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Rethinking the Past: *Victoria Four-Thirty* and the East/West Line

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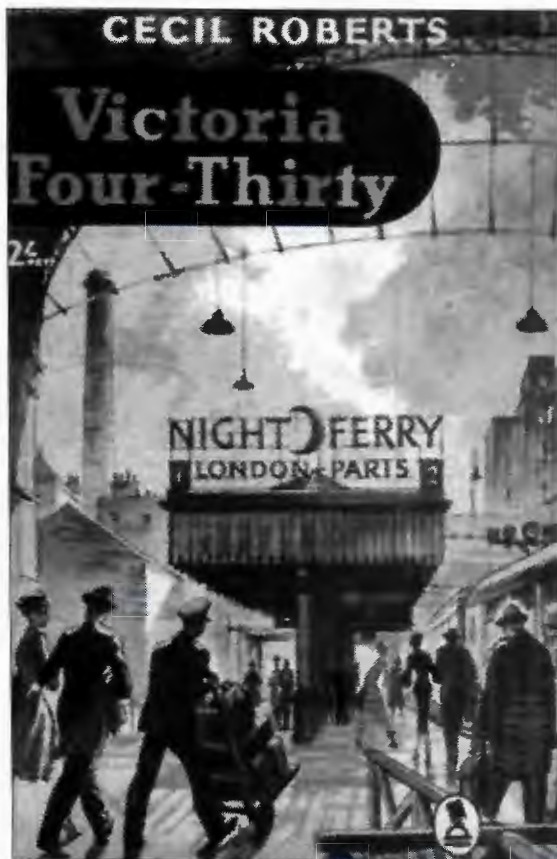
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Introduction

*V*ICTORIA FOUR-THIRTY, a novel with an episodic narrative by Cecil Roberts (1937), depicts a distinctive gallery of characters with diverse origins and cultures, statuses and family backgrounds, departing from Victoria Station by the boat train, and travelling to sundry destinations in the East. Book I consists of 13 chapters which introduce the main characters to the reader and give a glimpse into their lives and motivations for their travelling, while Book II consists of 10 chapters over which the "situation," i.e., the journey, actually unfolds. The 13 passengers have a variety of impetuses, motivations and desires for this long journey. Roberts depicts the journey in the vein of the "Orient Express" genre novel—it "accidentally" reticulates and networks the lives of the main protagonists. Consequently, it represents a specific "thread" which masterfully connects them all. *Victoria Four-Thirty* offers a vivid portrayal of different people with different goals but "sharing" the same, "throbbing" train bound for the East.

Apart from the train which takes them to their final destinations, the reader is hard-pressed to discover any other connection between the characters: Jim, a 22 year-old porter at Victoria Station; Herr Friedrich Gollwitzer, of Vienna, a world-famous conductor; the newlywed Mrs. Blake of Belgravia; Nikolas Metaxa, of Athens, a worker at a Soho restaurant; Prince "Sixpenny," the heir to the throne of Slavonia; Mr Henry Fanning, of Chelsea, a well-known writer; Herr Emil Gerhardt, of Berlin, a rising film star; Sister Teresa of Transylvania, once known as Mrs Ursula Greyne; Mr Percy Bowling, of Derby, the soul of honor and "a selfish old bachelor"; Mr Alexander Hassan Bekir, of Thessalonica, a millionaire who has led a double life; General Zoronoff, of Paris, once upon a time in command of the 3rd Guards Cavalry Division in the Army of his Imperial Majesty, Russian Tsar Nicholas; Dr Wyfold, of Wargrave, a widower retired from medical service in West Africa; and the 18-year-old Elise Vogel, of Feldkirch, an inexperienced, hardworking Austrian country girl.

In the interwar period, especially in the 1930s, the British writers "exploited" the Balkan Peninsula for Orient Express narratives, such as Graham Greene's[1] *Stamboul Train* (1932), Agatha Christie's[2] *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and Cecil Roberts' *Victoria Four-Thirty* (1937).

