

## **One Example of Balkanistic Discourse on Montenegro**

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to analyze the presence of balkanistic discourse in the article "Montenegro, land of stout hearts and stones", published in the Washington Post on December 3, 2010, and to indicate the factors involved in its generation and reproduction. We will pursue the specifics of the author's perception of the Montenegrin geographical and civilizational space and examine his writings in their relation to prior paradigms of travel narrative regarding Montenegro and other Balkan countries.

**Key Words:** balkanistic discourse, travel account, Montenegro

### **Introduction**

In recent years, travel literature has been increasingly studied, not only its literary but also the cultural and historical aspects. Due to the abundance of themes and to the variety of the information offered, travel books are particularly suitable for the analysis of traditional views of a country and for the identification of stereotypes and connotations that were tied to it. In fact, we do not consider travel accounts only as a personal testimony about the encounter with the Other or as a transfer of impressions and observations of phenomena in a given historical moment, but also as the construction of images of the Other and selective transfer of observations, opinions and facts through their generalization. Many critics have pointed out that travel narrative was the "birthplace" of many stereotypes concerning one nation that were built in a specific historical time to be later accepted as a generalization of the essential and timeless qualities of the people. As Sarup (1993) underlines in his *Postructuralism* "every narrative simultaneously presents and represents a world, that is, simultaneously creates and makes up a reality and asserts that it stands independent of that same reality. In other words, narrative seems at once to reveal or illuminate a world and to hide and distort it."

Edward Said with his study *Orientalism* (New York, 1978) enhanced the research in the field of a priori schemes of perception and representation of otherness or strangeness that are imposed by a particular discourse in a particular context. The recent events of the war in the Balkans and the renewed interest of politicians, historians, writers and publicists in the South Eastern Europe have led to a flourishing production of various articles on the Balkan countries, offering rich material for analysis of that kind of narrative in comparison with the writings of previous epochs. Basing their research upon Said's works many critics have dealt with issues such as essentialization of cultural differences in a particular historical moment and their politicization and instrumentalization in subsequent historical contexts. Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova, dealing with the reception of the Balkans in the scientific and political circles in Europe and the United States, also approaches this issue from the aspect of discourse. In her book *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, 1997) she argued "that a specific discourse, balkanism, molds attitudes and actions toward the Balkans and could be treated as the most persistent form or 'mental map' in which information about the Balkans is placed, most notably in journalistic, political, and literary output." As opposed to "Orientalism" which she characterizes as a "discourse about an imputed opposition" she defines Balkanism as "discourse about an imputed ambiguity", believing that the Balkans were seen as the alter ego of Europe and its uncivilized element, designed as "an incomplete self". The Balkans is therefore treated as an area inextricably bound up with a special identity that pre-determines the character of its inhabitants, making them substantially different from the inhabitants of the surrounding countries.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The article "Montenegro, land of stout hearts and stones" written by Robert Rigney, published in the Washington Post 3/12/2010 provides numerous examples of some basic features of balkanistic discourse. This contribution can be characterized as travel reportage, although the description of the route is given only partially. The writer presented details of his travel through Montenegro and means of transport used, but did not mention where and how he came to the Balkans, nor gave any information on the return. Since he came to Montenegro by train from Serbia, we can assume that this visit is just one of the stages of his journey through the Balkans.

The very title of this article, linking the words heart and stone, implies the image of the Montenegrins that Rigney wants to develop. The title also suggests that Rigney intends to use exotization and generalization in his reportage on Montenegro. This is reflected by his decision to use keywords such as "land of" followed by the conclusions applicable to all members of the country. Thus, "land of giants" means a country where there are no people of medium height or dwarves, a "land of stout hearts" attributed as trait to all its inhabitants, indicates the basic characteristics of this nation, by which it is substantially different from all the neighbors. Exotization of Montenegro is present from the very beginning of Rigney's stay in this country. The impression of "dramatic" train ride from Prijepolje to Podgorica while crossing a number of tunnels, over deep ravines and "indescribably rocky mountains" is reinforced by his statement that people can not be seen in these areas because of the too inhospitable environment, ignoring the fact that those areas are inhabited by tens of thousands of people. This view corresponds to the perception of the Balkans present in the travel literature of nineteenth century where the Balkan countries are presented to readers as "Europe's Indian territory." (Todorova, 1997)

Rigney made no attempt to conceal his perception of Montenegrin society as criminal and corrupted. After his arrival to Podgorica, the author compares the actual situation with the condition in the nineties, without revealing to the readers if he visited Podgorica in that period and if he had the opportunity to personally verify the assertion that the city was "rife with Mafiosi". Instead, without any inquiry into social conditions, Rigney affirms that "illicit atmosphere of those times still clings to the city" and compares the Montenegrin capital, where he spent a few hours around the train station, with the wild west.

