

# BALKAN WORLD LITERATURE: A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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*Abstract:* David Damrosch discusses the relevance of what he calls Balkan world literature in a recent essay (2023) which includes two Romanian authors. The Balkan world literature paradigm serves to construct a discourse through which Romanian literature generates, in a global context, an added knowledge of the space from which it originates. The binder used by Damrosch is linked to the Balkan space, a source of inspiration for literature. The main thesis of the present essay, articulated as a complement to Damrosch's method, is around a historical figure from the Eastern space who influenced Central literatures. We proceed to a twofold movement, from the centre – to the Oriental (the adoption of the model), but also from the periphery to the centre. We consider case studies which have as protagonist a historical character, Sultana Roxelana, and we will discuss the fiction of Mihail Sadoveanu and Marguerite Yourcenar to see if “Balkan world literature” model works from this perspective as well.

*Keywords:* Balkan world literature, novel, historical figure, Marguerite Yourcenar, Mihail Sadoveanu, nereids.

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The paradigm of World Literature in the conception of David Damrosch or world-literature as defined by the Warwick research group represents a pertinent theoretical framework for a new discussion that can integrate a relevant component for a geographical space. We find that what we call today world literature represents a transnational network in which literatures function as the circulatory system of the human body, with main vessels, central branches, and peripheral capillaries, as Marko Juvan defined interconnectivity<sup>1</sup>.

Whether we talk about a classification in which central literatures hold the dominant role, while the others are peripheral (in Damrosch's theory) or we notice the existence of three major groups such as centre – semi-periphery – periphery (Casanova and Shapiro's theories), the existence of a category that can be labelled as

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<sup>1</sup> See the theory related to the study of peripheral literature in Marko Juvan, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Balkan world literature demonstrates the congruence of several factors embodying this perspective. Seen by Damrosch as an intersection of geographical, linguistic, historical, religious, and imperial and national political determinants, Balkan world literature becomes a form through which Eurocentrism is undermined, with centres of power shifting primarily based on geographical criteria<sup>2</sup>. Yet with the recent discussions on Hungarian literature as world literature, Serbian literature as world literature, or even French literature as world literature, the national criterion seems insufficient for articulating the world literature component in a global context. The fact that they belong to a geographical region that produces a particular type of literature leads to the construction of a functional network in which national literatures redefine themselves as they establish relationships to each other under the umbrella of a common concept. Maria Todorova discussed how Balkanism can present a counterweight to Eurocentrism, noting that “A specter is haunting Western culture – the specter of the Balkans”<sup>3</sup>, shifting the discussion from the European to the Eastern centres of power. We note that the discussion had begun long before – even before the moment when the Venetian commercial hub was opposed by that of Istanbul – becomes a viable form of polarization.

In Romanian literature there are several critical studies that address the aspect of Balkanism and its literary variant. The most well-known definition is that of G. Călinescu, who proposes hybridization and the existence of a contrasting substance as characteristic features to highlight the duality civilization / barbarism. This definition may be seen as an incipient form of imagological discussion: “a hefty mix of coarse expressions, lascivious impulses, a consciousness of an adventurous and murky identity, all purified and viewed from above by a superior intelligence”<sup>4</sup>. Literary Balkanism involves “the baroque hypertrophy of images, the appetite for digression and storytelling”<sup>5</sup>, as well as “the redemption through

<sup>2</sup> “Balkan world literature can be thought of as a combination of several elements, each of which can be found individually elsewhere, but which are uniquely combined in the Balkans at the intersection of distinctive determinants of geography, language, history, religion, and imperial and national politics” in David Damrosch, “Epic traditions in Balkan world literature”, in *Neohelicon*, vol. 50, 2023, pp. 459–475, available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-023-00716-7>.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> „un amestec gras de expresii măscărioase, de impulsuri lascive, de conștiință a unei identități aventuroase și tulburi, totul purificat și văzut mai de sus de o inteligență superioară” in G. Călinescu, *Istoria Literaturii Române (de la origini până în prezent)* [The History of Romanian Literature. From Its Origin to Present Day], București, Minerva, 1986, p. 900. (our translation).

