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**“SELF-OBSSESSED AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE.”
RE-MEMBERING (POST)COMMUNIST TRAUMAS IN
THE AMERICAN IMAGINARY¹**

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Abstract: *Engaging scholarship pointing to the neocolonial patterns of perception built into East-West relations before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain, as well as compelling questions pertaining to the quasi-colonial status of the countries beyond the Iron Curtain vis-à-vis the Soviet Empire, this paper will focus on the manner in which (post)communist identity in fact forms at the intersection of these sometimes competing, sometimes complementary scenarios of power. Moreover, drawing on Caruth's and Tal's work, this paper will suggest ways in which the discourse developed in the field of Trauma Studies holds explanatory and potentially reconciliatory power, as it enables the audience to voice the series of missed or misunderstood encounters that are so often at the buried origin of disturbing memories/memoirs of Eastern Europe (or Romania) in Western (or American) discourse, thus pointing out ways in which interpretative tropes developed in Trauma Studies can be explanatory paradigms that shed light on both (post)communist and Balkan identity discourse. More particularly, invoking a series of early writings on postcommunist identity as well as critical inquiries into Balkanizing or Orientalizing discourse, this paper will explore how one can trace the transformation of individual encounters with (post)communist trauma into collective and then historical memory by borrowing from the field of Trauma Studies the analysis of mechanisms of repetition hovering around the site of trauma.*

As an overture to the complex node of memories, traumas, (post)communist and (post)colonial identities that, this paper argues, permeate Romanian cultural memory from transatlantic perspectives, an episode from Petru Popescu's *The Return* illustrates in a particularly salient way the manner in which identity-shaping episodes are embroiled with a multivalent power play replete with compulsions to repeat, pointing to a hidden original hurt. Engaging both scholarship pointing to the neocolonial patterns of perception built into East-West relations before and after the

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fall of the Iron Curtain (Todorova, Goldsworthy), as well as compelling questions pertaining to the quasi-colonial status of the countries beyond the Iron Curtain vis-à-vis the Soviet Empire (Mihăilă, Ștefănescu), this paper will focus on the manner in which (post)communist identity in fact forms at the intersection of these sometimes competing, sometimes complementary scenarios of power. Moreover, drawing on Caruth's and Tal's work, this paper will suggest ways in which the discourse developed in the field of Trauma Studies holds explanatory and potentially reconciliatory power, as it enables the audience to voice the series of missed or misunderstood encounters that are so often at the buried origin of disturbing memories/memoirs of Eastern Europe (or Romania) in Western (or American) discourse, thus pointing out ways in which interpretative tropes developed in Trauma Studies can be explanatory paradigms that shed light on both (post)communist and Balkan identity discourse.

Romanian-American writer, director and film producer Petru Popescu memorializes the formation of his own identity as a (Romanian) writer in his reconstruction of a communist Romanian past, permanently brought forward to dialogue with a postcommunist present he is voicing for his American audiences. More specifically, Popescu recalls occasions when the Romanian Writers' Union hosted American writers, and his memory zooms in on W.D. Snodgrass's visit, remembered through a stance that was hybrid in an almost humbly literal manner: that of the English-Romanian translator, belonging both to his native country and to what he describes as the "large planet" that ignored its existence (Popescu 136). Popescu was thus able to see Romania through Snodgrass's eyes, "quaint, tragic, self-obsessed, and incomprehensible" (Popescu 136), but also saw Snodgrass become aware of a more violent traumatic undercurrent traversing the conversation: "Mr. Snodgrass began to realize that there was some serious existential despair going on behind the pseudo-literary chat" (Popescu 137). The potential "moment of truth," however, passes quickly, with Snodgrass's question about Solzhenitsyn, and Popescu's retort to the effect that "black-and-white moral demarcations were already obsolete" (Popescu 138). Popescu, it might in addition be argued, also maps out what Ștefănescu for example has repeatedly shown to be a colonial relationship between the ex-communist states and the Soviet Empire when the writer muses that Americans had interest in the Soviet gulags, but no such interest for the less visible gulags of the "satellite states" (Popescu 138). The entire episode closes in Popescu's memory with the mapping of another colonial cartography, in which Eastern Europe in general, and Romania in particular, pertain to a geography projected by a Western imagination, borrowing Goldsworthy's argument. Thus Popescu asks bitterly: "Why was [Snodgrass], who had no such dilemmas, so important? What made him so meaningful, why was he sitting there surrounded by us all, like a prophet? The answer was crudely simple. Because he was from America, and wrote in English" (Popescu 138). What might be called the subaltern status of the East European under the Western gaze is fully fleshed out in a series of quasi-colonial encounters remembered by Popescu - "I'd met my share of Americans of the if-it's-Tuesday-it-must-be-Romania variety" (Popescu 138) - and the episodic encounter

