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THROUGH A READER LOOKING GLASS. OLIVIA MANNING'S *THE BALKAN TRILOGY*

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Abstract: *The paper explores the way in which Romanian readers, experts in literary studies, react to how Romania, Romanians are perceived by British foreigners travelling to Romania for the first time as instantiated in Olivia Manning's The Balkan Trilogy. The trilogy is based on the author's experience of living in Bucharest during WW II as wife of a British Council officer. The theoretical frame underpinning the study draws on reader-oriented theory and the role of stereotypes which are viewed as culturally and historically rooted.*

Keywords: *reader-orientdness, stereotypes, qualitative research*

1. Foreword

The novelist and critic Anthony Burgess (quoted in the 1981 preface of *The Balkan Trilogy*) considers *The Balkan Trilogy* to be one of the most significant fictional treatments of World War II in Europe, the only one to be written by a woman. It is not, nevertheless, this belief that sparked my interest in it, but a comment which popped up in an informal discussion I had with a British Council rather high official in the region. What he said was that the trilogy is “a must read” for those like him who came to work in this part of the world. I had already read the trilogy well before the conversation took place, but I was so intrigued by this remark that I decided not only to revisit it but also try to explore the way in which present day Romanians react to it.

The first stage of my research project was based on a Likert scale questionnaire through which I wanted to explore how a number of Romanian MA students reacted to the way in which Romania and Romanians are perceived by British foreigners in Olivia Manning's *The Balkan Trilogy*. A number of quotes of a stereotypical nature were selected from the book to which the student-respondents had to react by choosing from a five point scale ranging from “completely agree” to “completely disagree”. By and large this study showed that:

(...) most of these respondents disagree with the negative images painted in the trilogy, even though such rejection goes against documented realities. What is more, even if not denying evidence, a substantial number of respondents chose to adopt a neutral position. It is only a minority which take a more critical view of Romania and Romanians. The scarce qualitative data suggests that national pride lies at the bottom of the way in which the Romanian respondents reacted to Olivia Manning's and her characters' observations and opinions. (Goșa, 2019 in print)

The second manifestation of my research interest discussed in the present paper, maintains a similar reader-response oriented approach, though it deals with a different readership, different paradigm, and different research instrument. The qualitative research paradigm was used solely, since the purpose of the study was exploratory in nature and it relied heavily on the subjectivity of the respondents. The data collection instrument was an open ended written account. The respondents, six in number, were all expert readers of literature, all

professors of literary studies, at a certain university in Romania. They were all females and their age range is quite diverse spanning almost four decades. The respondents were given a fragment from the beginning of the first book of the series and they were asked to react to it. The fragment (see it in Appendix) deals with the first impressions and experienced by a British traveller to Romania. The accounts were analysed qualitatively and the results take the form of a verbal report, which will be presented later in this paper

2. A brief note on Olivia Manning and *The Balkan Trilogy*

Olivia Mary Manning (1908 – 1980), knighted CBE (Acronym of Commander of the Most Excellent of the British Empire, order of chivalry), daughter of a naval officer and a publican, had a conventional middle class upbringing as she attended a private school for girls before she moved to Ireland. According to <https://peoplepill.com/people/olivia-manning/> she recalled, “the usual Anglo-Irish sense of belonging nowhere”. Her education was completed by attending an art school when she moved to London. She married a British Council lecturer, R.D. Smith and followed him to Bucharest where he held a position as lecturer. They had three children. Besides living in Bucharest which she had to leave fleeing Nazi occupation, she also lived in Greece, Egypt and Palestine. She returned to London at the end of the war. She became well-known after her death in 1980 when the TV adaptation of the trilogies known as the *Fortunes of War* were broadcast in 1989. The trilogies remain her best-known work and rely heavily on her experiences. The reception of her works is divided to date and her primary merits are those of a woman writer of war fiction.