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Muthu, *Balkanismul literar românesc. Panoramic sud-est european. Confluente culturale* [Romanian literary Balkanism: A Southeastern European panorama. Cultural confluences],

art of an adiabatic geography, understood as a school of style that agglutinates different sensibilities and, axiologically speaking, as a form of freedom, primarily inner freedom, under predominantly autocratic conditions”<sup>6</sup>. The emphasis on the element related to power relations brings the authority that shaped literary Balkanism to the forefront.

One aspect is embodied by *Homo Balcanicus*, which “actually refers to an ethnically diversified world with a panopticon structure, depending on the state of the Byzantine model and then on the rapidly declining Turcocracy in the 19th century”<sup>7</sup>. The identification of the three historical periods – Byzantine, Ottoman, and modern – provides a detailed framework for analyzing literary Balkanism, offering the necessary tools to examine how cultural and social influences have intersected and generated a diversity of literary expressions. This approach aids in highlighting the specificities of literature from the Balkan region, as well as understanding the historical context that has shaped the themes, styles, and perspectives of authors from different eras: “the four categories: morphological (East/West), religious (Soul/Body), historical (Dual Byzantium), and ontological (cosmo-/anthropocentrism) make up, conjugated and articulated to the capillary level, a framework within which this behavioral archetype was born and developed in each of the three historical ages – Byzantine, Ottoman (Balkan) and modern (southeastern)”<sup>8</sup> in Mircea Muthu’s vision. In relation to Edward W. Said’s theory<sup>9</sup>, the observation that the duality which produced stereotypes and prominent social images is validated by this reductive classification that took the Ottoman historical age for Balkanism.

Geographically speaking, The Balkan Peninsula, in its most extended definition, includes the territories between the Mediterranean Sea, the Aegean Sea, the Black

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Cluj-Napoca, Editura Școala Ardeleană, p. 517: „hipertrofierea barocă a imaginilor, apetitul pentru digresiune și povestire” (my translation).

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 433: „ca răscumpărare prin artă a unei geografii adiabatică – trebuie înțeleasă ca o școală de stil ce aglutinează sensibilități diferite (oriental/occidentale, de extracție nordică și meridională ș.a.) și, axiologic vorbind, ca o formă de libertate în primul rând interioară, în condiții de regim preponderent autocratic”. (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 471: „Omul balcanic trimite de fapt la o lume diversificată etnic și cu o structură de panopticum, în funcție de starea modelului bizantin și apoi a Turcocrăției, în accelerată pierdere de viteză în veacul al XIX-lea.” (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 478: „Cele patru repere de coloratură morfologică (Orient/Occident), religioasă (Suflet/Trup), istorică (Bizanțul dual) și ontologică (cosmo/antropocentrism) alcătuiesc, conjugate și articulate până la nivelul capilarelor, un ancadrament în interiorul căruia s-a născut și s-a dezvoltat acest arhetip comportamental în fiecare dintre cele trei vârste istorice – bizantină, otomană (balcanică) și modernă (sud-estică)”. (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> See the seminal study written by Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979.

Sea, and the Adriatic Sea, encompassing countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Romania, and Turkey (at least part of it). Even the existence of the Sultan Trail, the trade route that connected Istanbul to Vienna, represents such a red thread that unites two centres of power.

The Romanian space is perceived fragmentarily from this perspective, especially for regions that were under Ottoman rule and whose legacies are reflected in literature. Despite geographical distance, the literature representing the Balkans resembles the literature of Central America, and many common aspects can be found regarding their evolution. Here is a definition given by Sophie Esch in the “Introduction” to *Central American Literatures as World Literatures*:

In Central American literature, one key challenge to the nation-state and its literary apparatus arises in Indigenous and Black works that question the monolithic and simplistic narratives of Central American nation-states, which are clustered around whiteness, mestizaje, and Spanish. Indigenous and Black literatures from the region often look far beyond the nation-state and instead invoke cosmos, oceans, roots and routes, and languages other than Spanish and thus create fissures and cracks in any monolingual, monocultural, or geographically limited and limiting conception of the region’s literatures. And while Central American nations often display or speak from a fervent nationalism (on the background of weak sovereignty and constant imperialist intervention on the isthmus from elsewhere), the lived reality of many of its writers often tells a very different story. It is overly common for Central American authors to have several national allegiances. Many writers were born and raised, or have lived in two different Central American countries or were forced to live in exile or migrate within or beyond the isthmus due to political persecution or personal life choices.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, within the Balkan world literature construct of certain indigenous groups defined as Balkan, belonging to emerging states, there are narratives that represent marginal voices, addressing the fragmented, hybrid, mixed status of the population in the Balkan Peninsula. The authors or, we might add, the authorial instances are related to their experience of a geographical space adherent to a lived reality.

For Damrosch, what defines Balkan world literature is based on the so-called “epic tradition”, but also on a dual reference, on the one hand to Balkan tradition itself, and on the other hand to supplementary sources from the Italian

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<sup>10</sup> Sophie Esch, ed., *Central American Literatures as World Literatures*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, pp. 7–8.

Renaissance literature of Tasso and Ariosto, as those identified in the work of Ioan Budai-Deleanu. “The inaugural epic of a nation that didn’t yet exist is built by interweaving Balkan traditions with the literature of the European core”<sup>11</sup>, notes Damrosch in the previously mentioned article regarding Budai-Deleanu’s first Romanian epic poem, *Țiganiada*. In this study, we notice that Sadoveanu’s prose, to which we will refer, brings into discussion an emblematic character of Balkanism, with a dual anchoring: Roxelana, Hurrem Sultan, the wife of Suleiman the Magnificent. The three elements that build what we call Balkan world literature are represented by: the Ottoman legacy and the inclusion of historical themes and characters in narratives; the second, the “epic tradition” which we will analyse in both Sadoveanu’s and Marguerite Yourcenar’s fiction; the third, the circulation of certain common motifs in the Balkan space, such as the mythology of the nereids<sup>12</sup>, in Romanian “zâne” or “iele” (“Lady’s bedstraw” is the English equivalent for Romanian “sânziene”, the plant dedicated to these feminine local deities).

### *Roxelana in Europe. From East to West*

Roxelana, a well-known historical figure from the 16th century in the Ottoman Empire, is celebrated primarily for the role she played at the court of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Of Slavic origin, reportedly the daughter of an Orthodox priest, historical studies attest that she was kidnapped by Tatars, sold at the slave market in Istanbul, and gradually accumulated power, and managed to create an aura that paralleled that of the Sultan who reigned for 46 years. Making a name for herself in both the Ottoman Empire and in the Western part of Europe, Roxelana became the subject of literary works in multiple cultures, analysed in collective volumes and studies from Italy, Spain, France, England, Germany, Turkey, Poland, and Ukraine<sup>13</sup>.

Mihail Sadoveanu’s prose featuring Roxelana has a clearly defined temporal and geographical framework from the outset: the year 1930 and the city of Istanbul. The narrative brings forth the perspective of a conquered city with a component of imperialism: “the bazaars and grand mosques of the conquering

<sup>11</sup> David Damrosch, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> See a comparative analysis in Alina Bako, „Reprezentări și funcții ale sânzienelor în proza românească. Scurt studiu comparativ”. [Representations and Functions of the Midsummer Night’s Fairies in Romanian Fiction. A Short Comparative Study] in *Incursiuni în imaginar*, 10, Alba Iulia, Aeternitas, 2019, pp. 11–23.

<sup>13</sup> See also *Roxolana in European literature, history and culture*, edited by Galina I. Yermolenko, Franham, Ashgate Publishing, 2010.

sultans (...), seeking (...) the ancient basilicas transformed into mosques, the traces of Byzantium”<sup>14</sup>. The epic tradition is renewed through the narrator’s stance as a writer. The narrator’s explorations are made from the perspective of Istanbul’s connections with the Romanian space, highlighting the longstanding historical relationships between the dominant power and the subordinated region under the Ottoman Empire. The issue of incomplete translations is also brought up, as the Armenian merchant shows the narrator painted objects depicting “stories from Halima that European readers do not find in the current editions of the translations”<sup>15</sup>. The origin of the character serves as an opportunity to mention the Armenian community in Moldova, with businesses “through Cetatea Albă and Cafa”. The ensuing dialogue discusses “the columns brought by the conquerors from the ruins of the Nile Delta to be used for the basilicas and mosques seen here”<sup>16</sup>. It’s a form of reconstruction using the remnants of one civilization to build another. Still: “Undoubtedly, the best sign of civilization is not tobacco or trinitroglycerin, but a witty remark”<sup>17</sup>.