Other sites that Rigney managed to visit in Montenegro are the Ostrog Monastery, Cetinje, Herceg Novi and Budva. The first two places have great historical, cultural and spiritual significance for the people of Montenegro, while the other two are tourist centers. As the author himself claims, one of the reasons that encouraged him to visit Montenegro is its multi-ethnicity. Therefore, immediately after his arrival to Podgorica Rigney decides to visit the monastery of Ostrog, considered as a holy site by adherents of different religions. However, instead of believers that usually visit Ostrog, Rigney notes "all manner of religious kitsch", referring to the souvenirs, that are sold in front of many churches and monasteries in the world, and "a couple of cafes blaring the usual Serbian and Montenegrin national music, with waitresses wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the visages of Radovan Karadzic and other indicted war criminals." Rigney's opinion about the music that emerged in the '90 called turbo-folk, which, albeit very popular, can not be characterized as national since the state television channels and many radio stations do not broadcast it, is well known from his earlier writings on music in the Balkans. He undertakes to suggest:

"Turbo folk is a style of music unique to Serbia, but with equivalents in almost every developing country in the world, that blends elements of folk music with Western pop and is characteristic of societies in transition. Turbo folk is relentlessly upbeat, oriental, marked by maniacal keyboards and wailing Turkish style vocals with artists singing by turns of love and nationalism. The most famous practitioner at the time was Ceca, wife of murdered mafia boss and paramilitary leader Arkan".

Turbo-folk music without any doubt deserves a large number of objections, but it can hardly be proved that the connection of this kind of music and its fans to the nationalism is stronger than the connection of other kinds of music (pop, rap, rock, heavy metal ...) to the same phenomena. It seems that Rigney believes that the quality of music is directly related to the development of a country in which it arises, and that it can be expected that in the richer countries exists only quality music, which in addition celebrates the noble human feelings, while the poorer ones are dominated by the music devoid of art and other values. This progressionistic understanding of cultural development was present in some earlier works of travel writing genre regarding Southeastern Europe, where the Balkans were presented as an area "subject to the universal laws of evolution but theirs was a backward culture and civilization" (Todorova, 1997), while the culture in Western countries is assessed as advanced and superior in every way. Rigney repeats all the negative stereotypes about the Balkans that dominated the collective imaginaries of Western countries after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and often represents

the Balkan countries to his readers as a threat to European culture. Thus, in an article about Trumpet Festival in Guca, published on 16/09/2008 on a web page, entitled "European Balkan project, a cultural phenomenon," Rigney concludes: "This was Serbia, a land of heated passions, and this was Guca, where nationalist sentiment is mixed with large quantities of alcohol made for a potentially dangerous mix." In addition to showing surprise that at big music concerts in Serbia people drink alcohol (as it was specific only to Serbia and not a widespread phenomenon that characterizes major music events organized around the world) Rigney is also concerned about nationalism that, in his opinion, is promoted at these events.

Rigney's intention to represent the Ostrog monastery as a gathering place for nationalist transpires in his description of two waitresses dressed in t-shirts with images of the Hague convicts. We can not verify the authenticity of this statement, nor claim that in Montenegro there are no people who support the military leaders concerned, but we were intrigued by other things that Rigney "saw" in Ostrog. There are, for example, cypress trees and olive groves which certainly do not grow there and our curiosity was also aroused by his assumption that the area probably was once inhabited by the "Albanian shepherds with fierce, wolflike dogs trained to fly at strangers". The first mention of this specific type of dogs can be found in the famous publication of Violla de Sommieres *Voyage Historique et Politique au Montenegro*, published in the 1820th in Paris and later translated into English. This publication has served as a model for many authors who visited Montenegro and wrote about it.

