

## The Balkans in Contemporary Anglo-American Travel Writing

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### Abstract

*This paper addresses travel writing as a genre pregnant with signifying practices of the culture that has produced it and, thus, significantly reflective of the relation between the two sides of the encounter, which is of a pronounced concern now, when the difference between the ideology of European history/ies and the exclusive Balkan heritage has to be reconciled. The travel writing about the Balkans produced since the 1990s – during the turbulent decades that witnessed war, political, and financial crises, but also the region's efforts to stabilize, harmonize, and achieve an access to the European union – likewise reflect a variety of frequently contradictory responses by the travellers. Therefore, we believe that it is a high time to revisit it. This paper will deal with some renowned travellers, Paul Theroux, Robert D. Kaplan, Bill Bryson, Dervla Murphy, but also with texts less familiar to the academic audience.*

**Keywords:** travel writing, the 1990s, postcolonial theory, globalization, salvage writing, cosmopolitanism.

### 1. Introduction

Because books of travel are not only about the travelled world but also about travelling and, therefore, about the travelling subject, the material assessed here is as much about the West as it is about the Balkans. Apart from the orthodox knowledge that human mind is always intentional and, thus, the "other" is necessarily the mirror and the product of the culture through which eyes see, travel writer Pico Iyer explains that "real travel" is not about discovery but about the travelling subject's awareness of their own "position in relation to an exterior world," it is "an activity tied up exclusively with our personal definitions of what makes up self and home" (cf. Graulund 2011, p. 54). Therefore, a detailed research of recently developed material promises to provide additional explanation of the place and the meaning of the Balkans in the contemporary world.

The material I am dealing with witnesses of a variety of travelling styles – in planes, ships, trains, busses, taxis, and bicycles – and of a striking combination of contradictory responses and literary representations; ranging from sympathy and benevolence that seek to redeem the Western "quilt" to moral and political criticism of the recent atrocities; from the allure of the exotic Orient still traceable here to the dismay at the eastern cultural negligence; from the amazing richness of heritage to the appalling poverty of the present; from the adoration of its inhabitants' nobility to the confusion at their simultaneous emotional deficit. At the same time the narratives range from personal, over unaffected, texts that brim with interviews and historical research, to laconic surveys of what is first at hand; from directly socially and politically committed, over philosophical and hermeneutical meditations, these texts also reach pure impressionist descriptions; from deep insights into the spirit of the place, over superficial notions, to factually incorrect renderings; from elaborate lyrical descriptions over gross descriptions during a busy itinerary, to narrative experiments, etc.

Description of travel is never only a literary event, but also an act of interpretation and, therefore, a political act. It involves complex power relations present in every human community. Moreover, as D. Lisle argues, it is politically interesting because, as it pretends to offer neutral reflections, it actually "mask[s] that process of discursive ordering" (2006, p.13). Illustrating how the travel writing initiates developments of discourses of power and the global policy, David Campbell gives an example of Bosnia:

Rebecca West's pre-World War II *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* influenced in both style and substance Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, which in turn was read by President Clinton and others at a critical juncture in 1993 and helped make possible – because of the story of ancient and violent animosities it told – the American reluctance to take action." (quoted in Lisle 2006, p. 33)

Indeed, while travelling from Nurnberg, via Vienna and Klagenfurt, to Ljubljana, which used to be the western border of the Balkans, Kaplan supposed that once the integration is over, the Balkans would no longer be. The Balkans, though, has been a conglomeration as much of geographical and anthropological differences as of political controversies that have paradoxically shaped the "core" image of the region. Apart from carrying a succession of names, from "Turkey in Europe" to the newest one, the "Western Balkans," it has been the "Wild East" of Europe (Goldsworthy 1998), Europe