with Snodgrass is inscribed into a longer list including William Saroyan, John Updike, Erskine Caldwell, Leslie Fiedler.

While strategies of representation and power configurations are certainly central to the discussion of Eastern European and more particularly Romanian identity as construed by Anglo-American discourse, as reputed scholars have shown,² one might argue that a cornerstone of this identity is frequently voiced as the memorialization of the communist trauma, just as Popescu's Snodgrass perceives the "tragic, self-obsessed" country of despair remembered after the missed encounter with the moment of truth. More particularly, invoking a series of early writings on postcommunist identity as well as critical inquiries into Balkanizing or Orientalizing discourse, this paper will explore how one can trace the transformation of individual encounters with (post)communist trauma (or Snodgrass's intimation of desperation) into collective and then historical memory by borrowing from the field of Trauma Studies the analysis of mechanisms of repetition hovering around the site of trauma.

Re-Membering (Post)Communism

In their studies dedicated to the term postcommunism in the period immediately following the changes in 1989 in Eastern Europe, researchers tried to consider the historical, social, political and economic implications of the new configuration, thus also charting the notion of postcommunist identity as well as its possible intersections with other types of contemporary manifestations, in particular with postmodern and postcolonial constructions. Most of these works are marked by a local-global dialectic, and they start from the attempt to comprehend an experience that is specific to Eastern Europe/the Balkans and, at the same time, they address the manner in which this experience is positioned with regard to the global model, seen both as a benchmark to define this experience, but also analyzed in view of the changes brought to it by this experience.

An indisputable point of reference in the social, economical and political analysis of postcommunism is Fukuyama's vision in which the end of communist regimes in Eastern Europe is seen as an "end of history" and as a victory of liberalism in *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama's perspective places the postcommunist period in an age marked by the end of ideology. Thus, Fukuyama contends, "We are witnessing the end of history" - that is, "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 4). The celebratory tone of Fukuyama's writing certainly performs cultural work advancing the Occidental paradigm, naturalizing the clash of political systems as a competition between ideology and democracy and speaking of "the unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism" (Fukuyama 6). This view of progress is, in this sense, a landmark of what Venn understands as being-West, explaining how Occidentalism thus "relates to the process of the becoming-West of Europe and the

² This field is pioneered and developed by the work of Goldsworthy, Todorova, Wolff, Hammond.

becoming-modern of the world” (Venn 8). Moreover, the view of the end of history as a tale of Western triumph over Eastern enslavement eschews the documented historical complications of the period of appeasement, for example, between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.,³ furthering, in this sense, a powerful Occidentalistic discourse that inscribes postcommunism in a celebratory present, reiterating the Western project of modernity. As Venn shows, “Occidentalism refers at once to the space of intelligibility of a triumphalist modernity and to the genealogy of the present as a history of the transformations that have in the course of time instituted the forms of sociality and the lifeworlds that inscribe Occidentalism” (Venn 8). Communist memory, in this scenario, seems to be a pointless backward-looking exercise.

