise the debate over its identity without considering the whole, represented by the Balkans: ”The problem of identifying with the Balkans is a subspecies of the larger identity problem of small peripheral nations” (Todorova: 2009, 57) It is the case of Romania, too, which possessing the conscious of being in between cultures, has always sought to claim its particular identity, and it has done so, through the artists' voices.

Therefore, the deep need to know ourselves, to portray our faces has been built on a long controversial process of negative perceptions, together with fewer positive ones. The lack of clarity that this portrait has determines the Romanians' will, in different directions, be it officially or colloquially, to make this portrait clearer. What we can achieve is to understand why it has come to be like this and how history has played tricks on us. Then, we can rewrite history, from our own point of view, and together with it, we can admire, clearly, our face in the mirror.

Works cited:

- Bloom, Harold, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Riverhead Books, 1995
- Eliade, Mircea, *Mituri, vise și mistere*, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1998.
- Levy-Strauss, Claude, *Structural Anthropology*, Basic Books Inc., New York, 1963
- Muthu, Mircea, *Literatura română și spiritul sud-est european*, Editura Minerva, București, 1976
- Todorova, Maria, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, 2009
- W. Said, Edward, *Orientalism Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin, London, 1978