As mentioned above, Olivia Manning is best known for her two trilogies, *The Balkan Trilogy* and *The Levant Trilogy*, written between the sixth and the eighth decade of the 20th century, both being known as *The Fortunes of War*. These novels revolve around a main female character, Harriet Pringle, and her life in Eastern Europe and the Middle East during the years of World War II. The main protagonist of these novels is in fact an alter ego of Olivia Manning herself. *The Balkan Trilogy* (*The Great Fortune* – 1960, *The Spoilt City* – 1962, *Friends and Heroes* – 1965) presents the story as seen and told by Harriet Pringle, an English woman who is travelling to Romania for the first time after marrying a lecturer attached to a British Council educational centre in Bucharest and is following him to his post, in the late 1930s. She finds herself in the middle of a strange new world, at the gates of Orient and in the middle of World War II about to erupt in this part of the world, too. Her husband, Guy, is of working class origin and is driven by a mixture of left-winged political views and romantic ideals. As such he is not capable of facilitating her adaptation to this very new and turbulent environment, since the protagonist is a true Victorian in her upbringing imbued with stereotypes, which she believes have the “trouble” of being true. The inevitable outcome of this melange is that the protagonist cannot take to her heart a people with very loose rules they do not even abide by. Since the trilogy is so blatantly autobiographic it is quite clear that the author herself does not either. And this becomes very plain throughout the entire trilogy.

The main character’s (and Olivia Manning’s) views, as (Percec, 2018) observes are tributary to the British travelogues of the 18th century. As such they put forth stereotypes which are deep-rooted in colonial beliefs, some of which still to be met today. The Balkans are neither friendly nor comprehensible. They may be exotic at times with their questionable odours, strident images and endless fights, as Kaplan (1993) puts it, but they remain by-and-large disgraceful to the civilised world, ever since they put the peace of the entire world in jeopardy with their Sarajevo shooting, as Todorov (2009: 30) aptly observes.

The first British travellers, most of them aristocrats and diplomats, were the ones who became the first authors writing (not very nicely) about Romania. They were met with bad roads strewn with beggars and muggers, strange habits and music, and corrupt rulers. Also worthy of

mention is the Bram Stoker rooted belief in the vampiric nature of Romania, culminating with the sinister dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, who used to drink children's blood aimed at keeping him young (Brînzeu 1997). In short, the picture painted by the British travellers is definitely not a pretty picture of exotic Romania. Olivia Manning continues this tradition and does the same thing

In *The Great Fortune*, the first volume of the trilogy, the newlyweds Harriet and Guy Pringles settle for an indefinite period of time in Bucharest, where Guy is to take a teaching post at the national university. They are faced with a hostile environment. Rumania (as it is named in the book) is a corrupt monarchy gradually but inevitably moving toward Fascism with the local Iron Guard ascending to power while World War II is closing on them. The pro-Western Prime Minister, Armand Călinescu is assassinated and replaced by Take Ionescu, who suppresses the Iron Guard temporarily. As political conditions deteriorate so does their marriage. Harriet's confidence in Guy is in threatened as she cannot understand her husband's single-minded dedication to his work as well his partiality to some Romanians. She craves to start a new life in a different place. She is also faced with the danger of losing her superior moral and social Englishness by having to intermingle with her lessers, such as Prince Yakimov. Though of British citizenship, Yakimov is an operatic tragi-comical figure, an aged citizen-of-the-world-playboy, of mongrel breed, son of White Russian and an Irish mother. Yakimov is an interesting character, not only in general, as he serves as a sort of counterpart to Harriet' insularity and Englishness, but also because it is through his eyes Bucharest, also known as the "Paris of the East", is depicted at a first encounter. With his Hispano-Suiza sports car as his only resource, confiscated for not having paid his debts, Yakimov, destitute and constantly hungry, arrives in Bucharest where he gets lost and spends his last coins on a piece of meat after which falling asleep in the street on a chicken coop. His first encounter experiences to Bucharest and its inhabitants are subject for interpretation in the study presented in this paper. The fragment was also chosen because it sets the scene of the trilogy which focuses on relationships, both between the two protagonists, and their interactions with the other characters they encounter in the different cultural spaces they inhabit temporarily.

