



## **The Other Nearby. Experiences of Strangeness in Southeast Europe**

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**Abstract.** The paper's aim is to present experiences of strangeness in Southeast Europe. The starting point for the analysis is an anthology entitled *Die andere nebenan* (*The Other Next Door*), which has been published in eight editions and countries. The Swedish editor Richard Swartz invited twenty-one authors from various Balkan countries to write essays about their relationship to "the Others." The experience of strangeness on the Balkans was strongly traumatized during the Yugoslav wars in the nineties, so the writings in the examined treasury can be read as trauma texts. The determination and construction of identity has a very important role in them. The paper deals with self-identification of Aleksandar Hemon, Dragan Velikić, Miljenko Jergović, Nenad Veličković and László Végh. The two notions which can accurately determine these experiences of strangeness are internal strangeness and the familiar stranger.

**Keywords:** the Balkans, experience of strangeness, trauma, the Other

The Balkans – they are always the other people; Sartre's well-known sentence was wittily rephrased by Rastko Močnik Slovenian sociologist. If we examine the stereotypes about this area, it is not startling that the Balkans fill the place of Hell, but the odd thing about it is the internal, Balkan point of view. The people of this region always look eastwards the Balkans, the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić declares. She claims that the symbolic and imaginary boundary of the Balkans moves from the Viennese Landstrasse to Trieste and Ljubljana, then to Zagreb and Sarajevo, to Belgrade, and even further towards the

Southeast, to Pristina. This unique, plastic border in fact is not a border, but a projection (Drakulić 2009, 1074).

The paper's aim is to approach the issues of strangeness on this imaginary, swampy territory. The starting point of the analysis is an anthology entitled *The Other Next Door* [*Die andere nebenan*]. This book was published in eight editions and countries in 2007: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, and Germany. The Hungarian translation was published one year later, in 2008.<sup>1</sup> The Swedish editor Richard Swartz invited twenty-one authors from various Balkan countries to write essays about their relationship to "the Others." (I do not want to deal with the issues of the theory and practice of translation, but it is very important to emphasize that the anthology's title in most languages is the other nearby, next to us, in the neighbourhood, but in Croatian unknown neighbour.)

The subtitle of the volume (*Writings from Southeast Europe*) urges us to clear up the boundaries of the Balkans and the confusion about the name of this region. The editor drew the lines of Southeast Europe around Albania, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia. Maria Todorova, who explores the ontology of the Balkans, uses the Balkans and Southeast Europe as synonyms, and her book *Imagining the Balkans* "covers as Balkan Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Romanians, and most of the former Yugoslavs." She mentions that although Slovenes are not included, and vassal territories as Dubrovnik were just nominally Ottoman, they "exerted such an important influence on the Balkan Peninsula that their history cannot be served from the Balkans" (Todorova 1997, 31). The Bulgarian historian outlining the phylogeny of the peninsula's name remarks that Balkan for the whole peninsula was applied by several authors just in the middle of the nineteenth century. Most European travellers preferred to use the ancient name Haemus before the nineteenth century. In 1893, and again in 1909 "the German geographer Theobald Fischer proposed that the peninsula should be named *Südosteuropa*" (Todorova 1997, 27-28). He was not the first person to use this term, "*Südosteuropäische Halbinsel*" had been introduced in 1863 by Balkan specialist, scholar, and diplomat Johann Georg von Hahn. The geographer Otto Maull also proposed using the name Southeastern Europe in 1929. Mathias Bernath had a similar opinion as Maull; he thought that *Südosteuropa* was a neutral, non-political and non-ideological mention contrary to the Balkans, which had been filled with a political connotation by the beginning of the twentieth century. After World War II the term *Südosteuropa* was undesirable, but some of the German geographers continued to use it. "In the rest of Europe and the United States, Southeastern Europe and Balkan have been used

<sup>1</sup> The citations and references from the anthology will be based on the Hungarian edition: Swartz, Richard, ed. 2008. *A közeli más. Írások Délkelet-Európából.* [*The Other Nearby. Writings from Southeast Europe.*] Pécs: Jelenkor.

as a rule, interchangeably both before and after World War II, but with an obvious preference for the latter” (Todorova 1997, 29).

The issue of boundaries is also complicated. The broadest interpretation of Southeastern Europe belongs to Karl Kaser, according to his geographical concept the borders are the “Carpathian Mountains in the north, the Black Sea in the east, the Aegean Sea in the south, and the Ionian and Adriatic Seas to the west” (Todorova 1997, 29). So Southeastern Europe includes Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and European Turkey. In this interpretation Southeastern Europe is a comprehensive entity and the Balkans are only its subregion. Mathias Bernath’s chiefly historical concept is very similar to Kaser’s opinion, but he omits Slovakia. Hungary’s and Romania’s positions also used to be problematic. These countries are parts of Southeast Europe, but they are usually omitted from the Balkans, especially Hungary (Todorova 1997, 29). George Hoffman, “who spoke synonymously of »the Balkan, or Southeast European Peninsula«, employed a mixture of criteria to come up with an essentially geopolitical interpretation that reflected the cold-war period when his account was written.” He defined as explicitly Balkan only three countries, the same three which were chosen to the anthology by Richard Swartz: Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia (Todorova 1997, 30). To our subject the former Yugoslav area is the most important for two reasons. Firstly, most of the authors in the book belong to this territory. Secondly, strangeness is a familiar and dominant experience to the nations of this multilingual, multicultural region, and the Yugoslav Wars in the nineties further amplified and traumatized it.