> *In its pre-Second World War form, train travel seemed, in fact, particularly well-suited to its use as a plot device. The compartmentalised railway cars and the enforced intimacy of wagons-lits on long-distance journeys created a sense of closeness with a small group of fellow passengers absent from many of today's trains, the open spaces of which, modelled on aeroplanes and buses rather than horse-drawn carriages, provide a greater degree of anonymity.* (Goldsworthy 1998, 102)

Goldsworthy claims that in the 1930s the train travel represented a far more complex narrative device than it used to be, connecting a rather small group of people of "haphazardly selected characters in a self-contained world" (cf. 103). Novels published in the 1930s offered "glamour and apparent dangers" during the train travel. Graham Greene, with his *Stamboul Train*, established a set of conventions of the Orient Express novel. The chapters of his book are titled after the stops on the Orient Express route. Cecil Roberts in Book I ("They Set Out") of his *Victoria Four-Thirty* titles the chapters after the names of the 13 characters, always putting, after their name, the place of their birth or a place of relevance for their present life, while in some chapters of Book II ("They Arrive") he mentions the name of the traveler's final stop. Some of Greene's set conventions implied a plot which deals with the Balkan Peninsula, the Balkans always offering a kind of "mystique" flavor—"it is there that the unexpected always happens and the train and its passengers are at their most vulnerable

(Goldsworthy 1998, 104). The last convention was successfully developed by Roberts—young Elise Vogel gives birth to a child during the train journey and it "incidentally" involves some of the passengers: Sister Teresa, who assists during the birth; Herr Gollwitzer, who most likely would adopt the baby; and Dr Hirsch who helped with the delivery. Unlike his predecessors Greene and Christie, Roberts gives a detailed account of the Balkan places they pass through during the journey. What *Victoria Four-Thirty* undoubtedly has in common with Greene's and Christie's aforementioned novels is the presentation of the Balkans as "a dangerous, anarchic place."

During the 1930s, as Valentine Cunningham points out, train journeys seemed to be highly thrilling as well as hazardous—an issue that was emphasized by certain train-based films (Shanghai Express, Rome Express, Turkib etc.) or by film versions of train-based novels (*Stamboul Train, Murder on the Orient Express*, etc.) (Cunningham 1988, 354).

> *Trains were magic . . . The big international trains were implicit with incident, with political intrigues, strange meetings, sexual plottings, providing an opportuneful montage . . . of the international scene through which they passed but also (like ships) as usefully enclosed as a vicarage drawing-room and thus ripe for all sorts of strange deaths and smart detective work.* (Cunningham 1988, 354).

The Symbolic East/West "Dividing" Line

*A*M I a Balkan? I ask myself as, having worked on this book for some years, I return to its beginnings and ponder again the possible implications of the term. Being referred to as such frequently has negative connotations—it is a toponym which easily becomes an insult. The Balkan peninsula is undoubtedly part of the European mainland, yet the adjective "Balkan" can imply the opposite of European. In the region itself the Balkans are always thought to be elsewhere, to the south-east wherever one is until, on the shores of the Bosporus, one catches sight of Asia across the water.* (Goldsworthy 1998, ix)

These are the introductory lines of Goldsworthy's preface to her seminal book *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*. In the author's spotlight was a presentation of the various English perspectives and presentations of the Balkans, the similarities and differences in their approach and comments on the region, whether they discussed Balkan issues grounded on their actual experience or whether they implied clichés and prejudices. Goldsworthy claims that novels set in imaginary Balkan kingdoms make up a specific contrast between "Eng-

lishness"[3] and "Europeanness," as well as "Englishness" and "Balkanness." To be English implies to be more powerful in both cases, while "Balkanness" presents an extreme, usually childish form of European "otherness" (Goldsworthy 1998, 69). The fact is that the rather large number of novels written by authors who had never visited any Balkan country influenced to a larger extent the creation of the image(s) of the Balkans than those that were the product of the writer's personal experience and actual knowledge and familiarity with the region or the land he/she writes about. Poor knowledge of Balkan issues made it possible for many British writers to use the region as a *locale* for different popular genres. In many cases the characteristics of the country are neglected as well as the real presentations of its people, history and culture.

> *Accounts of British experiences of the Balkan world . . . and, in particular, British imaginings of it . . . helped shape the imaginary geography of the peninsula to the extent that images created by British writers represent for many people the best known 'faces' of the Balkans.* (Goldsworthy 1998, 1)

Goldsworthy mentions some English words of Balkan origin such as *bugger*, *vampire*, *Balkanization*—comparing the English verb *to Balkanize* with the French *balkaniser* and Italian *balkanizzare* we find out that, no matter which language is concerned, this verb always denotes a certain kind of separation, mainly with negative connotations.

Trajan Stojanovich in his book *Balkanski svetovi: Prva i poslednja Evropa* (Balkan worlds: The first and last Europe) highlights the fact that the term "the Balkans" is not fully explained—it is known that it originated, through the Turkish language, from two Persian words which mean "high house" or "mountain." The very term was used more intensively from the mid-nineteenth century, after German geographer Johann August Zeune used the word *Balkanhalbinsel* (Balkan Peninsula) in 1808 and Major George Keppel published his *Narrative of a Journey Across the Balcan* in 1831 (Stojanović 1997, 21). The author explains that the region did not previously have a common name; for example, in ancient times the term Illyricum was used to describe the region's western parts, while Thrace was used for the eastern parts; in the Middle Ages, travelers from Europe used the term Romanie for certain regions in the Balkans, and the Ottomans used the term Rumelia for the eastern and central parts. The term "Turkey-in-Europe" was used by European travelers for the majority of this region, given the fact that since the fourteenth, especially mid-fifteenth, or the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was a part of the Ottoman Empire (ibid., 21–22).