3. The study

The study, qualitative in nature, relied on the reactions and opinions stirred by the fragment which, as already explained, was taken from the beginning of the first volume of *The Balkan Trilogy*.

The qualitative research paradigm is notoriously difficult to define, even when it is contrasted with the quantitative one. From simplistic approaches, mainly noting that while quantitative research is represented by numbers and statistics, the qualitative paradigm relies on wordy reports (see, for example Riley, 1996), to attempts to capture its nature on pages on end (see, for example Creswell, 2013), qualitative research has been the object of scrutiny of many theoreticians who tried to capture its allusive and controversial essence. I believe that one of the briefest yet comprehensive definitions to date has been proposed by Denzin & Lincoln (2011).

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos of the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3)

The present endeavour complies with the provisions of the definition above as it resorts to representations through accounts, is interpretive by excellence, it takes place in a natural

environment and it relies on the readers' own frames of mind in natural setting, and most of all, it counts on the meaning they allot the subject under investigation.

As already mentioned, the theoretical framework underlying this endeavour is that of reception. More precisely, it is a reader-oriented theory as it starts from the assumption that the reader of a text is the one that makes the text come alive. Karolides (2000: 5) observes in this line of thought that "without a reader, a text does not come into existence – does not have meaning or invoke feelings and sensations – but instead is just squiggles on a page". More than that, he argues that reader response derives from "the transactional theory of literature" (first proposed by Rosenblatt in 1938 and expanded on in 1978). The "central premise" of this theory, Koralides, argues, is that:

(...) the literary work exists in the transaction between the reader and the text. The term *transaction* during the reading event. It signals the connection between them and the nature of the connection. Transaction denotes a situation of mutuality. During the reading activity, the reader and text mutually act on each other, each affecting and conditioning the other. (Karolides, 2000: 5)

In this way, the reader is promoted to the rank of an equal partner who brings into the process of reading his/her own culture and life experiences.

A recent definition of reception further clarifies the concept by explaining that:

Reception involves looking at texts from the point of view of the readers, viewers, listeners, spectators and audiences who read, watch or listen to cultural productions, interpret them, and respond to them in a myriad of different ways. (Willis, 2018: 10)

In other words, looking into and analysing what people make of a literary text is as important as the text itself. Consequently, this is the very reason why researchers should look for ways and instruments which will enable them to both elicit and account for the way in which a reader or groups of readers interpret a text. It is exactly what this investigation sets out to do.

In a preliminary discussion with the respondents I found out that all were familiar with the trilogy, three had read the trilogy, one of them quite recently. The task was formulated as follows:

Please write below your reactions to the first impression of Bucharest and the Romanian people presented in the fragment above (possible issues to consider: positive/negative, true/untrue, then/now).

The fragment, whose context and content has already been briefly introduced above, was given to six professors of literary studies who agreed to be part of this experiment. Written in the third person narrative voice, the fragment presents Yakimov's (the intriguing and atypical character fleetingly dwelt upon above) perspective upon his first visit to Bucharest.

The resulting accounts were quite varied in length, ranging from 2727 words (the longest) and 210 (the shortest). The qualitative analysis followed the classical steps, as pinned down by Dey in the early nineties (1993) when qualitative data research began to pick up speed and established itself as an independent kind of research not as an appendix to quantitative approaches. Thus he speaks about the following: reading and annotating, creating categories, assigning categories, splitting and splicing, linking data, making connections.

The content analysis of the accounts generated two overarching categories concerning the respondent reactions produced by the reading of the fragment. They are the respondents' reactions to the content of the fragment and those referring to the style. These two categories were subsequently divided into several subcategories discussed as follows.

3.1. Reactions to content

The analysis of the respondents' reactions to the perceptions of the character referring to the places and people of Romania generated a number of subcategories: prevalence of displeasure, prevalent orientalism of the place, validity to date of the character's perceptions, and the peculiar nature of the character himself. I will elaborate on them as follows.

All accounts referred to the completely negative impression given by the perceptions of the character. Two illustrative quotes in this respect have been selected for their saliency.