A regional portrayal is delivered by the formula used by the Armenian merchant, who reveals to be also a poet and an archaeologist. Ghirgor Misir seeks to discover “the line of Mediterranean civilization”<sup>18</sup>. The centre is represented by “a languid and exhausted Byzantium in terms of military force; but it was a Byzantium of the arts and fine crafts, of scholarship and Greek intelligence”<sup>19</sup>. The decadent component fits the stereotype that constructed the image of the Balkans during the interwar period. Aspects of imperial power are described particularly through the perception of their decaying civilization, according to Rudolf Steiner. The Byzantine Empire, seen through its lack of brilliance due to the weakness of its army, the absence of virility, and the inclination towards intrigues, leaves an undesirable legacy:

<sup>14</sup> Mihail Sadoveanu, *Roxelana*, in *Revista Fundațiilor Regale pentru Literatură și Artă* [The Review of the Royal Foundations for Literature and Art], București, An 13, no. 1, 1946, p. 62: „bazarurile și marile moschei ale sultanilor cuceritori (...) căutam (...) basilicile vechi prefăcute în geamii urmele Bizanțului”. (These fragments from *Roxelana* and the following are in my translation.)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64: „povești din Halima, pe care cititorii europeni nu le găsesc în edițiile traducerilor curente”.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*: „cuceritori din risipiturile de la Delta Nilului ca să le întrebuințeze pentru basilicile și moscheile ce se văd”.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*: „Fără îndoială că cel mai bun semn al civilizației nu e tutunul, nici trinitroglicerina, ci o vorbă de duh”.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66: „linia civilizației mediteraneene”.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67: „un Bizanț molatic și sleit din punct de vedere al forței militare; dar era un Bizanț al artelor și meșteșugurilor fine, al cărturăriei și inteligenței grecești”.

The Byzantine germ of decay has passed from the ruins to the new rulers, and the Ottoman power has harboured, from the very beginning, the sickness of the Praetorian guards, harem intrigues, and eunuch dignitaries.<sup>20</sup>

Sadoveanu defines Balkanism during the Ottoman period and thus observes a blending of Eastern and Western spaces: “The Byzantine virus, heightened by its own oriental fever, has also received the addition of European cunning”<sup>21</sup>. The “Byzantine virus” refers to the legacy of the Byzantine Empire, which has left a profound mark on the Balkans region, as many elements of political and administrative organization from the Byzantine period continued to exist and influence local power structures even after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine legacy influenced the art, architecture, and literature of the Balkans.

Another topic is religious diversity, the so-called “millet” system organizing populations on religious grounds allowing for some autonomy within the framework of the Ottoman administration. To these, as the hero of Sadoveanu says, the “European cunning” is added, emphasizing the influences from Western Europe that have blended with Eastern and Byzantine influences. Starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the movements for national rebirth and independence in the Balkans were strongly influenced by Western European ideas about nationalism, liberalism, and modernity.

The diversity of the harem is representative for the populations ruled by the Ottomans:

Some of the maidens brought in here entered the harem of the Great Master. Blue-eyed girls from the lands towards North, goat eyes and chestnut braids from the Carpathians, undulating strands from the Caucasus, and quite often young ladies from the Italian and French coasts.<sup>22</sup>

The harem, a micro world of the empire, becomes an emblematic representation of the mix of populations and cultures ruled by the Ottomans. Syncretism and partial cultural integration are discussed here, since the women brought to