Stojanovich points out that the distrust of the West towards the Balkans was initiated in the past—probably it has lasted since AD 1000, particularly from the

period when it was immensely complicated to solve the schism between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Such distrust was significantly deepened by the Orientalization of the Balkans under Ottoman power—Balkan societies and cultures assumed the features of the conqueror and its culture (Stojanovich 1997, 379). There was also the ritual "translation" or "cultural transfer." The author emphasizes the fact that the Balkan countries were the last ones to undergo the process of industrialization in Europe; therefore, they could not follow the trends on the world market set by the most developed countries (ibid., 137).

Maria Todorova, in the preface to the second edition of her seminal book *Imagining the Balkans* published in Serbian in 2006, emphasizes the fact that she does not accept the ghettoization of the Balkans (Todorova 2006, 6). She explains that the term she used, "Balkanism,"[4] was coined under direct influence of Edward Said's Orientalism, though Todorova refuses to subsume Balkanism under Orientalism. Even though there are certain similarities between Balkanism and Orientalism, Todorova claims, the basic difference would be that the Balkans are geographically and historically concrete, while the Orient is something that is discovered on voyages, something that has mainly metaphorical and symbolic features (ibid., 10–11). Mentioning a series of different incarnations or manifestations of the Balkans, Todorova lists four categories: the name, the metaphor, the scientific analytical category, and the historical heritage.

Todorova explains that the term "Balkanization"[5] marked not only the fragmentation of big and powerful political units, but it became a synonym for a return to the tribal, primitive and barbarian (Todorova 2006, 47). Recalling the words of Larry Wolff, Todorova reminds the reader that the usual division of Europe (East/West) is a relatively recent invention of philosophers from the eighteenth century. Since the eastern part of Europe was lagging behind the rest of Europe, among other things in the sphere of economy, frequently the East was equated with industrial underdevelopment, with an underdeveloped society, a society without institutions that were typical of the developed West, with irrationality and superstition on which the Western Enlightenment did not make any dent (ibid., 61–62). In many cases the description of the classical Balkan man shows a man that is "uncivilized, primitive, rough, cruel, without exception, with disheveled hair" (ibid., 66). Maria Todorova, in her book *Dizanje prošlosti u vazduh* (Blowing up the past), also discusses the awareness of being late, delays and drawbacks, analytically involved in the term of backwardness as the dominant trope (Todorova 2010, 21). In her essay "The Trap of Backwardness," she claims that this was the dominant trope in non-European historiography, it was unpleasantly present in German self-perceptions, it is still there in Spanish and Italian discourse, and it is all-pervasive in Eastern Europe (ibid.).

Ivan Čolović in the preface to his study *Balkan—Teror kulture: Ogledi o politčkoj antropologiji 2* (The Balkans—The terror of culture: Experiments in political anthropology 2) points out that the Balkans are often imagined in the West as a place which suffers from a deficit of culture, a region populated by people whose culture is in its essence European. However, argues Čolović, they possess less of that culture than other Europeans, primarily the Westerners, unquestionably not enough to be really cultured, "because of which in that part of Europe the barbarian atavisms, the instincts of hatred and violence are easily woken" (Čolović 2008, 5). This author, in his essay "Balkanist Discourse and Its Critics," discusses Todorova's vision of the Balkans and states that it is "a region inhabited by people moving in the right direction, but having a hard time arriving where they are going and falling backwards in their 'development' as it used to be called, or 'transition' to use the more contemporary term" (Čolović 2013). However, he also mentions recent new friends of the Balkans and "the positive stereotyping" version of the Balkanist discourse, presenting it as

> *travelling away from civilisation, where authentic and original culture can be enjoyed in its musical, literary or artistic form. This 'handsome' version of the Balkans with their barefooted beauties, wooden flutes, wholesome food, hundred-proof plum brandy and meek monks, those guardians of ancient spirituality, emerged in Western travel journals during the 1990s, often as a political denial of the existing negative stereotypes.* (Čolović 2013)