The labyrinthine impression Bucharest gives visitors coming here for the first time is clearly negative.

The fragment presents a widely negative image not just of various parts of the city of Bucharest (the station, a street market, some streets, the river, a chicken market), but also of the people Yakimov passes by or meets, usually lowlifes (porters, beggar children, a taxi driver, tired clerks, several peasants, and a gypsy)

We are most definitely 'exotic' (without the positive connotations), 'oriental', in a nutshell, the Others. (original capitalisation)

The sarcastic tone of this third quote, is undoubtedly and unmistakably visible. There were, however, positive examples identified by two respondent. These very examples, as the respondents justly observed, are simply used to foreground the negative perceptions and achieve greater impact. One respondent remarked that:

In all this negativity, there may be found two positive things: the fact that the streets are lit (although this should be taken with a pinch of salt because it makes all the ugliness all the more visible), while the fact the "Rumanian" resembles the more highbrow Italian makes communication with locals easier at least at the beginning.

Another respondent observed in the same line of thought that:

Amid the feelings of frustration, desolation, and despair, one positive image shines out like a beacon of hope and civilization, the modern building of the Athéne Palace... Such contrasts are still associated with the more modern Bucharest of these days.

What is more notable in this quote is the observation that to date Athéne Palace is seen by Romanians a symbol of civilization. It is the place of the most famous classical music festival, and a place where cultivated and educated people go to celebrate their adherence to their "western" self.

This quote introduces us to the second subcategory identified in the process of analysis of the accounts as it refers to the validity to date of the perceptions present in the fragment. Mentions referring to this sub category are present in three of the six accounts. They all refer not the entirety of the character's depiction present in the fragment, but to particular aspects, some common, others different, as captured in the following quotes.

Some of the realities back in the 1930s are still an issue, no matter how much most of the ordinary citizens have evolved. There are still beggars in the streets of Bucharest who harass especially foreign tourists but not only.

The respondent who mentioned the presence of Athéne Palace as "a beacon of hope" also observed that the contrast it refers to is still to be seen today by saying:

This opulent image contrasting with the desolate neighborhood is typical of the countries struggling to advance and make progress at the dawn of civilization. Such contrasts are still associated with the more modern Bucharest of these days.

Thus some of the respondents agreed that at least when it comes to the presence of cons, beggars and contrasts, their existence still characterises Romania nowadays. What needs to be highlighted at this point is that even though the instructions for the task suggested a potential true/untrue approach, in only half of the accounts references to this exist. Two respondents provide a possible explanation:

It is hard to label such observations as true or untrue since they belong to a complex imagological projection the author creates.

I am afraid to use the word 'true' when writing about fiction or even travel writing, but whether we like it or not, it is true.

It is quite clear that true/untrue is an ambiguous reference, it can mean true to the reality of the time, true to the stereotypes associated to the Romanian culture and its people, chronologically irrelevant, or who knows what else. It certainly engendered these two kinds of interpretation among my respondents, suggesting that perhaps clearer guidelines should be instated when similar tasks are given.

The final subcategory identified and discussed here refers to the character whose perceptions are instantiated in the fragment. As such three respondents commented on the character, Yakimov himself. The comments referred to two features, his substance, on the one hand, and the attitude to him, on the other. The quotes below illustrate this.

Yakimov is one of the most tragic characters in the novel, not only because, unlike the other westerners, he loses his life in the turmoil of the war..., but also because he is the absolute outsider...For a man who has a childish obsession for food, Bucharest is a paradise.

There is much irony in the text, even though we see everything from Yakimov's perspective/angle, we do feel the author's irony (and I am not only referring to Bucharest and its' people, not to Yakimov himself.)

These quotes also put forward two opposite attitudes that the character stirs: directly stirred empathy in the case of one respondent, and two cases of respondent mediated perception of the ironical attitude of the author. The inconsistency and ambiguous nature of "poor Yaki" is thus reinforced.

3.2 Reactions to style

I loved the description of the city, its people, its smells, the contrasts, the dialogues (...)

