

Mircea Muthu, *Balcanismul literar românesc. Panoramic sud-est european. Confluente culturale*, Cluj-Napoca, Școala Ardeleană, 2017



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DOI: 10.24193/cechinov.2024.46.30

BALKANISM, FROM COLONIZING DISCOURSE TO AESTHETIC VALUE

What qualifies as Balkan? This question has provoked contradictory and controversial answers which by their definitions say more about the nature of the answerer than the concept itself. As Diana Mishkova observes in *Beyond Balkanism. The Scholarly Politics of Region Making*¹, the understanding of the concept of Balkan is done through a form of internalization of the external discourse that can only be explained by the hegemonic power relations between Eastern and Western Europe. She claims that Western discourse makes an ontological and epistemological distinction between the European “self” and the position of a Balkan “other”. Western Europe, which calls itself civilized, is differentiated by contrast from the Balkan space which he looks at from above. The concept is invested with meaning after “Evicting the agency of the Balkans by reducing the signifier ‘Balkan’ to a colonizing western discourse”². The colonizing discourse operates politically and ideologically in favor of hegemonic power. Thus, when Maria Todorova states that balkanization “has become a synonym for the return to the tribal, to the primitive, to the barbarian.”³ it exposes the attempt of the West to build a clichéd image against the marginalized region. The term was invested with a derogatory function after the two Balkan wars of 1912-1913, when barbarism, political tension, social chaos, seemingly unmotivated cruelty, instability and lack of economic development characterized the Balkan regions. Because of a tragic history and a complex and inconsistent vitalist spirit, seen rather inferior, the

derogatory image is accentuated after the two World Wars. However, Andrew Hammond argues that the denigrating speeches also serve to bring to the surface specific characteristics of Balkanism: “Even the briefest survey of the discourses that the West has deployed on the Balkans and the Orient will discover motifs, images, registers, and evaluations which appear to have floated free of historical and geographical context.”⁴

One of the most famous studies dedicated to Balkanism, *The Balkans and Balkanism*, signed by Maria Todorova, presents from a diachronic perspective the evolution and changes over time of the perception of the Balkan space and spirit. The author captures the function of compensatory space that the region had even in relation to what today is called the civilized center. Thus, the “good” side of Balkanism is promoted. The author explains how, after the industrialization and social changes, “the East constituted for the West an exotic and imaginary land, the home of legends, fairy tales and miracles; he synthesized the desired and offered option, opposed to the profane and prosaic world of the West.”⁵ For Britain, for example, the Orient became the representation of exoticism and excess, and this projection “turned the Orient into the escapist dream of wealthy romantic conservatives.”⁶ The East is perceived as a heavenly space from which men learn to smoke, wear specific clothing elements and sensuality, passion, is discovered, giving a double meaning to the escapist image – of liberation from urbanization and metaphor of what is forbidden. The oxymoronic dichotomy of Balkanism moves from the barbaric to the sublime. A significant contribution is made

to the critique and theory of the Balkan space by Maria Todorova because she provides the necessary tools for understanding and knowing the Balkanism, also succeeding in tracing transnational relations in a geocritical analysis.

On the other hand, changing the vectors of the colonizing definition, Mircea Muthu gives voice to Balkanism from within, from its particular sources, in a thorough analysis of Balkanism that speaks of art with a compensatory function. *Balkanismul literar românesc. Panoramic sud-est european. Confluențe culturale (Romanian Literary Balkanism. Panoramic Southeast European. Cultural Confluences)* is the work of an encyclopedic personality who offers, for the first time in the history of Romanian literature, a theoretical basis for Balkanism in the artistic space. It is necessary to mention that the ethical component of the term dominates the collective opinion, the aesthetic value being ignored or unknown. In a different way, the field of art claims that there is a *Weltanschauung* specific to Balkan people, different from their psychological or economic status.

The book is structured into three parts with distinct functions. The first part, *Etapele istorice ale conceptului (Historical Stages of the Concept)*, is a historiographical and analytical presentation that clarifies and establishes the chronological development of Balkan literature. The approach of the whole book includes and goes beyond the classical definition of the concept, which comes down to geographical delimitation or historical context. The domination of the Ottoman Empire and the social changes that followed the Turkish-Phanariot period left a permanent effect on the Balkan regions, but it is not the

only distinctive feature. In contrast to the approaches of historians or anthropologists, the volume aims to bring to light the aesthetic value of Balkanism, the way scholars and writers feel the world and transpose the Balkan soul into the text. That is why the primary texts chosen for the demonstration begin with the writings from the end of the Romanian Middle Ages that make the transition from the pragmatic function of writing to the aesthetic one. Written with a religious or philosophical purpose, the analyzed works can be distinguished from those before them by the literary and subjective style, the metaphorical language, the complex construction of parables and the abundance of figures of speech. These components form the fundamentals necessary to observe the most sensitive distinctions and trends in Balkan literature. "An amazing richness of myths, epic patterns and symbols define a territory heavily tried by history"⁷ characterizes Balkanism. The tensions and instability caused by political and social changes are transmitted artistically in the union and merging of the most opposite extremes. Authors such as Neagoe Basarab and Dimitrie Cantemir exemplify the homogenization of extremes and the possibility of the coexistence between dualities. The hybridity of artistic expression of Balkan literary texts and the common cultural background is the connecting element between authors from different historical periods. Although it can bring around itself several authors and define itself from an aesthetic point of view, Balkanism should not be understood as a literary or artistic movement. Balkanism is formed from a common way of feeling that creates artistic products without a predetermined programmatic vision.