Milica Bakić-Hayden explains the discourse concerning the Balkans as a variation of Orientalism, which means through the prism of Said's rhetoric. In her book *Varijacije na temu 'Balkan'* (Variations on the theme of the 'Balkans') she points out that, given the fact that the term "Orient" implies the overlapping of different geographical, cultural and imagological maps, its "flexibility" is evident, as well as that of the term "Europe"—therefore, there is a possibility of extending or narrowing them down as the need arises (Bakić-Hayden 2006, 19). The author claims that the rhetoric of Balkanism is not isolated from the Orientalist rhetoric and phenomenology; on the contrary, they overlap (ibid., 20). Bakić-Hayden thinks that the overlapping of Orientalism and Balkanism does not lessen the relevance of Balkanism as a peculiar analysis of this part of Europe. Furthermore, she points out that the term Balkanism is of essential importance as a contribution of self-representation. She recognizes its importance in a critical pose towards others' misconceptions of us, as well as discovering our own prejudices about ourselves and imaginary self-representations (ibid., 22). Bakić-Hayden discusses the Orientalist dichotomy which became domesticated—a type of discourse which

lends the "value" of scientific explanation to "shallow" syntagms—for example, when the economic, political or moral downfall of society is explained by "the Balkan mentality" (ibid., 27). Given the fact that Orientalism can be applied in Europe by making a difference between Europe "in the narrower sense" and the parts of it which were under the Ottoman (Oriental) government, Bakić-Hayden points out, the value system which appears here can be identified in the rhetoric which refers to that "other" part of Europe (the Balkan mentality, primitivism, Balkanization, "Byzantinism," Oriental despotism, etc.) (ibid., 34). The author points out that the old symbolic geography implied that the Balkans were considered the religious and cultural "Other" to Europe "in the narrower sense." Later on, during the Cold War, ideological and political geography appeared, and it implied a distinction between the democratic, capitalist West and the totalitarian, communist East (ibid., 35). Bakić-Hayden discusses "nesting Orientalisms," a pattern according to which the dichotomy onto which orientalism is grounded is once more implied (ibid., 54). According to this pattern, Asia is more "East" or "the Other" compared to Eastern Europe, and in Eastern Europe the Balkans are "the most eastern part." Consequently, within the framework of the Balkans the same classification may be applied. However, the terms which determine the aforementioned dichotomy eventually turned into their opposites (ibid., 54).

In Western literature, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the Balkans were treated as being close to the Orient, not European enough, dislocated, unknown, mysterious—argues Sanja Lazarević-Radak in her text "Na granici Orijenta i Okcidenta: postkolonijalna teorija i liminalnost Balkana" (On the borders of the Orient and the Occident: Postcolonial theory and liminality of the Balkans) (2011, 1424). Lazarević-Radak claims that the border-line issue or *liminality* will remain the main interpretative key which in imagological studies will be crucial for understanding the Balkans. The dislocation from the center but the incomplete positioning out of it, being close to the edge, the fringes of the continent, has remained the dominant presentation of the Balkans from its first symbolic mapping in the nineteenth century until the modern age (cf. ibid., 1425). The first attempts to symbolically map the Balkans were made at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the region was constructed as the border-line in a geographical sense, while the issue relating to the border-line of its culture was made later, by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Balkans were presented as a region which is, and yet it is not, part of Europe. Lazarević-Radak also points out that many travelers, in their travelogues, diaries and studies, deal with the Byzantine heritage, despotism, and *absolutistic* regimes. There are also notes and studies dealing with "racial features" or confusing anthropological types of the Balkan people who, according to the rule, represent a complex mixture (ibid., 1425–1427).

Gordana Đerić in her essay "Stereotip i studije o Balkanu" (Stereotype and Balkan studies) argues that symbolic presentations of "Otherness" have existed for almost as long as the world itself, which is why "mental mapping is as old as cartography, if not even older" (Đerić 2009, 12). Collective characteristics prescribed to people from the West, East, North or South "were changing during that time, but the possibility of making, maintaining or changing something always belonged to those who had the greatest political, military, economic or symbolic power" (ibid., 12).

Đerić also emphasizes that the period of the Enlightenment was of essential importance for a contemporary "orientation" in the European context (Đerić 2009, 12). Actually, it was a division into an industrial and an agricultural Europe, and its borders mainly coincided with the symbolic West/East dividing line. However, the author explains, by the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century an inquisitiveness about the study of the "psychic characteristics of people" emerges, while at the beginning of the twentieth century there appears a political need to get to know "the Enemy," to create its image, "the image of the Otherness" (ibid., 12–13).