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem: „Ceea ce alcătuia însă morbul bizantin al decăderii a trecut din ruini în stăpânitorii noi, și puterea Osmanlăilor a clocit încă de la început în măruntaiele ei boala gărzilor pretoriene, a intrigilor de gineceu și a demnitarilor castrați”.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 68: „Virusul bizantin, sporit de propria febră orientală, a mai primit și adaosul vicleniei europene”.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 68: „O parte din fecioarele aduse intrau în haremul marelui stăpân. Copile cu ochi albaștri din ținuturile de către miez-noapte, ochi căpriei și cosițe castanii de la Carpați, boiuri unduoase de la Caucaz și destul de des domnișoare de pe coastele italiene și franceze”.

the harem from different regions retained elements from their original cultures, but also adapted elements from Ottoman culture. The mechanisms of power and influence are reflected in the relationships within the harem, including the assertion of the sultan's authority over the regions from where these women originated.

Sadoveanu chooses a different origin for the female hero, than that historically confirmed. The writer credits Roxelana to be of Italian descent, from a family of "patricians from Venice"<sup>23</sup>. The statement is not coincidental; it is an opportunity to emphasize the component through which colonization occurs through marital alliances. "Venice, triumphant on the seas and islands, won elsewhere another victory, the most important of all, because it was more hidden"<sup>24</sup>. It becomes another form of conquest, a more subtle way for one empire to colonize another. Women in the harem, especially those from influential families, have often played a significant role in court politics and behind-the-scenes power dynamics. Sadoveanu suggests that subtle influence could be even more effective and lasting than apparent military victories. Influence and control could be exerted from within, from the political sidelines, without the need for direct conquest. Roxelana becomes, not just in Sadoveanu's narrative, a perfect example of influence and social ascent in the Ottoman imperial context. Initially a mere slave, she has succeeded in becoming one of the most influential figures of the harem and the Ottoman court, demonstrating how behind-the-scenes influences and alliances could change the balance of power.

The narrative thread is a court intrigue, one in which Roxelana would have wanted to oust Mustafa, Giorgiane's son, so that Mehmet, her son, could become sultan. Her intrigues led to the killing of Mehmet, with Sadoveanu emphasizing that "fate – with eyes of green ice"<sup>25</sup> was more powerful. His narrative is built around the intrigues woven by Roxelana, who loses her sons, but resorts to feminine charms to convince the sultan and strengthen her position.

Using the technique of the foreign storyteller, the Armenian merchant, Sadoveanu also brings into discussion the narrative scenario, seen in the epic tradition of hybridizing between Eastern and European elements: "his narrative, although served in a florid style, East-fashion, yet has plenty of European elements."<sup>26</sup> Elements belonging to the epic tradition of the East are juxtaposed

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem: „patricieni de la Veneția”.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 69: „Veneția, biruită pe mări și în insule, câștiga în altă parte o victorie cu atât mai serioasă, cu cât era mai ascunsă”.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 73: „soarta, cu ochi de gheață verde”.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 86: „expunerea sa, deși mi-a fost servită în stil înflorit, după moda răsăritenilor, totuși are îndestulătoare elemente europene”.

with European insertions, designed to prompt comparison. The Armenian merchant becomes a voice that facilitates the understanding of cultural and narrative hybridization, able to observe and report details about both Eastern and European cultures without being limited by internal prejudices or biases. Eastern narrative tends to follow a meditative and contemplative rhythm, different from the often more alert and action-oriented cadence of the European storytelling, with a clearer and more logical narrative structure, a linear unfolding of events, and focused on coherence and causality. By intertwining Eastern and European elements, Sadoveanu creates a hybrid epic tradition that reflects the complexity of cultural interactions in the Balkan space, more specifically from Constantinople.

*Roxelana, persona in absentia, from Composite Notes*

My discussion regarding the historical metafiction of French writer Marguerite Yourcenar, which contain historical references to the Balkan space, proposes a double perspective: on the one hand, the reference to the character of Roxelana in *The Abyss*, on the other hand, the Balkan elements from her *Oriental Tales*.

*The Abyss* tells the story of a fictional character Zeno, set in the early sixteenth century, a physician and philosopher through whom Yourcenar travels across Europe and the Levant. Zenon's gaze is like a surgeon's, which penetrates into the flesh of things and cities. The Balkan facets are generated by observations of a civilization in a state of decline: "Mirages", Zeno said. "Your golden ages are like Damascus and Constantinople, beautiful from afar; you have to walk their streets to see their lepers and dead dogs"<sup>27</sup>.