A similar note with Fukuyama’s, one might argue, rings in the approach adopted by Michael Mandelbaum, editor of *Post-communism. Four Perspectives*, representative of a stance that is dominant in analyses of the postcommunist phenomenon, namely the attempt to circumscribe postcommunism in social, political and economic terms. In his introductory piece, Mandelbaum synthesizes a key aspect of this field of study and interestingly also privileges the present as a new period of history. Forms of memorializing thus appear to be triggers for returning to a past that is no longer relevant: “The term “postcommunism” is backward-looking. It implies a world defined by what it used to be but no longer is” (Mandelbaum 1). At the same time, in Mandelbaum’s understanding, postcommunism means a forward-looking orientation that draws together the radically different social, political, economic and cultural heritages of the countries marked by this moment. It is very significant that Mandelbaum draws attention to the pervasiveness of the Western paradigm, which, in light of Venn’s approach, might be read as a paradigm of becoming-West: “The goal is, figuratively, the West: they are presumed to have embarked on a journey from totalitarianism to democratic politics and free market economics” (Mandelbaum 2). The volume thus aims to explain and analyze the transition of postcommunist countries in view of this double perspective: backward-looking, and, one might add, foregrounding a memory that returns compulsively to the experience of communism, and forward-looking, tending towards a “West” mentally constructed so as to include democratic structures and a market economy. Interestingly, in this geography, Romania is situated in a privileged space, a “West” in itself of postcommunist Europe.

Another study that is essential in understanding the early analyses of the configuration of the postcommunist world is Richard Sakwa’s *Postcommunism*. Sakwa reads postcommunism from the perspective of a “short” 20th century

³ The complex strategies of communication developed by the U.S. towards the Soviet block during the Cold War is a separate topic of study. It is important to mention, however, that analyses dealing for example with the sometimes contorted U.S. public diplomacy strategies reflected in difficult decisions about what were traditionally regarded as Cold War propaganda instruments – Radio Free Europe and Voice of America – draw attention to frequent conflicts of interest between support for the radios as instruments of sabotaging the closed Soviet world and strategies to build a form of entente with the Soviet Union – see, for example, Puddington, Critchlow, Fulbright.

stretching between 1914 and 1989, dominated by competing ideologies crystallized in the Cold War. As a period immediately following suit, postcommunism is thus

a term that is not restricted to countries where regimes once proclaimed themselves on the road to communism but one that has universal significance. It defines an epoch that claims to have moved beyond the ‘extremism’ of ideological politics and its associated ‘metanarratives’ towards a more open and ‘discursive’ set of politics. (Sakwa 1)

In this sense, Sakwa is interested in looking at the global configuration of the post 1989 situation, showing an awareness of the interconnectedness of East-West positions, thus moving beyond the Occidentalist approach: postcommunism is used to refer to the 27 countries in Eurasia that were once communist, but also reflects on the “global post-socialist epoch inaugurated by the fall of the state socialist regimes in 1989-91” (Sakwa 3). This perspective calls for a profound analysis of the local-global dialectics, as implied by Sakwa’s challenge: “we are all post-communists now” (Sakwa 3), perhaps also suggesting the manner in which communism is a common memory – if not heritage or trauma – to be shared on a global scene.

Postcommunist Identity Constructs

Of special interest for the investigation of the representation of (post)communist trauma in critical discourse is the analysis of cultural identity in postcommunism. Two early works of reference in this field are the collections of essays edited by Michael D. Kennedy, which lay the foundations, one might argue, for “postcommunist cultural studies”. Thus in *Envisioning Eastern Europe. Postcommunist Cultural Studies*, Kennedy’s introductory piece sketches a new field of investigation that would place the stress more on the multiple valences of postcommunist identity and less on the imposition or adoption of models for change which, in the end, remain mere models that are sometimes poorly suited to complex realities. Thus, Kennedy argues, “Much social scientific literature on this period assumes a fundamental political and economic distinction between what was and what is to come” (Kennedy, *Envisioning Eastern Europe* 2). Moreover, “these ideational oppositions are transposed onto the countries formerly ruled by communists to highlight their basic similarities under that rule and distinguish their various routes out of, or distances from, communism” (Kennedy, *Envisioning Eastern Europe* 2). In this context, Kennedy envisions “postcommunist cultural studies” as a way in which to complement what one might call a prescriptive approach with a descriptive approach that is more adequate to the complexities encountered in Eastern European countries, giving due credit to the operative function of communist memory and trauma merged with present directions. This perspective is reflected in the whole collection, where “the *contents* of visions and the *formations* of identity are more important than their putative conditions or causes” (Kennedy, *Envisioning Eastern Europe* 8). Moreover, this perspective even determines a new and nuanced interpretation of the much-vaunted term “democracy”, almost inevitably associated with postcommunism, thus moving away

from earlier Occidentalist discourses pointing to an inevitable, and desirable, becoming-West as a step in a process of evolution, the purpose of Kennedy's approach thus being to open up ideologies and discourses that structure the social sphere to a multitude of interpretations: "Democracy is often conceived of as a phenomenon with certain fixed elements, including civil rights and multiparty democracy. But one might also imagine it as an ideological element defined by its relationship with other ideological elements" (Kennedy, *Envisioning Eastern Europe* 30-31).