When it comes to the value viewpoint which Western culture creates in observing and experiencing South Slavic culture (always positioned on the boundary between East and West, geographically, historically and, culturally), the creation of cultural patterns which function within the framework of stereotypes is evident. The matrix which is formed by Western perspectives in relation to the experience of Balkan sexuality has always been prototypical and recognizable. In such interpretations, either literary or political, men from the Balkans are potent and multiply aggressive—verbally, sexually, and politically.

> *It is a stereotype that Slavs are barbarian tribes. Having come a thousand years ago from the north and east of the Eurasian continent to the south of Europe, they encountered more civilized tribes and people in our region. Ancient civilization was already blossoming there. Compared to the Greek and Roman civilization which had already taken hold in the Balkans, it is certain that the Slavs acted more primitively and crudely. However, over time, as it usually happens, there began the inevitable blending of people, the blending of cultures and customs, so that the Greek and Roman culture, by its presence in this region, modelled some of the pagan features of the Slavs.* (Marić 1998, 57)

It is very important to highlight the domination of the heroic model of life in the Balkans, conditioned by the continuous centuries-long chronotope of struggle. Their collective identity had been formed in turbulent historical times and had survived in those Balkan communities which were chiefly exposed to

the cultural, psychological and identical aggression of the other, more powerful peoples and empires. All this resulted in a great delay in artistic movements and trends, so it is evident that there was no stylistic formation, with the exception of the medieval literature which flourished under the patronage of the Nemanjić dynasty, that could function synchronically in progressive European countries and in any Balkan community. The struggle for survival and the protection of freedom and national identity led to cultural regression and the emergence of stereotypes about the Balkan primitivism. Only those representatives of Western culture who had spent time in the Balkan lands and had lived with peoples with a tribal mindset could comprehend the complexity in the psychological outlook of the Dinaric archetype and, when it comes to its manliness, the shame in the face of Eros, and making a taboo of sexuality and rigid attitudes towards struggle, the relationship between the individual and the collective, as well as the opinions on heroism. One of the Western writers who spent some time in the Balkans and was interested in Montenegrins, Gerhard Gesemann, in his work *Heroische Lebensform: Zur Literatur und Wesenskunde der balkanischen Patriarchalität* (1943) pointed out that the frequent mentioning of the cult of ancestors in this part of Europe has an agonal feature and that self-control is one of the most essential characteristics of these people when it comes to instincts and emotions. However, self-control necessarily results psychologically in the later escalation of those things that have been repressed for a long time. "Concern for sex and eroticism, exuberant sexual fantasy, readiness for erotic comments and courtship—represent our typical character features," points out the famous Serbian psychiatrist Jovan Marić in his book *Kakvi smo mi Srbi? Prilozi za karakterologiju Srba* (What we Serbs are like? Contributions to the characterology of the Serbs) (Marić 1998, 187). He also points out that the obsession with sexuality actually arose due to various factors and came from multiple and multi-layered sources. One of the factors refers to the centuries-long patriarchal stigmatization of Eros as an element which was considered destructive and which was, as such, expediently repressed as deep down as possible. One important factor of the shame regarding sexual self-revelation is the five centuries-long Ottoman colonial rule[6] in this region, under which the Balkan people acquired an inferior position and the degradation of sexuality occurred. Due to the predomination of Thanatos, it was Eros that had to be put into the background. Furthermore, because of the accultural interweaving of the autochthonous people and the colonial Ottomans as an inevitable psychological and customary product, what followed was an attitude toward women which was rather dominant.

Alexandru Duțu, in his text "Ideas and Attitudes: The Southeast European Revolutions of the Nineteenth Century," discusses the Southeast European En-

lightenment which usually relates to the last three decades of the eighteenth century and the initial three decades of the nineteenth century and is seen as a time of great political and social upheavals, many of which resulted in a kind of rebellion:

> *For example, peasants led by Horea in 1784 attacked the castles and fortresses of nobles in Transylvania who had assumed that peasants did not form a "nation" and therefore could not enjoy political rights; moreover, the Serbs revolted against the Ottoman Turks in 1804, as did the Greeks in 1821, when the Philiki Etairia fought for an independent Greek state. Also in 1821, Tudor Vladimirescu marched against the Phanariots who were ruling in Wallachia, as well as in Moldavia, and tried to restore that principality's independence.* (Duţu 1984, 1)

During the period between the two World Wars, the contact between Britain and the Balkans was characterized by "the plurality of sources [which] influenced the quality and types of images that were transmitted, often resulting in different images being shared by different audiences" (Michail 2011, xiii). In the interwar period, Eugene Michail claims, there was not a steady British interest in the region, but there were very frequent fluctuations. The dominant image of the Balkans at the time was the image of violence provoking dread and terror. Reports on frequent turmoil, coups d'état, assassinations, regicide and the presentation of the Balkans as Europe's powder keg reinforced the image of the region as a place of instability, insecurity, cultural backwardness and "under-modern inter-European periphery" (ibid., 131). With a plethora of signs to follow, especially from newspaper articles, studies and travelogues from the interwar period, under-modernity and under-development emerge alongside the inevitable failure of the Balkan states to cope with the expectations imposed on them. Many of the aforementioned themes were exploited and developed in the fiction of the period.