The attempt to process the trauma is a very significant phenomenon in the literature of the former Yugoslav countries. The recent past caused the dominance of self-examination, introspection, self-reflexivity, autobiographic character in contemporary Croatian literature (cf. Sablić Tomić and Rem 2009, 55-68) and it had a great impact on the literature of the other former Yugoslav countries. Jörn Rüsen distinguishes three types of historical experience: a normal, a critical and a catastrophic or traumatic one. The latter “destroys the potential of historical consciousness to integrate events into a sense bearing and meaningful narrative” (Rüsen 2004, 11). According to trauma theory, if a traumatized person wants to heal, he or she must tell the traumatic story, but this activity comes up against difficulties because of the traumatic memory (Menyhért 2008, 5). Assembling the fragments, phantasmagories to a coherent unit, linear narrative is a really difficult task. Detraumatization often results in the avoidance of the traumatic event, estrangement and falsification of the experience. Rüsen underlines that historization is the only solution to overcome trauma. “At the very moment people start telling the story of what happened they take the first step on the way of integrating the distracting events into their world view and self-understanding. At the end of this way a historical narrative gives the distraction by trauma a place in a

temporal chain of events” (Rüsen 2004, 13). Anna Menyhért very aptly remarked that the trauma could be told if the necessary language developed, which should show, articulate the trauma instead of hiding it. The trauma texts are characterized by a very strong personal tone or detachment, equidistance, their genre is usually autobiography, memoir and diary (Menyhért 2008, 6-7). The writings in the examined anthology can be considered as trauma texts, they can be classified into the genres of trauma. In the book, among others, we can find genealogies, autobiographies, confessions, interviews and theoretical essays.

The Southeast and the West are equally concerned about the Yugoslav civil wars as a “catastrophic” historical experience. The West regards the war as an unexplainable event like the Holocaust, and they attempt to understand and legitimate it. Slavenka Drakulić has a really witty answer to the questions of Western audience. She says that the former Yugoslavia collapsed because of Italian shoes. People thought that they were free if they could go away from home to buy things which they could not get at home. They did not labour to figure out and develop a democratic alternative, and the emptiness which remained after the collapse of communism has been filled with nationalism (Drakulić 2009, 1074). Richard Swartz’s questions to the authors (“Why this strife and struggle, why conflict, why the neighbour as an adversary and not as a partner? What is the relation to the »Other«?”) are also the issues of the West, and Swartz remarks that these questions are based on misunderstandings, generalizations, on the West’s shallow image of the Balkans.

The naive issues seem strange, if we know that the editor worked as the East European correspondent for the Swedish daily Svenska Dagbladet for many years, and his wife is the Croatian author Slavenka Drakulić. So strangeness is a familiar experience to Richard Swartz too, he satisfies Simmel’s requirements for the stranger, he is far away and close at the same time (cf. Simmel 2004, 56). It can be said of Maria Todorova also, whose fatherland is Bulgaria, but now she lives and works in the United States of America.

Most authors in the anthology are in a transitional, dual situation as well. Most of them live in emigration and some of them have even changed language. We can agree with Viktória Radics, who notes that it is impossible to talk about the Balkans without the theme of emigration (Radics 2008, 26). David Albahari lives in Canada, Aleksandar Hemon in Chicago, Bora Ćosić and Maruša Krese in Berlin. Several authors constantly travel from one place to another, they have several homes. Ismail Kadaré lives in Paris and Tirana, Fatos Kongoli in Tirana and Peking, Biljana Srbljanović in Belgrade and Paris, Slavenka Drakulić and her husband Richard Swartz in Vienna, Stockholm and Sovinjak. Remarkable is the case of Miljenko Jergović, whose living spaces are Zagreb and Sarajevo. Dimitré Dinev, Aleksandar Hemon, Charles Simic or Saša Stanišić changed their writing language. Even these simple biographical data reveal many things about the

authors' complex, complicated identities, so it is not surprising that determination and construction of identity play a very important role in the anthology.