Rigney seizes the opportunity to present his reflections on nationalism in Montenegro during his visit to Cetinje (historical capital of Montenegro) and to the mausoleum on the Lovcen mountain which is the burial place of famous Montenegrin poet and ruler Petar II Petrovic Njegos. Rigney draws his readers' attention to the signs "perforated by bullets, fired by some drunken Montenegrin in an excess of glee," which completes the fictitious image of Montenegro as the wild west. Upon arrival at the mausoleum he concludes that "The Nazis would have loved this place". However, this observation applies not only to the "fascist architecture" but also to the "couple of Montenegrins in nationalist T-shirts" who were selling flags and "patriotic souvenirs". While the sale of souvenirs is considered lucrative and desirable activity in other states, Rigney seems to think that in Montenegro this points to nationalism of its people and allows the categorization of souvenirs as patriotic and unpatriotic. In referring to the salesmen he cannot help noticing: "They would have preferred me to be a Serbian or a Montenegrin. They had at least hoped I was a Slav. Still, they could not refuse me a ticket." It remains unclear to the readers what makes Rigney think that the salesmen are nationalists and racists when he only purchases the ticket without any discussion with them.

The only dialogue that Rigney noted in his travel reportage is his conversation with the owner of a bookstore in Herceg-Novi. The conversation topic, the independence of Kosovo from Serbia, was chosen by the journalist after an unusual encouragement from the bookstore owner to ask him anything he wanted to know about Serbs and Serbia. This unnatural dialogue is more appropriate in situations where the speaker can not freely participate in the conversation and direct it to the topic of his interest, so he needs to find a way to suggest the questions he wants to be asked. After noting that the bookshop owner opposes the independence of Kosovo, Rigney quotes his words that may help the readers understand the bases of religiosity of the population in Montenegro: myths and fatalism. When asked if he is only the seller or the owner of the shop, the bookstore owner replies that everything belongs to God and explains his belief with a fairy tale about a farmer whose farm had been repeatedly burned until he realized that he needed to recognize that God owns everything on earth. Rigney's interlocutor shares his personal experience of surviving the earthquake in Montenegro in 1979, which warned him that he was nothing more than a "user" of things that belong to God.

Dialogue is not the only form of narration used by Rigney to convey his thoughts on religion and spirituality in Montenegro. There are also descriptions: abandoned churches in the region of Budva, "dark Orthodox churches hung with icons and swimming in incense" in Herceg Novi, and we should not forget the random passerby who offered him a drive from the Ostrog monastery to Podgorica, in whose car at least four crosses were hanging from the rearview mirror. Rigney humorously explains their role. In his opinion, their presence "was perhaps an indication of how much he needed the grace of God to protect him on the road" because he was driving like a lunatic.

We notice that Rigney pays particular attention to the values that he believes do not exist in Montenegro and that he nurtures an anachronistic and fabulous view on Montenegrins as fearless warriors. He claims that he decided to visit Montenegro because he was "inspired by the colorful history of the place, Montenegro's tradition of resistance to the Turks during the nearly 500-year Ottoman occupation of the Balkans". Therefore he quotes Rebecca West, who visited Montenegro in the thirties of the twentieth century, and says that the architecture of Cetinje depicts "the austere ways of the Montenegrins, who distinguished themselves mainly in the field of battle and never had much

interest in the finer things of life ". Despite the fact that there is no longer a regular military service in Montenegro, Rigney is still fascinated by this very romantic mystification of Montenegrins in the spirit of a much older tradition of travel narratives and continues to exploit "the myth of Balkan rebellion and heroism" (Čolović 2008). This confirms Maria Todorova's conclusion that the Balkans in the west are still seen as "The Volksmuseum of Europe." Climbing up to the mausoleum on Lovćen Rigney notices only desert and ruins which leads him to the following reasoning:

"I thought about the heroes who had once populated these valleys. In the words of Burns, it was once, perhaps a hundred years ago, "the birthplace of valor, the country of worth." The race has since all but died out. Left home. Moved abroad. The last representatives, big, quiet men, are to be seen sadly smiling behind the counter of some local restaurant. But up in the mountains, I thought about their ancestors, the race of mountain men who once nimbly trod these stones, armed to the teeth with guns and knives, accustomed to sleeping bareheaded in the rain at night in the mountains, ready to fight the Turks at a moment's notice. The whole landscape was full of the memories of these people; their ghosts lived in the stones."

In his article "Balkanistic discourse and its critics" Ivan Colovic points to the constitutive ambiguity of exotic discourse because "people and things that it 'describes' do not have two kinds of characteristics, the bad and good ones, but those are mostly the same characteristics, differently interpreted. For example, in some circumstances use of force can be praised as a noble courage and grit, and in some other occasions this can be interpreted as barbarity and bullying." Also, according to Rigney, working in tourist sector, in other countries considered as one of the most important factors of development, in Montenegro is an indicator of degradation of social values. In his opinion, in the process of transformation into civil society Montenegro has lost much of its exoticism and authenticity. Therefore, disappointed in his expectations to see Montenegrins armed to the teeth, Rigney considers the warriors and heroes as guardians of real values, while he describes modern Montenegrin society as decadent and nationalistic.