It is interesting that the fragment focuses a lot on the sensory experiences of the character newly arrived in Bucharest.

Rancid odours, oily smells of cooking, and 'hissing fog' fill the air, thus creating the sensation of an uninviting and unfriendly place.

These three quotes illustrate the second category of the data driven category system identified in the process of analysis: the reactions my respondent had towards the style of the fragment. In all but one of the accounts there appear mentions concerning the descriptive nature of the fragment, with appeal to senses employed by the author when presenting Bucharest and its inhabitants' in Yakimov's perspective. Prevalent, however, are those appealing to the sense of smell, observe my respondents. They also reacted to the all-encompassing, yet detailed attention paid to the elements which make up the image of the city.

The fragment presents a widely negative image not just of various parts of the city of Bucharest (the station, a street market, some streets, the river, a chicken market, but also the people Yakimov passes by or meets, usually lowlifes: porters, beggar children, a taxi driver, tired clerks, several peasants and a gypsy).

As could be seen, the analysis of the six open-ended accounts written by my expert respondents showed that the general impression of 1930s Bucharest, is one of “poverty”, of a city “trying to be European but always failing”, a “labyrinth impression (...) clearly negative” and whose exploration becomes “a dangerous journey”. What is more, their reactions to stereotypes, like the ones instantiated in the fragment they had to comment on, proved dissimilar to those obtained from the student respondents.

The endnote to follow will summarise the most important findings of the endeavour discussed in this paper

4. Conclusions

If the student survey mentioned at the beginning of this paper indicated a sort of denial phase the majority of the student-respondents seemed to have experienced when completing the Likert scale based questionnaire containing stereotypical quotes from the novel, most likely due to national pride, the qualitative study painted a divergent picture. It is a picture that observes more closely the reality of the time and even that of today’s Romania. In a sense, this was to be expected considering the difference in profile of the two types of respondents. The six respondents of the complementary qualitative study discussed in this paper were definitely more mature, more knowledgeable, and less prone to idealistic and nationalistic views on the culture they belong to. Additionally, their expertise in literary studies undoubtedly had its part to pay in the way in the way they reacted to the fragment they were asked to discuss.

Three noteworthy aspects have to be highlighted at this point. The first is the similar nature of their readings. Not only did they all mention the oppressive atmosphere created by the author by taking on board the perspective of the eccentric British character, but also the manner in which it was stylistically achieved (i.e. the appeal to sense, mostly to that of smell). This “common” reading is in line with what Patil (2018) argues:

While reader-response criticism rejects the notion that there can be a single, correct reading of a literary text, it doesn’t consider all readings permissible. Each texts creates limits to its possible interpretations. (Patil, 2018:4)

Though far from attempting to generalise this finding, some implications are to be considered. One is the need to explore the cognitive processes of a reader in order to find out how they inform the interpretation of a text and thus look into why and how this is limited by the text itself. On the other hand it might be equally interesting to go deeper into the way in which a reader’s profile lead to similar interpretations and reactions to a literary text.

The second aspect to be noted is the fact that all my respondents agree that Romania’s capital, Bucharest, was and still remains at the crossroads of the occident and orient, at the margins of civilized Europe, displaying signs that a European traveller from the centre might find disturbing. As such, one can further argue that nothing much has changed in the last and present century, even though Romania is geographically part of the European Union and also claims it pertains to it in spirit and culture. Obviously much more research into this issue is needed to argue in favour of its validity.

The third main aspect which emerged from the analysis of the accounts is that the problem with stereotypes, as the author Olivia Manning through her narrative voice argues, is that they do tend to be true. The finding that most of the respondents, at least when it comes to a number of stereotypes instantiated in the fragment, found them to still be true to date stands proof that the author’s rather cynical and not-at-all politically correct observation might be valid.

Once again, a lot more research is needed in this area in order to ascertain that stereotypical thinking is indeed a cognitive strategy.