The multilingual, Bosnian-American Aleksandar Hemon has been living in Chicago since 1992, and he has been publishing in English since 1995. His autobiographical short story in the anthology is about the components and formation of identity. The reader can follow the steps of the development of the narrator's identity from the attempted murder against his younger sister who risked his central position through group identity and national identity, meeting other cultures to the recognition of his own complexity. He defines himself as a tangle of unanswerable questions, a beam of otherness (Swartz 2008, 112). Very decisive questions arise in the text, such as when the acquaintance becomes a stranger, and when the stranger becomes familiar. The answer to the first question is a story from the narrator's childhood. Almir was one of his friends, together they made up the team called *raja*. When the narrator called Almir Turkish without any malice, it immediately caused a great gulf between Almir, the narrator and the *raja*. The narrator learned then that if we declared someone *other*, we would declare ourselves *other* (Swartz 2008, 103). The narrator's family in Canada experienced how strangers can become familiar. After the arrival in the foreign country they searched and kept in evidence the differences between Canadians and them to legitimate their own existence in the overseas culture. The family's growth and the increasing number of relationships ended this behaviour. Then it was more difficult to distinguish between "we" and "they," because the obviousness and relevance of differences are inversely proportional to distance (Swartz 2008, 105-106).

The self-identification of Dragan Velikić is also destitute of simplicity and certitude: he is Serbian by birth, but grew up in Croatia, in Istria, in the city of Pula, which has always been on the margin since the Roman Empire. Although it has always been a multiethnic territory where the principle of tolerance was vivid, he heard the ironic overtures of "we" and "they." The two fundamental groups were the locals (*domaće*) and the newcomers (*furešte*) (Swartz 2008, 278-279). He writes about the principle of small differences which was relevant in former Yugoslavia. It played the main role in Tito's regime, the real others were not important, they were crowded to the margin. The leaders wasted time and energy to the small differences' opposition of whom they could produce enemies without effort. This principle proved its ruinous power in the nineties, when the bloody civil war was fought by two nations which spoke almost the same language.

Miljenko Jergović Croatian writer presents a really complex identity similarly to previous authors. His short story entitled *There where other people live* [*Ott, ahol más emberek élnek*] is a colourful genealogy. The narrator's Swabian great-grandfather settled in Sarajevo, spoke Croatian with loan-words which characterized the Muslims' speech, rescued his Serbian neighbours from the Ustašas, and these neighbours saved him from the Croatian fascists. He needed his

Serbian neighbours, they were necessary part of his life, because he could only feel himself a Swabian among them, and not in Germany. The narrator experienced the same feeling later when he had to move to Croatia. His Croatian identity fundamentally differed from the identity of people who lived in Zagreb, because he learnt that hatred in a multiethnic, multicultural community was necessarily self-hatred (Swartz 2008, 135).

All these self-definitions raise the question “How can one possibly be a foreigner?,” which Julia Kristeva, in her book entitled *Strangers to ourselves*, judges as an issue which rarely comes to our mind. According to her,

when we allow the topic to cross our minds, we immediately find a niche among those entitled to a nationality and cast out into an unreasonable alienage those who belong to an elsewhere they have been unable to preserve, one that no longer belongs to them, who have expropriated themselves of their identity as citizens. (Kristeva 1991, 41)

Although this attitude is really comfortable and simple, it is wrong, we can agree with Kristeva, who states that the foreigner is not something outside us, but lives within us:

The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the group. Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns ‘we’ into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible. The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities. (Kristeva 1991, 1)

In my opinion this internal experience of strangeness characterizes the quoted authors, the complicated Hemon, Velikić, who underlines the principle of small differences and Jergović, who considers hatred as self-hatred. We cannot omit the Bosnian writer Nenad Veličković, who thinks that the other is not Muslim, black, Pakistanian, Gypsy, Jewish, Chinese, Palestine, Albanian or Kurd, but a creature that was made from us, in whose eyes wide open fear replaced curiosity. According to him, the conversation about the Other is just an intellectual phantasm, an alibi to keep quiet about the one (Swartz 2008, 265-266).

In many respects László Végel's thoughts in his essay entitled *Familiar strangers, European bastards* [*Ismerős idegenek, európai fattyúk*] are the same as Veličković's reflections. Besides the Other, which is celebrated with grand words he mentions the Otherness, the national minorities living on the margins of European national states. He is worried about their future, their possibilities. He asks what is waiting for the European whoresons who live in more parallel worlds, but none of them is theirs, who have at least two languages, and none of them is foreign or theirs. They do not talk about differences, about the Other, because they have more serious worries, they do not want to differ, but they are constrained and convicted to be different. They do not represent the Other, they are part of it, and unfortunately their personality contains several Others, several foreign elements meet inside them. Végel calls the national minorities as familiar stranger, the Other who bears the stigma of Otherness (Swartz 2008, 245). The notion of familiar stranger will be especially interesting if we know that Végel uses this category to the victims of the Holocaust, to those Jewish people who were killed not by a foreign army, but by their fellow citizens, who had seen in them at once the familiar and the alien (Swartz 2008, 252). A particularly deep and painful experience of strangeness is unfolding from the above-mentioned authors' and Végel's thoughts. The internal strangeness and the familiar stranger can express only together something relevant about the paradox situation in Southeast Europe.

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