Victoria Four-Thirty **and the Balkans**

IN CECIL Roberts' *Victoria Four-Thirty* the reader can identify numerous allusions to the Balkans. Although the writer does not directly insist on stereotypes, certain prejudices and clichés do emerge from the text and are not hard to observe. One of the characters in the novel, Mr Fanning, talks with great interest at an Empire Society dinner about "the alarming conditions in the Balkans!" The evening newspapers were filled with detailed accounts of the King of

Slavonia's assassination. We also find out that a student "had thrown the bomb after the ceremony of opening the new University" (Roberts 1937, 95). In this manner, young Dorette asks her father, the well-to-do Turkish businessman Mr Bekir, just before his trip to Thessalonica: "Daddy, are you quite safe in the Balkans? They're always shooting someone, aren't they?"[7] (ibid., 184).

In the interwar years, in material and economic terms, the region was identified as typically underdeveloped. Consequently, as Michail puts it, British travelers considered themselves the bearers of modernity (Michail 2011, 133). Many Balkan travelogues from the aforementioned period describe "bad roads, old cars and chaotic timetables" (ibid.). Therefore, Mr Bekir opposes his wife's suggestion to accompany him on his business tour simply because "the Balkans are scarcely fit for a woman to travel in," though the main reason would probably be that he had another family in Salonica. Since his trips were to distant tobacco-growing regions in Greece and Bulgaria, he had to put up with "accommodation of the most primitive order" (Roberts 1937, 182). Mr Bekir explains to his family in London that he "travels by train, car, horse and sometimes donkey through the mountainous regions of the Balkans" (ibid., 182).

One of the chapters titled "Prince 'Sixpenny' of Slavonia" introduces a young boy who was sent to a preparatory school in England. This lad turns out to be the heir to the throne of Slavonia, who finds out that his father, the King of Slavonia, has been killed by communists although it was an act of "the military party eager to seize the power on the pretence of a revolution" (Roberts 1937, 333). The capital of Roberts' imaginary Kingdom of Slavonia is Nish, a town in the southern part of Serbia. The name of the kingdom coincides with the name of a province in eastern Croatia. In the aforementioned military and political scenario, the reader can undoubtedly identify one of the most exploited themes pertaining to the Balkans—the theme of violence, ghastly assassinations, regicide and turmoil. A 1939 report on the British press shows that people in Britain were much more interested "in news of royalty than foreign news" (Michail 2011, 104). "Of the 25 references to the contemporary Balkans in the weekly magazine, only six were about political news, while 16 were about personalities in the Balkan royal houses, by far the biggest single category of references" (ibid.). More than three decades earlier, the British public had been informed about a shocking deed that had occurred, not surprisingly, in the Balkans. Namely, on 11 June 1903, junior officers of the Serbian army assassinated King Alexander Obrenović and Queen Draga of Serbia. The very next morning the papers and magazines in Britain were full of news about the terrible regicide[8]— "its cause [was] the widespread frustration with Alexander's inconsistent foreign policy that was unable to match the rising expectations of Serbian na-

tionalism, and with his marriage to a divorcee and apparently infertile Draga" (Michail 2011, 6).[9] Once again ghastly images of terror and fear sparked the imagination of writers such as Cecil Roberts. The story of Cecil Roberts' character is reminiscent of the life story of Prince Peter of Yugoslavia after the murder of his father, King Alexander, in Marseilles in 1934 (Goldsworthy 1998, 108).

Cecil Roberts, as a prominent journalist, was obviously familiar with the scandals involving Balkan royal families. He was surely aware of the popularity of those "terrifying" but at the same time "exotic" places with the British public, since he decided to use this material for his novel. The reader is not surprised when Mr Bekir, while commenting on the assassination of the King of Slavonia, exclaims: "Poor devil—it just proves that anything can happen in the Balkans" (Roberts 1937, 183).

The established stereotypes concerning the region and its people—such as backwardness and simplicity—were exploited in a rather subtle manner in *Victoria Four-Thirty*. However, no matter how subtle or indirect the means the author uses, these issues are evident and easily identified. Namely, as the young boy Nikolas Metaxa is finally leaving the big city after spending a few years in London, doing his best to earn some money to open his own restaurant in Greece, his friends from the restaurant came to Victoria Station to wish him good luck.