This approach is also encountered in Kennedy's subsequent *Cultural Formations of Postcommunism*, which is inevitably marked by the global configurations of the post-9/11 world. Here, the object of study is the culture of transition in postcommunist countries, and preference is given to this term for its dynamism. In addition, the culture of transition denotes a culture of mobilization that is change-oriented and looks both backwards, at inevitable communist memory, as well as forwards, towards new cultural constructions. In a context in which, Kennedy argues, in the current global configuration, postcommunist experience loses its difference, to a great extent, as the "enemy" is the terrorist rather than the communist, the reconfiguration of the meaning of the term postcommunist can offer a significant perspective. Returning to the power perspectives invoked earlier to understand these interpretations, it is not necessarily that the power play has come to an end, or that the Occidentalist discourse has reached its end, but rather that the sphere of Occident has grown to include what, by comparison, is more Western, bringing into focus another West-East conflict foregrounded by the fight against terror, recalling into discussion the civilization-based world order discussed in Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, in particular the plea for the consolidation of the Western paradigm in American identity as well as the insistence on the need to accept the "multicivilizational character" of global politics (Huntington 21). Kennedy's perspective is captured by the term "cultural formation," a term borrowed from Raymond Williams and considered more relevant to current global configurations. Thus, Kennedy shows, "cultural formation" means a complex of meanings and values including sociology and daily life, not only values that are explicitly expressed. Thus, the culture of transition is understood as a "cultural formation" comprising diverging experiences such as emancipation and a civil society, the culture as well as the poverty of transition, all these coming together in a much more volatile post-communist identity.

A provocatively different approach is that taken by Meštrovići, who associates postcommunism with the collapse of what one might call Western, Occidentalizing paradigms. Arguably a book written also as an angry intellectual reaction against the often disparaging Western response to the wars in ex-Yugoslavia,⁴ *The Balkanization of the West* argues that the Balkan peninsula and the wars in ex-Yugoslavia exemplify Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality, with the spectacle overriding ethical or political implications, a fact also noted by Hammond

⁴ This historical trigger is openly assumed by other scholars in the field, for example Todorova and Goldsworthy.

in his later investigation *The Debated Lands* and in particular the chapter on “The Return to Denigration.” Moreover, Meštrovići conflates postcommunism and postmodernism by showing that the chaos of the postcommunist world, which culminated in the tragedy of the wars in ex-Yugoslavia, is echoed by the postmodern chaos of the Western world, thus “balkanized.” This balkanization of the West is shown, in particular, in the failure to adequately deal with the crisis in ex-Yugoslavia, and it indicates, according to Meštrovići, the definite end of the grand narratives of the Enlightenment. In this sense, returning to the concerns of this paper, rather than situate postcommunism in the post-traumatic time of the end of history, like Fukuyama and his school, Meštrovići insists on the ways in which the Balkan wars are a trauma the West shuns away from and relegates to a remote part of Europe, avoiding to confront the undoing of its own Western paradigms and refusing to contemplate its own powerlessness.⁵ In spite of the historically-determined fuel of his book, Meštrovići’s tone rings prophetic in view of the questions arising about Western paradigms in the wake of the 9/11 trauma,⁶ and anticipates more recent nuanced discussions about the (postmodern) entanglements of rhetorical constructions in postcommunist and diasporic/exilic spaces (Marin).