To analyse carefully the closer proximity to cultural epochs means to see reality, the everyday world of ordinary people. Zeno is the physician who has also reached the court of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, an idea suggested in the moment of describing the body of John Myers:

The still-warm body of the old John Myers was lying on the table in the adjoining room. Catherine entered with the chosen shroud to bury him. – 'The master died from a stroke', she said. She looked like one of those washerwomen with a black veil whom he had seen operating in the mansions of Constantinople when he was in the service of the Sultan. The death of the old doctor did not surprise him much.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *The Abyss*, translated by Grace Frick, New York, Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981, p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 164.

The feminine guise of the washerwoman dressed in black recalls her experiences from the Ottoman Empire and simultaneously expresses the privileged position of women who labored. It represents a fictionalization of the woman who assumes the prerogative of the writer.

It is time to confess that *The Abyss* is mainly discussed due to... an absence. For some fragments have been omitted from Yourcenar's published text, which are included in *Composition Notes*, presented in the section *Memories of Turkey*. Several passages, sequences, and characters have been eliminated from the oriental setting: "Roxelana's intrigues, Ibrahim's evening, the character Mustapha, the eldest son of Soliman and the presumptive heir to the throne, condemned to death by his father following the machinations of his stepmother Roxelana"<sup>29</sup>.

The author's choice to remove passages about Roxelana can only add information to our endeavour regarding the projection of such a Balkan character. Things look differently in the case of Ibrahim, a historical figure mentioned many times in Roxelana's entourage. He becomes an instrument the physician Zenon wishes to use in order to eradicate diseases or for medical systematization. We cannot fail to notice the Western stereotype of undertaking the civilization of a space that appears barbaric, as well as how medical knowledge is perceived as originating from Greek civilization, passed through Arabic manuscripts and rediscovered:

At the Grand Seraglio, the friendship of the powerful and unhappy Ibrahim, vizier of His Highness, had made him hopeful of the success of his plan for cleaning the marshes around Adrianople; he had embraced in his heart a rational reform of the gendarme hospital; he had begun to buy – to buy up here and there valuable manuscripts of Greek physicians and astronomers, acquired once – once acquired by Arab scholars, and which, amid much clutter, sometimes contained a truth to be rediscovered.<sup>30</sup>

The descriptions of cities contain a mix of elements, with the debauchery of the Grand Seraglio, but also that of a Venetian brothel. Reducing the human being to primal instincts, to intrigues, and to the desire for enrichment, Yourcenar describes the successions of generations from any era.

The choice of the French writer Marguerite Yourcenar for discussing Balkan world literature is also related to her work published in 1938 *Oriental Tales*, which recalls one of the stories collected by Sadoveanu in 1947 entitled *Fantazii*

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 321.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 182.

*răsăritene* [Eastern Fantasies]<sup>31</sup>. In one of Yourcenar oriental tales, intitled *Marko's Smile* [Marko's Smile], she proposes a Balkan narrative scenario, with geographical landmarks like the Montenegrin Alps, and with foreigners as main characters, representing different facets of the centre and peripheries: "The Greek archaeologist, the Egyptian pasha, and the French engineer had remained on the upper deck. The engineer had ordered a beer, the pasha was drinking whisky, and the archaeologist was cooling off with a lemonade."<sup>32</sup> Stereotypes are used here to identify some geographical types.