The first chapter, *Bizanțul dincolo de moarte (Byzantium beyond Death)*, is dedicated to the first form of Balkanism in Romanian literature that belongs to Neagoe Basarab. *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie (Neagoe Basarab's Teachings to his Son Theodosius)* attest to his Balkanity by preserving the duality specific to Byzantium between the aulic and the popular. The alternation between aulic and popular comes from "the dualism of a properly Byzantine nature, which characterized for a millennium, with normal alternations of plans, the culture and spirit of the empire in the east of the continent."⁸ The Byzantine aesthetic merges with the Christian humanism specific to peninsular regions to reveal a common sensibility in which religious character is preferred in works of art. However, the preference for the religious is doubled by profane elements. The sacred-profane relationship is a prime example of alternation between two seemingly opposite representations. In his self-portrait Neagoe Basarab presents himself as a humble scholar and as a descendant of the genealogy of the great emperors of Byzantium, this brings together two different images of the self. The false charity is revealed by the determination with which he guides others in faith in the religious paragraphs. Because he combines an authoritative voice and religious imaginary, Neagoe Basarab manages to satisfy the need of the Balkan peoples to find a solution through faith in the face of Ottoman oppression.

The second chapter, *Balkanicitate și balcanism (Balkanity and Balkanism)*, focuses on Dimitrie Cantemir, which is located in the middle between the anti-Ottoman East and the Western humanism. On a

political, but also imaginary level, he mediated between two divergent systems. The specific contradictions of the Balkan style of being and feeling were formed against the background of an erudite education in various foreign regions. The much-discussed dual character in the analysis of his portrait is a tendency specific to the Balkan spirit marked by disagreements and oppositions. *Istoria ieroglifică (The Hieroglyphic History)* is an allegorical description of the political situation within the Balkan space that captures the intrigues, tensions and personalities of those who come into conflict. The novel presents a Balkan typology which, in addition to its aesthetic value and innovation, provides internal details of historical content. The second work, *Divanul (The Divan)*, shows a material status to duality because it separates it into a dialogue between sage and world, soul and body. Other modes of correspondence between dualities are achieved by interweaving pre-Christian elements from antiquity with Christian ones or, at a closer look, by juxtaposing micro/macro-cosmos, good-evil, rational-irrational, life-death, winter-summer, youth-old age etc. Fundamentally Balkan leitmotifs are present in the content of the work, such as the wheel of the world - the image of perfect balance, symmetry and cyclical development. In the same direction of aesthetic analysis, the commentary of the notes in *Istoria otomană (The Ottoman History)* highlights the transition period between historical writings with a purely informative role that emphasize the tragism of the period of Ottoman domination and literary-artistic writings. Dimitrie Cantemir describes details from the intimacy of the Ottoman empire to reconstruct the Islamic world in fiction and

to make a new contribution on a historical level. The descriptions of habits contributed to the pejorative sense of Balkanism that we perceive today because they highlighted the lack of morality, the preference for luxury, talk in vain, artificial behavior, chaotic dynamics and the need for conflict.

There is no doubt that the structural dualism observed in the two authors who open the succession of Balkan works, Neagoe Basarab and Dimitrie Cantemir, is found later in other forms in the context of Balkanism as a product of urbanization. For example, the awareness of the crisis of the Romanian feudal society translates into a departure from literary texts and an ironic authorial voice. Thus, in order to understand the aesthetic value of Balkanism in Romanian literature, the third chapter focuses on the continuity of the phenomenon at the collective scale. As I said, the aesthetic phenomenon called Balkanism cannot be considered a literary-artistic movement, a clear movement with a defined aesthetic status. However, the literary analysis captures the aesthetic mutations that have as a common denominator a specific typology inclined towards contrasting state of mind. To exemplify, such contrasts are formed between the realism of folk books and the solemn discourse of religious literature.

Balkanism formed as a reaction to urbanization is examined in the caustic satire of Nicolae Filimon and the wild laughter of Anton Pann. The Balkan spirit comes to life in the work of Anton Pann through the character of Nastratin - ironic, mocking, inconsistent, who loves farce, disorder and indiscipline. Nastratin's attitude represents the general need to react to a restrictive history. The freedom to laugh and distance

oneself from the tragic nature of the facts is due to the period of the fall of the Phanariotes. In this context, Nicolae Filimon's critical attitude and desire to do justice is explained. Like Pann, Filimon uses parody in a determined and sharp note, but he is distinguished by the passionate attitude specific to romance. Epic descriptions of expansive dimensions are rendered sensitively. The writers of this period create a new artistic sensibility to form to new aesthetic category. The artistic redemption of sensitivity continues with Ion Ghica who completes the overall picture of the Balkan instability from a contemplative vision. Ghica replaces Filimon's romantic sensibility with a realistic vision and an analytical perspective that participate in the common Balkan imaginary, without losing the preference for caricature, polemic, storytelling and a strong need for morality. The recognition of a common Balkan tradition in art is due to the efforts at aestheticization made by the writers of the 19th century and those before them.