which still is not the Europe, the Europe that once was, noble yet wild. Tracing the creation of the Balkanist discourse, Goldsworthy argues that "the comparative absence of direct economic involvement in the Balkans [...] supported the influence of th[is] imagery" (1998, p. xi). Beside the right-wing perception of the region as "a contagious disease, an infectious sore in the soft underbelly of Europe, best left to fester in isolation," there is, she claims, the left-wing's "unconsciously neo-colonial" notion that the Balkan conflicts may "be solved by mature and responsible powers" (p. xi). Apart of this "Scila of the Balkans, seen as the label of external condemnation," as Alexander Kiossev calls it, there is also "the Haridba of the Balkans, seen as the name of the internal, 'native,' fear and shame" (2002, p.182). As such, the Balkans has also often been a place for the projection of various Western fantasies, from Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night*, over Tennyson's romantic sonnet "Montenegro" (inspired by the British 19th-century liberal leader W. Gladstone's passionate speeches about the small country, which he had never visited) and Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), to one of the recent James Bond movies, *Casino Royale*, filmed in the Czech Republic, but ostensibly set on the Montenegrin coast, which in an uniformed observer forever placed the seed of Monte-Carlian expectations when it comes to Montenegro. As Peter Preston wrote in a paper titled "Imagining Montenegro: from Tennyson to James Bond," Balkans, in terms of culture in the narrow Mathew Arnold sense, was perceived as a void: there was not Gothic movement, renaissance, neo-Classical revival, no artist whose influenced was felt outside of it. Especially so Montenegro, isolated for some centuries, then simply disappearing from political maps, it never allured any of the great travellers who instigated that magnificent impressionist style, such as D.H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, A. Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, etc. This uncertainty about the reality of the place finally inspired an article in 2007 in the *Observer*, which discussed the future development of Montenegro's Adriatic coast as a high class tourist destination, evoking the glorious days when Sophia Loren, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor were among its visitors. It reported that Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones are house-hunting near Kotor, where the racing driver Ralf Schumacher owns land. It also remarked that the country's profile was raised 'by *Casino Royale*, which took Daniel Craig as James Bond to play poker' and a photograph of Daniel Craig as James Bond is used as an illustration. (Preston 2009, p. 29)

In Montenegro everything is possible still. "Discovering" Kotor, Francis Tapon develops a dream to buy a house on the hill and become a shareholder in the newly opened casino "Maximus": he will enter through the VIP entrance, will dress Versace, will have free drinks, will be able to invite drinks to "the hottest chicks" and take them later to his Jacuzzi (2012, p. 342), etc. Yet, in front of this very dream-place, a murder takes place: his friend Fritz, who was also a friend of a notorious Mr. Sarić, is killed in the middle of the day in view of everybody.

My reading is mostly grounded in the postcolonial theory, which understands that travelling precedes colonizing, both literally and metaphorically. However, since the term "postcolonial" does not really apply to the Balkans, approached through the prism of Anglo-American narratives, I will be using its prompts to closely address the genre and its limits. As the genre places importance on the idiosyncrasies of the writer ("There is no foreign land; it is only the traveller that is foreign," R. L. Stevenson said), the culture-bound perspective of the perceiver normally comes into focus of the studies that problematize the "imperial eyes" (M.L. Pratt 1992) of the travellers, i.e. the projections of the (mostly economically and politically) privileged self (of those who can afford travel) onto the reality of the (often inferior, unprogressive) other (Said 1993). Another wave in critical discourse asks: "what happens when the Empire ceases to exist and the ideology of imperialism is brought into disrepute?" Can the new travellers avoid (neo)imperialist discourse or there are new methods of incorporating these (marginal) spaces into the West – such as making them into the escapes from the restrictions of the centre or placing them in a distant past that still keeps the best values of the West (cf. Ivison 2003)? Thus, in the second part of the 20th century, we encounter Westerners still travelling as emissaries of the Western ideals, but mostly avoiding grand walks of their predecessors and seeking for another, undiscovered, Europe. The opening of the Eastern Europe has urged many a traveller to social and political action (cf. Hulme and Youngs 2002, p. 93). Yet often insisting on its tragic lines (cf. Decker 2009, p.127), the travellers' eyes are fixed on the poverty stricken local population, the grossness of hotels, the ruins that testify to regional conflicts, the pornography available at the newsstands, etc. (p.140). Moreover, as Graham Huggan argues, globalization effected drastic change in the nature of locality as "a lived experience in a [...] de-territorialized world" (2012, p. 6) and thus of travel writing that has mostly relied on the localities' exotic anomalies (personal, cultural, national) that has allowed tourists and natives to "perform their identities to each other" (p. 5). This situation gave rise to, what he calls, "responsible tourism," of which one particular kind is "tourism of suffering," in which the modern cultures of confession and victimage are brought together in part-therapeutic, part-voyeuristic reminiscences of the traumatic experiences of disaster casualties" (p. 6).