Yourcenar resorts to concrete geographical details to situate the narrative scenario in the Balkans. The quay of Kotor and that of Ragusa serve as the sole gateways to the Mediterranean for the expansive Slavic realm, delineating a region that remains largely disconnected from maritime influences despite its vast geographical reach. This separation underscores the unique cultural and historical dynamics of the Slavic territories, which navigate a complex network of waterways rather than a direct relationship with the sea:

The quays of Kotor and Ragusa are undoubtedly the only access points to the Mediterranean for the vast Slavic realm that stretches from the Balkans to the Urals, remaining indifferent to the changing boundaries on the map of Europe and distant from the sea. This region can only be reached through the intricate sinuosities of the Caspian, the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the coast of Dalmatia.<sup>33</sup>

The dominant idea that defines what we can call Balkan world literature is that the Balkan space acts collectively, disregarding the phantom borders<sup>34</sup> that temporarily shape the European landscape. Nation-states, with borders established through treaties or conquests, become illusory, with the only palpable reality remaining the Balkan territory united by criteria other than those drawn on the map. In accordance with the geographical space, a Balkan epic tradition is born, corresponding structurally to a sinuous landscape. Yourcenar draws a parallel between the literary creations of Balkan populations and the Kotor Canyon, which defines the Peninsula:

<sup>31</sup> Mihail Sadoveanu, *Fantazii răsăritene* [Eastern Fantasies], București, Editura de Stat, 1946.

<sup>32</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *Oriental Tales*, translated by Alberto Manguel, New York, Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1985, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup> About „phantom borders” see more in Alina Bako, “Cognitive cartographies in Liviu Rebreanu’s Forest of the Hanged”, *World Literature Studies*, 4, vol. 14, 2022, pp. 78–90.

Kotor, as we see it from the deck of this Italian steamer, is the wild and well-hidden Kotor, with its winding road that climbs toward Cetinje, and, on the other hand, the barely less wild Kotor of legends and South Slavic epic poetry. Kotor, once Turkicized and oppressed under the yoke of Muslims from Albania, is a place where, as you well understand, Pasha, Serbian ballads do not always do justice.<sup>35</sup>

This “South Slavic epic poetry” gives voice to the suffering of the conquered, under the dominion of an empire. The geographical image and the one constructed by literature are juxtaposed and defined as “wild”, using a cultural stereotype.

The story of Marko Kralievici is narrated by an engineer, a symbol of technology that had invaded a space still loyal to tradition. The engineer confesses he had listened to the story from the peasants of the village where he stayed while digging a tunnel for the Orient Express. The epic tradition is thus brought back into discussion. Oral transmission, noted also by Damrosch as characteristic of Balkan world literature, is certainly a form of preservation for the cultural memory.

Balkan literature is one that primarily deals with conflict, the struggle against colonizers, in this case, the Ottomans. The character chosen by Yourcenar, Marko, embodies the aspect of *homo balcanicus* as defined by Antoaneta Olteanu:

The image of the Other in this geographical region has been marked by a heavy historical past, conflicts and rivalries, but also by common struggles against invaders, for the preservation of freedom. The Serbs fought for Greece’s liberty; in Tudor Vladimirescu’s detachments, there were Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, and others.<sup>36</sup>

To position oneself against the Ottomans, the dominant imperial force during that time, temporarily erased one’s belonging to a specific people:

If I remember correctly, Marko died in a battle against the Ottomans, either in Bosnia or on Croatian soil, but his last wish was to be buried in this Sinai of the Orthodox world. A boat managed to carry his body there, despite the rocky cliffs of the Aegean Sea and the danger posed by Turkish galleys. It’s a beautiful story that, for some

<sup>35</sup> Marguerite Yourcenar, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Antoaneta Olteanu, *Homo Balcanicus. Trăsături ale mentalității balcanice* [*Homo Balcanicus. Some Features of Balkan Mentality*], Cluj-Napoca, Paideia, 2004, p. 133: ”Imaginea Celuilalt a fost marcată în această regiune geografică de un trecut istoric apăsător, de conflicte și rivalități, dar și de lupte comune împotriva invadatorilor, pentru păstrarea libertății. Sârbii au luptat pentru libertatea Greciei, în detașamentele lui Tudor Vladimirescu erau angajați greci, sârbi, bulgari ș.a.” (my translation into English).

reason, reminds me of Arthur's final journey. The West certainly has its heroes, but they are supported in battle by their principles, while the heroism of this Serb was purely about valor. The Turks Marko confronted believed that a mountain oak was falling upon them. I've told you that at the time, Montenegro was under Islamic rule: the Serbian troops were too weak to openly reclaim Mount Black from the Ottomans, from which their land derives its name.<sup>37</sup>

Balkan world literature has also a militant component, especially in relation to a common enemy, the invading Ottoman Empire, as well as the conglomerate of nations that define it. Another characteristic is the comparison to the Western literary models; in this case, Marko is seen as a different Arthur, not adhering to principles but to "pure courage", an embodiment of the instinctual. Yourcenar reveals that the inspiration for *Marko's Smile* and *Milk of Death* came from two medieval Balkan ballads.