It is significant that Rigney wishes to present himself as an adventurous traveler, who, deprived of all conveniences of modern society, has to make his way through the rugged regions, and is even forced to deal with dangerous situations such as possible traffic accident, assault by wild animals or armed drunken Montenegrins, exposure to extreme weather conditions and so on. It is interesting, for example, that in the description of Montenegrin towns he does not mention their architecture which is a very rich amalgam of various architectural styles, wherein the influences of various epochs find due expression. He also avoids to mention any hotel or resort, so the reader might wonder whether these facilities exist in Montenegro. He even chooses to stay in the old fort that was transformed into a bunker during the Second World War and to sleep in a tent, so the next day, "oppressed by the intolerable heat and deadly thirsty" he hardly manages to find a fishing village to quench hunger and thirst. Our traveler had no luck on this trip because he finds only closed shops, despite the fact that, due to the tourist orientation of the town, a large number of stores are open on Sundays in Budva. Also, after visiting the mausoleum on Lovćen, Rigney, exhausted from climbing the mountain, concludes that there is no question of returning, and is therefore forced to sleep on the mountain, without even taking into consideration the possibility to use some of very cheap taxi services. We conclude that the narrativization allows Rigney to create the image of Montenegro as an exotic area in which extraordinary experiences are expected.

The climate is also one of the factors that contribute to exoticism of this small Balkan country. Rigney notices it immediately upon his arrival to Podgorica due to sudden changes in temperature and tropical heat. The experience of extreme climatic conditions is intensified by the description of a night spent in a tent on Lovćen: "That night, there was a thunderstorm that put the fear of God in me. I had never in my life heard such thunder. The heavens sounded like they were cracking open, and the ground shook under me. " In the atmosphere of intimidating nocturne the imagination of our traveler is captivated by the image of Njegos," who used to climb this mountain during thunderstorms to commune with the elements." This idea of geo-mystical symbiosis of man and nature, often present in romantic travel literature of the XIX century, is the only information about the famous Montenegrin poet and philosopher, died at an early age of 38 of a lung disease, that Rigney has chosen to share with his readers.

Rigney concludes his article by quoting one Montenegrin who expressed his perception of the region claiming: "All we have is stones.", which effectively completes the picture of the country and the people that the American journalist wanted to present.

Maybe it is a coincidence that the article was published in the Washington Post in December 2010, at the time when the EU members had to *decide whether* to grant *Montenegro* with

the *status* of a *Candidate Country*, but one should not lose sight of this fact in the analysis of Rigney's observations, especially after reading some of his articles about the Balkans published in online journals. Our search for other motives that have led Rigney to Montenegro and encouraged him to convey his findings to this reportage is inspired by his failure to accomplish his own goals. Thus, although he claims to have come to Montenegro to see the mountains and the sea, Rigney did not visit the north of the country nor mountain resorts which attract many tourists, and despite the assertion that he does not like crowds and tourists, he chooses to visit Montenegro during summer, in the months when this country has more tourists than residents, which prevents him from exploring the old town of Budva or other attractive tourist destinations.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The analysis of Rigney's description of his journey through Montenegro indicates the interpretative strategies and literary mystification of perception that are used to confirm a priori ideas about this Balkan country or to transform the desired perception into reality. Namely, it is noticeable that his experience of Montenegro is influenced by the "horizon of expectation" that he had prior to the arrival. His perception is based on images of travel writers who visited Montenegro in past decades, who also wrote their travelogues relaying on pre-existing cultural reference points, as well as on articles on the Balkans during the war. Nor did the author neglect the expectations of his readers or the audience for which the article was intended. Years of war and crisis have influenced the perception of the Balkans in Western countries. This rich depositary of images is dominated by ideological biases with negative connotations. The persistence of negative stereotypes in the collective imaginaries has also been influenced by film industry often linking the Balkans with nationalism, crime, violence, savagery and tyranny. Such fictitious images do not take into account decades of peaceful coexistence between people of different nationality and religion, but only years saturated with conflict, producing new images in order to reaffirm already adopted and ossified conventions of representation.

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