All in all, the qualitative enterprise encapsulated in this paper turned out to be as worthy and rewarding as I expected it to be. It helped to the rounding up of an insight into stereotypical thinking and the way in which stereotypes travel and endure through time and space. It also pointed to the fact that, whether we like it or not, people will continue to appeal to stereotypes when making sense of unfamiliar worlds, fictional and non-fictional at that.

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Appendix

The fragment

On reaching the main station at Bucharest, Yakimov carried his luggage to the luggage office. He held a suitcase in each hand and his crocodile dressing-case hoisted up under his right elbow. His sable-lined greatcoat hung from his left arm. The porters – there were about a dozen to each passenger – followed him aghast. He might have been mobbed had not his vague, gentle gaze, ranging over their heads from his unusual height, given the impression he was out of reach.

When the dressing-case slipped, one of the porters snatched at it. Yakimov dodged him with a skilled sidestep, then wandered on, his shoulders drooping, his coat sweeping the dirty platform, his check suit and yellow cardigan sagging and fluttering as though carried on a coat-hanger. His shirt, changed on the train, was clean. His other clothes were not. His tie, bought for him years before by Dollie, who had admired its 'angelic blue', was now so blotched and beyellowed by spilt food, it was no colour at all. His head, with its thin, pale hair, its nose that, long and delicate, widened suddenly at the nostrils, its thin clown's mouth, was remote and mild as the head of a giraffe. On top of it he wore a shabby check cap. His whole sad aspect was made sadder by the fact that he had not eaten for forty-eight hours.

He deposited the two suitcases. The crocodile case, that held, among his unwashed nightwear, a British passport and a receipt for his Hispano-Suiza, he kept with him. When the car had been impounded for debt by the Yugoslav officials at the frontier, he had had on him just enough to buy a third class ticket to Bucharest. This purchase left him with a few pieces of small change.

He emerged from the station into the confusion of a street market where flares were being lit in the first fall of twilight. He had shaken off the porters. Beggars now crowded about him. Feeling in the air the first freshness of autumn, he decided to wear rather than carry his coat. Holding his case out of reach of the ragged children round his knees, he managed to shuffle first one arm and then the other into the coat.

He looked about him. Hounded (his own word) out of one capital after another, he had now reached the edge of Europe, a region in which he already smelt the Orient. Each time he arrived at a new capital, he made for the British Legation, where he usually found some figure from his past. Here, he had heard, the Cultural Attaché was known to him; was, indeed, indebted, having come to one of those opulent parties Dollie and he had given in the old days. It occurred to him that if he drove to the Legation in a taxi, Dobson might pay for it. But if Dobson had been posted and there was no one willing to pay, he would be at the mercy of the taxi-driver. For the first time in his life he hesitated to take a risk.

Standing amid the babble of beggars, his coat hanging like a belltent from the apex of his neck, he sighed to himself and thought: 'Your poor old Yaki's not the boy he was.'

Seeing him there, one driver threw open the door of his cab. Yakimov shook his head. In Italian, a language he had been told was the same as Rumanian, he asked to be directed to the British Legation. The driver waved him to get in.

When Yakimov shook his head a second time, the man gave a snarl of disgust and began to pick his teeth.

Yakimov persisted: '*La legazione britannica, per piacere?*'

To get rid of him, the man flicked a hand over his shoulder.

'*Grazie tanto*, dear boy.' Gathering his coat about him, Yakimov turned and followed a street that seemed a tunnel into desolation.

The light was failing. He was beginning to doubt his direction when, at a junction of roads, it seemed confirmed by a statue, in boyar's robes, wearing a turban the size of a pumpkin, that pointed him dramatically to the right.

Here the city had come to life again. The pavements were crowded with small men, all much alike in shabby city clothes, each carrying a brief-case. Yakimov recognised them for what they were; minor government officials and poor clerks, a generation struggling out of the peasantry, at work from eight in the morning until eight at night, now hurrying home to supper. In his hunger, he envied them. A tramway car stopped at the kerb. As the crowd pressed past him, he was buffeted mercilessly from side to side, but maintained his course, his head and shoulders rising above the surge with an appearance of unconcern.