As noted so far, the Balkan man lives by contrasts and joins the contemplative attitude with the parodic dynamism. Contemplation that turns to oriental origins and parody highlights the emotional distance from the dramatic and violent state of the peninsular peoples. Moreover, the distant attitude is a first indicator of the improvement in reducing the tension on the social and political level. The duality that joins moral with irony also emphasizes the relaxed attitude of the authors and the end of a historical stage.

The study continues its chronological approach to 20th century literature in the chapter *Prelungiri literare (Literary Extensions)* where Mircea Muthu makes an

important delimitation between different types of Balkanism. In this way he explains that Balkanism has multiple nuances, such as the Balkanism of common histories (Sadoveanu, Bucuța, E. Barbu), moral and political Balkanism (G. Maghieru, I. L. Caragiale), predominant Balkanism social (P. Istrati), ethical and religious Balkanism (Gala Galaction), but also a metaphysical dimension (Ion Barbu) and especially an aesthetic dimension with a distinct tone (Matei Caragiale, Adrian Maniu, Gala Galaction, Ion Barbu, etc.).⁹ The division is a solid argument in support of the aesthetic dimension in Romanian literature that forms a complex overview and delimits the authors between different functions of Balkanism.

In a similar way, the last chapter of the first part, *Ecouri contemporane (Contemporary Echoes)*, examines twelve literary works with the aim of tracing the common thread of Balkan literature. In addition to the diversity of styles and similarities of content typical of the Eastern sensibility, prose and poetry justify the existence of a thematic and literary Balkanism.

The second part naturally extends the critical analysis in an approach based on themes, motifs and literary traits. The typological approach contributes to the understanding of Romanian literature, but it is not territorially limited here, it extends to Southeast European literature from the 19th and 20th centuries. From a methodological point of view, the second part of the book offers directions for approaching literature from two levels, locally - at the national level, and generally - between the Balkan peoples. The conclusion reached is that the literary systems of these regions share similar political, economic and social

histories that create collective artistic typologies. The comparative approach to intercultural exchanges allows establishing a common sensibility, a general way of feeling.

The third part comes with the answer to the question suggested from the beginning of the volume about what it means to be Balkan. Built on the corpus of texts from the first parts, this section is conclusive and purely theoretical. Two clarifications have been made up to this point. First of all, that Balkanism has been configured as a clearly defined aesthetic function that differs from the status that literary currents have in general. And second, that there is no perfect overlap between Balkan and South-East European, thus, it is an error to equate the two notions without delimiting them conceptually. In the end, the directions of common knowledge of the concept of the Balkan are limited to a political, ethnic and historical context clearly defined by the wars and conflicts of the

peninsular regions that individually manifested in an inner tragedy and the attempt of identity survival which led in arts to the need for aesthetic redemption and the creation of compensatory sensibilities to the turbulent reality.

To summarize the relevance of the volume, let me return to the importance of defining Balkanism from within. Mircea Muthu defines the concept starting from literary works and their authors and refuses the external colonizing definition that reduces the concept to its pejorative form. The perspective moves from the colonizing external view to the aesthetic vision born from the intimacy of the experiences of a people crushed by conflicts. The author offers us the chance to familiarize ourselves with the peculiarities of Romanian literature of Balkan origin. Thus, with the release of the volume *Balkanismul literar românesc (Romanian Literary Balkanism)*, the aesthetic value of Balkanism can no longer be denied.

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NOTES

1. Diana Mishkova, *Beyond Balkanism. The scholarly politics of region making*, Routledge, New York, 2018.
2. *Ibidem*, p.3.
3. Maria Todorova, *Balcării și Balcanismul*, În românește de Mihaela Constantinescu și Sofia Opreșcu, Humanitas, București, 2000, p.15.
4. Andrew, Hammond "Typologies of the East: On Distinguishing Balkanism and Orientalism", in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 29, no. 2-3, June 2007, p. 202.

5. Maria Todorova, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
6. *Ibidem.*
7. "Summary", English version by Alexandra Noemina Câmpean, in Mircea Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc. Panoramic sud-est european. Confluente culturale*, Școala Ardeleană, Cluj-Napoca, 2017, p. 746.
8. Mircea Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc. Panoramic sud-est european. Confluente culturale*, Școala Ardeleană, Cluj-Napoca, 2017, p. 29.
9. "Summary", English version by Alexandra Noemina Câmpean, in Mircea Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc. Panoramic sud-est european. Confluente culturale*, p. 755.