Origins of Misremembering

If some critics have focused on the volatility of (post)communist and Balkan identity, others have warned against the processes through which “realistic” (read journalistic/fictional) representations of Eastern Europe in fact are based on literary archetypes and fantastic scenarios inspired from a Ruritania-like imagination in which the Balkans are a frozen image. Thus Todorova analyzes “frozen” images of the Balkans transmitted through clichés which have mediated perception throughout the ages,⁷ while Goldsworthy, arguing that “[o]ur political

⁵ Meštrovići goes on: “Consider the definition of Balkanization as the breaking up of a unit into increasingly smaller units that are hostile to each other. There is no good reason to understand Balkanization literally, as something that must apply only to the Balkans” (ix).

⁶ See, for example Parillo’s *Diversity in America*, or the collection *American Multiculturalism After 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*.

⁷ The result of this type of investigation into Balkan identity is, as Todorova shows, the revelation of the all-pervasiveness of the Balkan stereotype, dangerous and traumatic because it is raised to the level of philosophy: “If one were to make more of the frozen image of the Balkans than merely define it as the product of casual, dismissive, or hectoring journalism, one could argue that this image is more than a stereotype. It appears as a higher reality, the reflection of the phenomenal world, its essence and true nature, the “noumenon” to the “phenomenon,” to use the Kantian distinction. None of the politicians, journalists, or writers who have specialized in passing strictures on the Balkans have ever made a claim for a philosophical basis of their argument, yet this is what they have achieved. The frozen image of the Balkans, set in its general parameters around World War I, has been reproduced almost without variation over the next decades and operates as a discourse” (Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* 184). In addition, it has been noted by many critics and readers that contemporary representations of the Balkans in media such as journalism, are filled with essentializing comments – see Goldsworthy, Hammond. In fact, it seems that the representations of the Balkans are a challenge to postmodern notions such as the constructed

imagination, after all, feeds off much of the same archetypes as literature” (Goldsworthy 212) shows how 20th century explanatory paradigms for the Balkans employ literary images which are dangerously granted truth value.

Critics who investigate the origin of this Western identity divided against itself, of which the most violent manifestations are the representations analysed by Todorova or Goldsworthy, find it necessary to look for a first scene of representational violence. For example, Wolff looks for what can be termed the origin for the Balkan trauma in the 18th century when Europe, he argues, was first divided into East and West, with the Iron Curtain reenacting a previous mental divide, repeated in turn by a series of profoundly disturbing representations and manifestations persisting over contemporary representations: “The iron curtain is gone, and yet the shadow persists. The shadow persists, because the idea of Eastern Europe remains, even without the Iron Curtain” (Wolff 3). In fact, shows Wolff, “Eastern Europe is a cultural construction, an intellectual invention, of the Enlightenment” (Wolff 356), and he sets out to show the extent to which Eastern Europe – as well as the notion of a divided Europe – “was produced as a work of cultural creation, of intellectual artifice, of ideological self-interest and self-promotion” (Wolff 4) for the purpose of constructing a meaningful identity for the counterpart identity, Western Europe.

In turn, in the introductory piece of *Balkan Identities. Nation and Memory*, Todorova readdresses the link between identity and memory in the Balkans, where both notions have been strongly exploited and manipulated. Moreover, Todorova draws on Pierre Nora to argue that memory and identity have passed from *milieux de mémoire* to *lieux de mémoire*, from a social, collective, naturalized memory to a memory fixed in external locations, employing a mechanical manner of keeping memory alive. In this context, the issue of East European identity is formulated in terms of a historical heritage defined by communist-socialist experience – or, one might add, communist-socialist traumas yet to be healed. Thus, as Eastern Europe slowly disappears in the context of European integration, attitudes inside and outside take longer to change. Hence the need to understand Eastern European heritages and, in particular, hence the need to understand them in their historicity and simultaneity, without reifying or transforming them into perennial values, and

nature of categories like nationality, race, patriotism. Hammond ascribes this fascination with Balkan difference as a response to postmodern boredom, arguing that the current return to denigration is the result of a postmodern alienating consciousness that imposes this alienation on its object of reading. He speaks, thus, of the end of ideology and of a “disbelief in the legitimizing narratives of consumer capitalism” (Hammond 231). Moreover, he states that the development of “postmodern scepticism” impacts the way other cultures are constructed: “On the one hand, the loss of faith in the grand narrative has undermined one half of the traditional binary, writers now discrediting the self-idealisation against which the iniquity of the foreign was once gauged. On the other hand, a large number of writers have continued to deny worth to foreign cultures” (232), one reason being not the escape from modernity sought by early twentieth-century travelers who romanticized the Balkans, but the desire to seek relief from the “boredom of the post-modern” (Hammond 232).