He stopped at a window displaying jars of a jam-like substance that held in suspension transparent peaches and apricots. The light shone through them. This golden, sugared fruit, glowing through the chill blue twilight, brought a tear to his eye. He was pushed on roughly by a woman using a shopping basket as a weapon.

He crossed the road junction. Tramway cars, hung with passengers like swarming bees, clanged and shrilled upon him. He reached the other side. Here as he followed a down-sloping road, the crowd thinned and changed. He passed peasants in their country dress of whitish frieze, thin men, lethargic, downstaring, beneath pointed astrakhan caps, and Orthodox Jews with ringlets hanging on either side of greenish, indoor faces.

A wind, blowing up towards Yakimov, brought a rancid odour that settled in his throat like the first intimations of sea-sickness. He began to feel worried. These small shops did not promise the approach of the British Legation. The street divided into smaller streets. Keeping to the widest of them, Yakimov saw in every window the minutiae of the tailoring trade – horse-hair, buckram, braid, ready-made pockets, clips, waistcoat buckles, cards of buttons, reels of cotton, rolls of lining. Who on earth wanted all this stuff? In search of even the sight of food, he turned into a passage-way where the stench of the district was muffled for a space by the odour of steam-heated cloth. Here, in gaslit rooms no bigger than cupboards, moving behind bleared windows like sea creatures in tanks, coatless men thumped their irons and filled the air with hissing fog. The passage ended in a little box of a square so congested with basket-work that the creepers swathed about the balconies seemed to sprout from the wicker jungle below. A man leaning against the single lamp-post straightened himself, threw away his cigarette and began talking to Yakimov, pointing to bassinets, dress-baskets and bird-cages.

Yakimov enquired for the British Legation. For reply the man hauled out a dozen shopping-baskets tied with string and started to untie them. Yakimov slipped away down another passage that brought him, abruptly, to the quayside of a river. This was more hopeful. A river usually indicated a city's centre, but when he went to the single rusted rail that edged the quay, he looked down on a wretched soapy-coloured stream trickling between steep, raw banks of clay. On either bank stood houses of a dilapidated elegance. Here and there he saw windows masked with the harem grilles of the receded Ottoman Empire. A little paint still clung to the plaster, showing, where touched by the street lights, pallid grey or a red the colour of dried blood.

On Yakimov's side of the river, the ground floors had been converted into shops and cafés. China lettering on windows said 'Restaurantul' and 'Cafea'. At the first doorway, where the bead curtain was looped up to invite entry, he endured the sight of a man sucking-in soup from a bowl – onion soup. Strings of melted cheese hung from the spoon, a pollen of cheese and broken toast lay on the soup's surface.

He moved on. The interiors were full of speckled mirrors, rough chairs, and tables with dirty paper covers. An oily smell of cooking came from them. Again he was conscious that he had changed. In the past, often enough, he had

eaten his fill, then somehow explained away his inability to pay. In different parts of the town, he might still attempt it: here he was afraid.

As he sidled from doorway to doorway, there suddenly came to him the rich scent of roasting meat. Saliva sprang into his mouth. He was drawn towards the scent, which came from a brazier where a peasant was cooking small pads of meat. The peasant customers, lit by a single flare, stood at a respectful distance, staring at the meat or occasionally turning to look at each other in a nervous, unsmiling intensity of anticipation. The cook seemed conscious of his superior position. He offered the meat with an air of bestowing it. He whose turn it was glanced about uncertainly before taking it and, when he had paid with a small coin, slipped away to eat in the shadows, alone.

After Yakimov had watched this exchange take place half a dozen times, he took the coins from his pocket and spread them on his palm. They comprised of a few *lire*, *filler* and *para*. The cook, to whom he presented them, examined them closely then picked out the largest of the Hungarian coins. He handed Yakimov a piece of meat. Like the others, Yakimov went aside to eat. The savour unbalanced him. He swallowed too quickly. For an ecstatic moment the meat was there, then it was gone. Nothing remained but a taste lingering about his neglected teeth, so honey-sweet it gave him heart to ask his way again.