Established pilgrimage in the Balkans, and especially ex-Yugoslavia, in the 1990s encompassed the sites in which atrocities took place or the sites of museum or mythic past. The natural beauties provoke only sporadic impressionist intervals. As Goldsworthy says,

*some of the dullest backwaters in the former Yugoslavia have acquired a dubious romantic resonance over the past ten years while reporters searched for the Balkan heart of darkness, in order to return with tales of 'unspeakable' horror. The relative anonymity of those parts [...] is another indication of this particular fascination. (2002, p. 29)*

It is revealing that on his grand Mediterranean tour, in his *The Pillars of Hercules* (1995), which title already reflects "the power of the affluent American [...] to dominate vast stretches of geography" (Decker 2009, p. 130) however different or exotic it is, Paul Theroux spends only two pages on Venice and over thirty on Albania as it was in 1993. Goldsworthy gives example of the novelist Joyce Cary who, volunteering to join the Montenegrins in the war against Turkey in October 1912, said that he was afraid "there would be no more wars. And I had a certain romantic enthusiasm for the cause of the Montenegrins; in short I was young and eager for any sort of adventure" (2002, p. 30). However, Montenegro of today, which did not suffer greater calamities in the recent wars, does not provide much allure (except for its wilderness which will be discussed later). Paul Theroux almost does not bother to cross the border from Croatia into Montenegro on his way to Albania. Bill Bryson and Tony White do not even mention it. Even in the academic writing, such as Elizabeth Pond's 2006 *Endgame in the Balkans: Regime Change, European Style*, only a couple of pages are devoted to Montenegro under the subtitle "Podgorica/Cetinje" in a chapter titled "Demythologizing Serbia and Montenegro," and these few pages are almost completely devoted to Montenegrin recent myths: Milo Đukanović's smuggling and (as it is understood) the half-legal institution of the Montenegrin Orthodox church.

Travel narrative is also significantly determined by public, mostly poor, transportation links that often provoke grudge and subsequent discontent with the visited place. Bill Bryson's joyful reminiscence of his trip through Yugoslavia is suddenly interrupted by his inability to travel by train from Belgrade to Sofia because all the seats are booked, even in the expensive dream-travel first class couchettes. Unexpectedly, he spends one more day in Belgrade (his previous day being a failure too) unsuccessfully attempting at busses and planes for which reason he starts hating the city. Travelling by trains and busses through a region devastated by war and economic crisis, Theroux moves quickly and thus strongly suggests the right to movement to the modern, rich, technologically advanced, and politically powerful man (cf. Edwards and Graulund 2011). A kind of resistance that grows in him to the somber stations, hotels, bad food, local beggars, etc. makes his observations reductive of the presence and relevance of the Balkan diversity to the old metonymy – "the Balkans." Yet, being a traveller who travels to write, Theroux knows he must overcome the American expectations of comfort. While he assumes he manages to mask the hegemonic stand in this way, another delicate irony develops in his text: as his book records human violence, poverty, and desperation, it is still the world that "American tourists prefer to see through the eyes of someone else" (Decker 2009, p. 141). For example, the Croatian town of Split, despite its glorious Roman remnants, to Theroux is just "an industrial port, rather horrible-looking, enclosing the tiny ancient town of Old Split" (1995, p. 247). While, immediately upon his arrival in Albania, he concludes:

*Nothing was right in Durre's [...] In a filthy and deranged way it all fit together – the toasted trees, the cracked buildings, the nasty earth [...] When the people saw me it was as though they had seen The Man Who Fell to Earth and they ran towards me and screamed for me to give them something – money, food, clothes, my pen, anything. (p. 260)*

Travelling in a less harried manner, Kaplan behaves less as an impressionist commentator and more as an analyst of Yugoslavian ethnic and national conflicts, which he understands as "a synecdoche of matters that constitute the vast unfinished business of the twentieth century" (cf. Decker, p. 142). Already in the train from Klagenfurt to Ljubljana he experiences physical entrance into another world embodied in the train bar which suddenly becomes poor, with tin aluminum shank and the hands of male workers holding cigarettes, beers, and Playboys. In a mosaic form, this image is automatically contrasted to the mysterious, almost unsurmountable, icons of the Gračanica monastery, and then again supplanted with the reminiscence to an angry and revengeful monologue on hatred and poverty heard in Albania. The following dissonance of the images and beliefs that he comments on and tries to understand, eventually leads to develop a series of conclusions:

*The Balkans were the original Third World, long before the Western media coined the term. [...] Whatever has happened in Beirut or elsewhere happened first, long ago, in the Balkans. The Balkans produced the century's first terrorists. IMRO [...] Twentieth-century history came from the Balkans. Nazism, for instance, can claim Balkan origin. Among the flophouses of Vienna, a breeding ground of ethnic resentments close to the southern Slavic world, Hitler learned how to hate so infectiously. (2005, p. li)*

In the extremity of her endeavors, Murphy is bicycling through the region for months and thus subverts the traditional idea that the movement is predominately male. Whenever she cannot use her bicycle, she walks. Once in the Croatian part of Bosnia snow forces her to take a bus to the Muslim part, but when she crosses this superficial border she

confesses to the conductor that she does not have money to pay the ticket and is immediately thrown out of the bus. Avoiding typical tropes of progressive mechanistic civilization, she has an opportunity to observe the places and ordinary people. Often on the road she has to stop to rest and, therefore, provide us with aesthetic observation of the place. On the deserted steep climb from Herzegovina to Montenegro, she notices profound silence, solemn and soothing, [...] broken only by mewling falcons and croaking ravens. And theirs was only movements in all the expanse of harsh beauty: the falcons circling, drifting, gliding, swooping – the ravens being aerobatic, tumbling and darting and swerving and soaring, showing off in the springtime. (2002, p. 175)

Yet, despite her biting criticism of militarism as the sole cause of contemporary conflicts and the hypocrisy of humanitarian interventions in the region, nowhere in the Balkans at the turn of the century does she find hot water for bath or shower, so that one wonders if she ever washed herself on that ardent road. She rarely found good food, but Red-Cross or airplane packages served in hotels. Therefore, her writing may still belong to this group of urgent political engagement, both when it comes to gender and to the global politics, or what M. L. Pratt called “planetary consciousness” (1992). Therefore, she still cannot avoid the Western production of knowledge, especially when she comments on the local people surprise to see a grandmother bicycling.

small children giggled unkindly on seeing me pushing Ruairi up that hill to the Simićs’ [...] The minimalism of my luggage sent Mrs Simić into another of her soft-hearted tizzies [...] Five days later, when I was leaving Sarajevo, she beamingly presented me with a carrier-bag containing a pink-and-yellow striped cardigan, a voluminous, flowery summer skirt, two blouses to match and a pair of plastic sandals. My gratitude was genuine; she would never know that her gift was passed on within three minutes to a Gypsy family squatting in a ruin. (135)

Growing awareness of the new globalized and hybridized world produces another twist in the critical discourse. Travel writing, as Hulme and Youngs elaborate, becomes illustrative of “an age in which theories of race and ethnicity [...] are starting to crumble” and the gaze of the traveller “is more likely to be multi-focal” (2002, p. 240). But, when, thus, “the lines of demarcation between Europe and the other are becoming disturbingly blurred” (Carr 2002, p. 81), many a traveller became increasingly anxious that there might no longer be an alternative anywhere (73). It seemed almost impossible to produce again a distinctive otherness of “the rest of the world” (M. L. Pratt 1992, p. 5) and thus to save travel writing, that late-romantic quest for the other. For this reason Helen Carr calls contemporary travel writing “salvage travel writing” (2002, p. 82). The undiscovered beauty, better say wilderness, of the Balkans comes convenient in these efforts. “If your tastes – culinary and otherwise,” says an essay, “extend to something a bit different and you’ve a healthy sense of curiosity about an area of which you’ve heard much but know little, go and visit Montenegro while it’s still relatively undiscovered” (Anon 2005). At the same time, after the drama of Montenegrin coast and its mountains, its capital Podgorica, built after the socialist fashion after World War II, to Francis Tapon, and to numerous others, is “a let down” (2012, p. 349). So is the old city of Dubrovnik.