> *While he was searching through his pocket for the ticket, so safely put away that he did not know where it was, he heard someone shouting behind him. . . . Six of his friends from Phaleron were there: three waiters, a waitress, a girl from the kitchen and an assistant chef. They were inclined to make a scene, and he disliked being the centre of any demonstration. . . . They fired questions at him, laughing uproariously at the own banter. Very superior people passing the barrier ignored them. . . . There was a sudden scrimmage around Nikolas and in a burst of emotions they all soundly kissed him in turn. . . . Like a flock of shrill blackbirds, his Phaleron colleagues began to run with the train, shouting messages in Greek. . . . Nikolas entered his carriage, removed the bowler hat, and sat down, mopping his face. His black curls had fallen over his damp brow. He felt very self-conscious now in this carriage of prim people, and when he nervously glanced round no one took the slightest notice, as if he had grossly misbehaved. They were all well dressed, with expensive-looking luggage stacked up on the rack. Nikolas felt ashamed of his old fibre portmanteau with a battered end.* (Roberts 1937, 62–65)

Roberts creates a subtle "border" line between the sufficiently and insufficiently "civilized" world. When Nikolas Metaxa comes to Victoria Station, ready to

set off, the reader's focus of attention is transferred to his appearance. "He had bought a bowler hat, which was a little too tight, and his black tie had slipped sideways, and a pair of new shoes pinched him . . . Also, he felt slightly ridiculous in his bowler hat" (Roberts 1937, 62–63). When the King of Slavonia was killed, "two fat men arrived in a big car—foreigners," Gary Hamilton informed his friend Prince 'Sixpenny.' Prince Paul could not recognize one of them, "a burly bearded man." Paul disliked Colonel Tetrovich, not only because of his strict attitude but also because of his appearance. "There were long black hairs on the back of his hands, which glittered with rings" (ibid., 72). After Sister Teresa had come back from her native England to Predeal in Romania, she was supposed to have a meeting with the mayor. "He was a butcher by trade and his coarse clothes smelt of the slaughterhouse in which he had been working since seven" (ibid., 354). The scenery of Transylvanian pine forests where the convent was situated was magnificent. "But how out of the world, and buried among the primitive peasants, except for a short season when the tourists came from Bucharest!" (ibid., 128)

A lack of good taste, absence of etiquette, acting rather awkwardly in "natural" situations, being ridiculous while trying, unsuccessfully, to adapt to "appropriate standards and manners" are evident in the novel. According to modern criticism, the peasant served as the most appropriate indicator of the Balkans' lack of modernity. As Michail puts it, British peasants had become "capitalist farmers" long ago, therefore, "varieties of Balkan peasant inevitably attracted the gaze of the region's visitors as relics of a distant past" (Michail 2011, 132). Furthermore, the highly significant role of the peasant in Balkan issues, the lack of a fast pace of urbanization and industrialization contributed to the perception of "the whole of Balkan culture as a peasant culture" (ibid., 133).

Conclusion

THE BALKANS have intrigued European public thought for centuries, which is why interest in this part of Europe and in its relations with the rest of it has grown over the years. The increasing number of academic articles and studies shows the importance of a thorough and meticulous research of intercultural contact, as well as of the way these cultural issues are exploited in certain literary works. The Balkan cultural plurality as a thematic and inspirational source of European writers and the European (primarily Anglo-Saxon) public can by no means be considered a coincidence, since it has its justification and evolutional reason. The junction of different cultures, which through the centuries had blended into a multicultural and acculturational nucleus with all

the points of joining and splitting, with tumultuous socio-historic events, had to be inspirational and fertile ground for authors, as well as attractive to the readership. The southeast region of Europe is the ideological source into which, since the end of the sixth century, the South Slavic people, who over time had become permanent and dominant denizens, had mixed with various other peoples, such as conquerors, vanquishers and co-operators; therefore, throughout history different cultural influences alternately made their presence felt, mainly of an autocratic nature, but also with strong populist ideas. Roberts, as a connoisseur of the multiplicity of cultural codes and historic upheavals, experiments with the genre, from which he extracts specific objects of interest. The train is the space of diegetic enculturation on the micro-scale, given the fact that it becomes a liminal line between real and unreal, permitted and forbidden, desirable and repulsive, as well as a genealogical fusion which, by its dynamics, disintegrates the genre and tradition, thus creating brand new conventions for the composition of the story. It is undoubtedly unique and colorful from the perspective of the plot as well as according to the theory of reception that all these viewpoints were presented by the British author.