He returned to the brazier and spoke to a peasant who looked a little more alert than the others. The man did not answer or meet his eyes but, hanging his head, glanced from side to side as though at a loss to account for the noise he heard. A little dark gypsy of a fellow came bustling up and, pushing the peasant contemptuously aside, asked in English: 'What is it you are wanting?'

'I am looking for the British Legation.'

'Not here. Not anywhere here.'

'But where?'

'A long way. It is necessary to find a conveyance.'

'Tell me the way. I can walk.'

'No, no. Too far. Too difficult.' Dropping Yakimov abruptly, the gypsy went across to the other side of the brazier, where he stood looking resentfully across at him.

Yakimov was growing tired. His coat hung hot and heavy on his shoulders. He wondered if he could find some sort of lodging for the night, making his usual promise to pay next day.

As he went on, the quayside widened into an open cobbled space where a gritty wind sprang up and blew feathers into his face. On the further side, near a main road, stood several crates packed with live fowl. This, he realised, was a chicken market, the source of the pervading stench.

He crossed to the crates and took down one so that the others formed a seat. He sat protected by the crates behind him. The hens, stringy Balkan birds, stirred and cackled a while, then slept again. From somewhere in the market a clock struck nine. He had been wandering about for two hours or more. He sighed. His fragile body had become too heavy to move. Wedging his case out of sight between the crates, he drew up his feet, put down his head and slept.

When awakened by the long scream of a braking car, he murmured: 'Unholy hour, dear boy', and tried to turn round. His knees struck the wire of the coop behind him. The cramp in his limbs forced him to full consciousness. He scrambled up to see what vehicles could be passing, so erratically and in such profusion when it was barely daylight. He saw a procession of mud-caked lorries swerving and swaying on the crown of the road. One lorry dipped towards the kerb, causing him to jump back in alarm. As it straightened and went on, he gazed after it, shocked, the more so because he himself drove with inspired skill. Behind the lorries came a string of private cars – a seemingly endless string: all the same mud-grey, all oddly swollen in shape, the result, Yakimov realised, of their being padded top and sides with mattresses. The windscreens were cracked. The bonnets and wings were pockmarked. Inside the cars, the passengers – men, women and children – lay about, abandoned in sleep. The drivers nodded over the steering-wheels.

Who could they be? Where had they come from? Aching, famished, racked by the light of this unfamiliar hour, Yakimov did not try to answer his questions.

But the destination of the cars? Looking where they were heading, he saw tall, concrete buildings evolving pearly out of the pinks and blues of dawn. Beacons of civilisation. He followed the road towards them.

After walking a couple of miles, he reached the main square as the sun, rising above the roof-tops, flecked the cobblestones. A statue, heavily planted on a horse too big for it, saluted the long, grey front of what must be the royal palace. At either end of the palace workmen had started screwing pieces of prefabricated classical façade on to scaffolding. The rest of the square was, apparently, being demolished. He crossed to the sunlit side where a white, modern building proclaimed itself the Athénée Palace Hotel. Here the leading cars had come to rest. Only a few of the occupants had roused themselves. The rest slept on, their faces ashen and grim. Some of them had roughly bandaged wounds. In one car, Yakimov noticed, the grey upholstery was soaked with blood.

He pushed through the hotel's revolving door into a marble hall lit brilliantly with glass chandeliers. As he entered, his name was called aloud: '*Yakimov!*' He started back. He had not received this sort of welcome for many a day. He was the more suspicious when he saw it came from a journalist called McCann, who when they met in the bars of Budapest had usually turned his back. McCann was propped up on a long sofa just inside the vestibule, while a man in a black suit was cutting away the blood-soaked shirt-sleeve which stuck to his right arm.

Yakimov felt enough concern to approach the sofa and ask: 'What has happened, dear boy? Can I do anything to help?'

'You certainly can. For the last half-hour I've been telling these dumb clucks to find me a bloke who can speak English.'

Note on the authors

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