The old city was gorgeous — shiny ramparts against a shimmering sea — but there was nothing to discover. The streets were too polished, the menus too refined. I turned on the faucet in my hotel room and flinched when the water came out hot. [...] but the Peaks of the Balkans Trail isn’t about distance so much as interaction, and with that one bus ride I’d crossed the most obvious border of the trip, the one between traveler and tourist. Despite wandering through a place of such hardship, the trail had introduced me to a rare part of Europe where the very idea of walking freely between worlds is still a gift as sweet and momentous as your first soft drink. A whole new Europe, a gracious and wild one, had presented itself, and to experience it I just needed to lace up my boots.

That all may one day disappear, too. (Neville 2013)

Leaving her bicycling “through the embers of chaos,” Murphy also passes Konavle on her way to Dubrovnik and concludes:

*The contrast with Montenegro was striking. And perhaps this is how Montenegro will soon be – and Albania, and everywhere else awaiting conquest by “globalization”. My granddaughters will grow up deprived, in a monotonous world where prosperity is equated with TNC-imposed homogeneity. (2002, p. 326)*

Similarly, on his return trip to Yugoslavia, Bill Bryson is disappointed that the bus service from Split to Sarajevo and the road conditions have improved.

When Katz and I had crossed Yugoslavia, it had been nothing if not exciting. The roads through the mountains were perilous beyond words, much too narrow for a bus, full of impossible bends and sheer falls from unimaginable heights. Our driver was an escaped lunatic who had somehow talked his way into a job with the bus company. Young and handsome, wearing his cap at a rakish angle, he drove as if cheerfully possessed, passing on blind bends, driving at break-neck speed, honking at everything, slowing for nothing. He sang hearty tunes and carried on lively conversations

with the passengers – often turning around in his seat to address them directly – while simultaneously sweeping us along the edge of ragged roads on the brink of sheer-sided cliffs. I remember pressing my face to the window many times and being able to see no road beneath us – just a straight drop and the sort of views you get from an aeroplane. [...] It had been a nearly perfect day and I itched to repeat it now. In a strange way, I was looking forward to the dangers of the mountain road – it was such an exhilarating combination of terror and excitement, like having a heart attack and enjoying it. (1998, p. 125)

Another traveller has “a confession to make.”

Before going to Serbia, I couldn't have pointed it out on the map. I had a vague idea it was one of those Balkan states that used to be Yugoslavia, and which were the site of bloody civil wars in the 1990s. But I couldn't have told you if it was by the sea (it isn't) or that it lies between Greece, Romania and Croatia. It would seem that I'm not the only one. You'd be hard-pressed to find a guide book on Serbia in most shops. There certainly isn't one anywhere in Heathrow Airport. But the fact that it's an undiscovered tourist spot is a definite advantage. If you go now, you can enjoy it while it's still unspoiled. Imagine what Prague was like before it was invaded by stag parties. [...] Even better, it's almost on our doorstep, reached by a plane journey of less than two-and-a-half hours. There aren't many places so close to home that have had recent experience of armed conflict but which are perfectly safe now. (Anon 2011)