The third trait of Balkan world literature is linked to fundamental motifs and themes circulating in the Balkan space. Damrosch notes the circulation of the myth of *Mesterul Manole* [Master Manole] and some of its variants. However, this is not the only motif; for example, the nereids appear in the entire Balkan region. Thus, in *The Man Who Loved the Nereids*, another novel from *Oriental Tales*, Yourcenar imagined the beggar Panaiotis, who embodies a character that "has lost his speech because he saw the Nereids".<sup>38</sup>

Romanian literature is also populated with appearances of nereids, found in both folklore superstitions and literary writings, from Dimitrie Cantemir to Mihail Sadoveanu and Mircea Eliade. Yourcenar chooses, through one of her characters, to counterbalance the Gothic fantastic with a Balkan fantastic where ethical boundaries blur. Innocence and destruction are equally present, and their copresence reflects human complexity and a moral ambivalence characteristic of Balkan cultures:

You may not know that this island is inhabited by strange apparitions. Our ghosts are not like yours from the North, which only come out at midnight and then dwell in the daytime in cemeteries. They do not dress in shrouds, and their skeletons have flesh on them. But they are certainly more dangerous than the souls of the dead, which are at least baptized, know what life is, and what suffering means. The nymphs from our realms are innocent yet harmful, like nature, which either defends or crushes man. The ancient gods and goddesses have long died, and only their marble relics can be found in museums. Our nymphs resemble more your fairies and sirens than what you envision after Praxiteles.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Yourcenar, *Oriental tales*, p. 131.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 99.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 100.

Unlike the images of spectres from the North Mythology, described as beings that wander only at night, Balkan entities appear to be more integrated into daily life and environment, as a natural aspect of the community. The cultural syncretism in which a connection is created between the ancient gods and goddesses and nereids comprises multiple historical layers and diverse, hybrid cultural influences. The image of the nereids/sirens is dual:

These raw fairies are beautiful, bare, refreshing, and ominous like water from which you drink fever germs; those who have seen them once fade slowly, consumed by longing, drained of power, and those who have dared to approach them remain forever silent, so that no one knows the secret of their love.<sup>40</sup>

The nereids symbolize nude, pure, and natural beauty, but the epithet “ominous” highlights the danger associated with this attraction. The association with water concealing the danger of diseases, common in the Middle Ages, represents the warning stemming from folklore, that of approaching beings belonging to another realm. Those who see the fairies “fade slowly” – this phrase evokes the image of a passion that completely consumes the individual. The devastating effect of encountering the fairies is not immediate, but long-lasting, gradually wearing down the strengths and will of the inflicted individual.

The analysed prose fragments provide a solid foundation for understanding how historical figures like Roxelana and literary motifs like nereids can contribute to defining and exploring Balkan world literature. These elements initiate an important dialogue on the hybridization of cultural and literary traditions in the Balkan Peninsula. Roxelana is a historical figure, not only in the Ottoman history but also in a wide Balkan literary context. Her origins – assumed either to be Ukrainian / Caucasian or European (Venetian) – make Roxelana a symbol of the blending of East and West. This is reflected in her central role in the Ottoman court and harem, where she wielded significant influence.

The prose fragments analysed, and the elements discussed contribute to a broader and more inclusive definition of Balkan world literature, underlining the diversity and interconnectedness of literatures in the Balkan Peninsula. Additionally, Balkan world literature offers an alternative perspective that counterbalances the predominantly Eurocentric literary traditions, highlighting cultural and literary contributions from the Balkans. The proximity of Balkan

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 102.

narrative traditions to those from other European and Oriental regions reflects the dynamic transnational networks of world literature, as conceptualized by Damrosch and others.

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