Victoria Four-Thirty is a novel of modest literary merit. It displays the features of the "Orient Express" genre novel and it deals in a specific way with the issue of the West vs. East "dividing" line. Its episodic narrative, simple plotline, sequential insight into the lives of the main protagonists, plus the train journey with the Orient Express genre conventions, make up some of the most significant literary features of Cecil Roberts' novel. However, the book offers a wealth of material for cultural studies research, since it deals, albeit in a rather subtle way, with the East/West "border-line," stereotypes, conventions and the issue of the (un)known "Other," primarily seen from the British perspective of the 1930s.

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Notes

1. Goldsworthy emphasizes Graham Greene's "modest" experience of the Balkans before the publication of *Stamboul Train*, since he had spent only twenty-four hours in Constantinople in 1930 while he was on his Hellenic cruise. That is why his depiction of Subotica (a town in the former Yugoslavia, today part of Serbia) in the aforementioned novel does not reflect the facts. Greene describes Subotica as if he wanted to show that the typical Balkan setting "inevitably" implies "mud, snow and backwardness with a pervading sense of danger." On the contrary, Subotica is a town built mainly in a neo-baroque architectural style with an observable Austro-Hungarian heritage (cf. 105–106).

2. Christie's well-known "technique" of making a sharp distinction between the Orient Express's "civilized" passengers and the "violent, uncivilized" Balkans (Goldsworthy 1998, 107).

3. The term "Englishness" was approached through a similar prism by Pia Brînzeu, who also poses a question concerning the need of Europeans to elucidate "the nature of their nationness." The author claims that the very term "Englishness" in this context does not only refer to the national character—it "has to be seen as a nexus of values, beliefs and attitudes which are offered as unique to England and to those who identify as, or wish to identify as, English" (Brînzeu 2000, 24).

4. The term "Balkanism" was also discussed by Duțu (1997) and Muthu (2002a, 2002b). See also Preston (2009).

5. Todorova explains that the term "Balkanization" appeared after World War I. It was used for the first time in *The New York Times* (20 December 1918) in an interview with a well-known director of the German company AEG ("Rathenau, a big industrial foresees the Balkanization of Europe"). It is obvious that this term, from Rathenau's perspective, is used to depict the trepidation of an almost apocalyptic future, alluding to the fear of possible conflict between the Eastern powers and Western civilization (Todorova 2006, 99).

6. "In 1345 the first warriors serving the House of Osman crossed the Dardanelles and new chapters began in the history of Southeastern Europe. A little more than a hundred years later, in 1453, the House of Osman conquered Byzantium" (Sugar 1996, 13).

7. Trajan Stojanovich points out that the Balkan people are not only "characterized" by violence but also by being highly impulsive, especially by turning smoothly from one emotional state to another, usually a contradictory state (Stojanovich 1997, 82–83).

8. Maria Todorova claims that the regicide of Alexander and Draga in Belgrade outraged the public in the West. She mentioned a review published in *The New York Times* whose author pointed out that throwing someone through a window was a racial characteristic of the primitive Slavs (Todorova 2010, 238). Milica Bakić-Hayden also discusses this report. Namely, throwing someone out of a window, according to the author of the article, is a sign of not being sufficiently civilized, being without manners or any sense of good taste. Consequently, in contrast to a British, French, Italian or German who uses civilized and noble ways of dealing with his enemies, people from Bohemia or Serbia just "whizz" them off out of the window (Bakić-Hayden 2006, 56).

9. H. V. Steed, a correspondent of *The Times* in Vienna, after the aforementioned regicide, described Belgrade as a modest capital of Serbia which is much more like a medieval qanat than a city in Europe (Stojanović 1997, 377).

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Abstract
Rethinking the Past: *Victoria Four-Thirty* and the East/West Line

The region of the Balkans has for centuries inspired a number of travelers, writers, artists and researchers, which is why interest in this part of Europe and its relations towards the rest of it has increased over the years. The increasing number of academic articles and studies shows the importance of thorough and meticulous research of intercultural contacts, as well as of the way these cultural issues are discussed in literary works. The Balkans have been exploited in numerous novels and stories; many imaginary kingdoms have been "situated" in the region for the sake of a mysterious, thrilling setting, and a number of authors who had little or no personal contact with the region and its people used mainly set conventions, convictions and prejudices for their literary purposes. Cecil Roberts' *Victoria Four-Thirty* (1937) shows the characteristics of the "Orient Express" genre novel and it deals with the issue of the West vs. East "dividing" line. The aim of this paper is to analyze the novel within the framework of cultural studies since it features , though in a rather subtle way, the issue of East/West "border-line" and stereotypes, presented mostly from the British perspective of the 1930s.

Keywords