Drawing on a wide canvas of the Balkans, in an attempt to understand the conflicts and contemporary politics, a good part of this writing is written by journalists who are intent in maintaining their credibility (cf. Hulme and Youngs 2002, p. 6) and, therefore, base their conclusions on balancing personal, factual, and historical research. Aiming at an objective picture they come close to investigative reporting (p. 9) interwoven with cultural theories, philosophical meditations, or quotes from historical sources and newspapers. Very often these books include academic apparatuses, such as lists of abbreviations, indexes, bibliography, maps and tables, etc. Besides, most of these travelogues might be also described as the “footsteps genre,” as the travellers develop a kind of dialogue with earlier and better-known travellers, which gives their books academic credibility (p. 97). We often see Kaplan and White reading Rebecca West, for example. However, as a critic says, “this approach to travel, with another's travel book always in mind, is also a way of not seeing,” (Folks 1999) which significantly disables a genuine response to the place. Furthermore, because the experience of travel is difficult to capture, because the actual travel always happened in the past in the relation to writing, the genre cannot be limited “to true accounts of actual travels” (Sherman 2002, p. 32), it becomes impossible to clearly differentiate an account and what actually happened, because the authors play “with the boundaries between eyewitness testimony, second-hand information, and outright invention” (p. 32). Besides, both authors and readers are aware that travels are “transmitted, and shaped, by textual accounts,” and that, therefore, they require “a secondary journey” (p. 32), the one of recollection, which always displaces meanings and the value of meanings. Therefore, it is not surprising that in spite of serious research that preceding the travel, the records often contain blurred memories and factual errors, sometimes even when it comes to names of the visited places. Saying how he was returning to Kosovo, no longer as a member of a humanitarian mission but as a real traveller, the author writes down how he would be able to “visit the ancient Orthodox monasteries on which Milosevic based his claim that Kosovo was inalienable Serbian territory, and sip macchiatto [...] in the pavement cafs [sic] of what is no longer *Pristina* to its inhabitants but *Prishtina*, capital of an independent nation” (Whitaker 2009, emphasizes edited). Tapon recollects hearing the story of the Montenegrin “founding father,” Petar II Petrovic Njegos (with no diacritics), who was born in 1813 in “Njegosi,” instead of *Njeguši*. Entering Nikšić in the direction of Trebinje, Murphy remembers passing by a skyscraper on her left, which has never existed there, and stays in the *only* hotel in Nikšić, Onogošt, for unbelievable 45 pounds per night. Tony White talks about Jan and Kora Gordon's “*Two Vagabonds in the Balkans*, a bizarre account of a bohemian year spent painting landscapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1920s,” (2006, p. 17) whereas the book is actually called *Two Vagabonds Through Serbia and Montenegro* and takes place during World War I. Theroux, despite his remarkable affluence, still talks about Serbian Protestantism. Such examples, of course, instigate a question: what expectations will those potential travellers have, who, apart from relying on these books of travel, also must have get familiarized with some academic writing on the region. There are numerous knowing insights in *Endgame in the Balkans, Regime Change, European Style*, by Elizabeth Pond, but it also provides a map in which the river Miljacka runs through Mostar, while the Neretva is placed in Sarajevo, instead of the other way around. Barbara Korte's “Facing the East of Europe in Its Western Isles: Charting Backgrounds, Questions and Perspectives,” talks about “the wars of 1991-1998 in Vojvodina, a former autonomous province of Yugoslavia [sic] which witnessed massacres and [...] forced migrations, mostly of Hungarian-speaking minorities” (2010, p. 155).

How building of these expectations work can be observed in the following example in which a Western traveller assumes that Croats don't grow beards because beards are associated with Serbian Četniks. That is why, he assumes, that at the Croatian border he “was held up for half an hour while unsmiling officials took turns to glare at [his] passport. The photograph shows me with a beard [...] I wondered whether they still associated beards with their Serbian former

enemies and suspected me of infiltrating a bicycle into their country" (Clarke 1997). In a long line of visitors to Dubrovnik is the one whom Dubrovnik reminds of Venice, but "on a small scale. The narrow alleys, the loggias, the basilicas, the piazze and, above all, the sense of entering a three-dimensional dream space" (Gusha 2009). With a pity he also observes that "nearly 70 per cent of the old town was damaged" (Gusha 2009) in the war with Serbs.

On the opposite side are the authors who deliberately fail to provide authoritative knowledge, offering instead entertainment. For its famous abandon, lavishness, indulgence, the Balkans saw many a traveller drunk. Once back home, Tony White misses Macedonian wine "T'ga za Jug." In Split, Bryson does shortly describe Diocletian Palace, but spends 2/3 of the narrative describing his drunken experience, while Dervla Murphy often goes back to her hotel "perilously drunk, verging on footlessness" (10). On a recent page in the Guardian one reads:

*Montenegrin enthusiasm for oenology can be dangerous, as they haven't really grasped the concept of a wine tasting yet. You don't spit, just glug – and the wine is normally followed by a slug of rakija (brandy). I discovered this to my cost during a visit to irrepressible winemaker Ilija Klisic, which possibly wasn't the wisest thing to do the day before my first attempt at kayaking. (Novakovich 2014)*

However, the travellers of this kind tend to get insights into the region hidden to conventional observers, while, as Bracewell argues, their alleged amateurism and innocent observation paradoxically give them authority over the unbeaten tracks, the ordinary, the random, the truly "authentic" (2005). In an "unconventional guide" to Montenegro, an Australian traveller writes:

*If you're looking for a new adventure, a change of life [...] you need to see the real Montenegro, to meet its people and to experience the true possibilities of what's available. Forget the maps and guidebooks. You need to get lost in the interior. That's where you'll find a classic symphony of pure, mountainous splendour that you won't see anywhere else on the planet. (Bulatović 2010)*

Yet, as various critics agree, even avoiding passing judgments on the inferiorly civilized world comes from a privileged and an elite community (Hollan and Huggan 2003, p. ix). Debbie Leslie makes only a slight difference between the "colonial vision," as the "continuation of hierarchical global relations," and the "cosmopolitan vision" of an international community, which assumes some universal standards of civilization, and, forgetting "the privileged conception of global mobility embedded in the genre" (2006, p.11), criticize the relations of dominance and subordination (p. 6). Moreover she insists that it is those who enact a cosmopolitan vision "who are most alarming, for they smuggle in equally judgmental accounts of otherness under the guise of equality, tolerance and respect for difference. [...] they simultaneously rearticulate the logic of Empire through new networks, structures and boundaries" (10). Thus, in her view, Bryson's "playful celebration" of European happily coexisting differences can be "mobilised in the construction of new global hegemonies" (p. 10). Travellers are probably aware of the global inequalities, but at the same time they ignore the fact that the act of writing actually "itself engenders contemporary power formations that are as unequal, unjust and exploitative as those forged during Empire" (p. 10). Therefore, Bryson's efforts "to reveal the funny side of difference might seem like a step in the right direction," (p. 10) but, Leslie argues, they also "can be used to justify and legitimate new forms of global exclusion, domination and violence" (p. 11). Unlike Kaplan's and Theroux's explicit judgments,

Bryson's "quirky" and unthreatening observations are less about judging difference, and more about contrasting the marvellous Europeans with his own infantile, shambolic and ungainly self. But this humour does not neutralise Bryson's travelogue; rather, it helps to place his production of difference beyond question, for how can the playful celebration of difference be a bad thing?" (p. 13)

A few books are so courageously acquiescent to the generic limitations of travel writing as is Tony White's *Another Fool in the Balkans: in the Footsteps of Rebecca West* (2006) and so aware of the inescapable influence of a better known writer. Prepared to cross the border by this "big book of life" (p. 152), as he defines West's *The Black Lamb and the Grey Falcon*, and also by a virtual walk from the UK to Belgrade performed by an expatriate Serbian artist in his art gallery, White travels by train from Zagreb to Belgrade in the company of FAK-YU (Festival alternativne književnosti – Yugoslavia) artists, himself to take part at a short story festival in Belgrade. A long tunnel before the Zemun part of Belgrade effects darkness in the train, diverts his sight from the surrounding nature, allows him time to reflect, and announces his entrance in another zone. But, he is acutely conscious of his privilege to be thus formatted as a traveller through the former Yugoslavia and taken care of by its literary vanguards, so that he assumes a humble pose. Their ex-Yugoslav nostalgia obviously impacts his own perception as he rejects the "universal" truths and points out to the regional potentials of affluence in every sense. His endeavors to avoid the Balkanist discourse and the discourse of the *other* in general are sometimes presented by poignant comparisons of the localities with gentle memories of his childhood in

Great Britain. All the time he is aware that his main influences are strongly opinionated and regrets to be living in an age in which all the values have crumbled and that one can hardly have a firm stand. He wonders, then, what he himself can make of the trip and the countries he visits, and promises that he will try to avoid "ill-founded" (p. 50) opinions. But he still calls himself "a fool" not only because he hopes he could reach the yet indiscernible truth about the Balkans, but maybe more because he knows that as hard as he tries he cannot avoid an opinion of a highly educated British writer as he is. Therefore, he cannot help asking himself, over and over again, what travel writing is: is it mostly fact, or mostly fiction, or, indeed, only fiction? In this way his book also presents an open challenge to the travel writing theory. Longing for a shelter from his own dilemmas, White relies on something that has never lost its dignity – art. He revisits numerous works of art and traces the instances of nobleness and thus, actually, produces not only a book of travel, but also a long meditation on art.

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