Todorova's work is a key contribution in this respect.⁸ To this effect, Todorova's discussion employs the terms collective memory and historical memory, as well as the post-Bergsonian consensus that "the first represents lived experience, while the second is concerned with the preservation of lived experience" (Todorova, *Balkan Identities* 4). The missed origin, we might add, of the frozen Balkans is read as individual memory which has already become a repository of collective memory, and in turn this is transformed, imperceptibly, into historical memory, especially in view of Todorova's discussion of Susan Crane and the vision of a collective memory elusively located in individuals (Todorova, *Balkan Identities* 6).

Another origin for violent representations of the Balkans is identified in the discourse-producers themselves, as Todorova speaks about the manner in which description spirals back to the observer, revealing attributes pertaining to the latter:

The obvious conclusion should not be about comparative barbarity and double standards in judging events in the West and in the Balkans. This is taken for granted. The conclusion should be that the categories of rationality and irrationality are not implicit in the object of study. They vest with the eye of the beholder and they become characteristics not of the mentality of the region but of the mentality of the observer. (Todorova, *Balkan Identities* 9)

In fact, this point is one which has drawn the attention of a series of critics, and the manner in which description in fact is based not in the object described, but in the observer's experience, is also the subject of Goldsworthy's comments (although they do not form the main part of her argument) as well as the subject of other investigations.⁹ Interestingly, Hammond, in his reading of American and British travel writing, also considers the extent to which representing the Balkans attests to a complementary process of self-definition. Looking at political rhetoric and the "construction of the Balkans as "civilisational other"" in accounts of post-communism (Hammond 231), Hammond argues for a link with postmodern subjectivity:

While acknowledging problems within the region itself, I shall be sourcing contemporary denigration in the breakdown of these discourses – nationalism, modernity, communism, Romanticism – upon which much nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western thought had been founded and with which complimentary balkanism had interacted. (Hammond 231)

Models of Traumatic Memory

In *Imagining the Balkans*, one of the mottos used by Todorova for her concluding comments comes from Konrad Bercovici, the Jewish-Romanian-American writer, who states: "And yet, like the poor, the Balkans shall always be

⁸ Interestingly, works which focus on what one might call episodic memory/history, consciously abstaining from spiraling out to historical memory, also constitute successful instances of reflections on Balkan/(post)communist identity, one such example being Latham's *Timeless and Transitory*.

⁹ See, for example, *Wild Europe*.

with us” (Bercovici, *The Incredible Balkans* qtd. in Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* 184). While Todorova intends through this to highlight the immutable qualities ascribed to the Balkans by a lore of writers and journalists in the 19th and 20th centuries, the quote is also relevant for this reading of how Balkan/ (post)communist identity discourse is marked by the trope of trauma, suggesting the ways in which Trauma Studies approaches can bring to light explanatory models and patterns of perception.

Having gone back to many of the works which set out directions of discussion both for postcommunist and for Balkan identity discourse, and drawing together the above critical approaches, it is possible to see how, one might argue, individual memory not only is enshrined as collective memory but becomes historical memory relearned and reenacted by future observers, thus shielded from a real confrontation with the incomprehensible, which is feared by the observing instance for subjective reasons. In this sense, representation implies the repetition of a traumatic memory which is, at the same time, the memory of a missed encounter. The mechanism of trauma is particularly salient here, as, following approaches opened up by Trauma Studies, the link between trauma and repetition, identified by Freud, and its repercussions in fiction, theory and discourse, yields sites of trauma or traumatic construction in the interstices of texts.

More precisely, the discourse about the Balkans, which pre-dates the Iron Curtain and the debates about postcommunist identity, substantiates and gives depth to analyses of postcommunist phenomena, becoming a locus of trauma and an original site of ever-defective memory to which representations seem bound to return, as in the pattern of traumatic repetition suggested by Caruth. The latter draws on Freud’s analysis of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in which “the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (Caruth 2), and goes beyond the Freudian interpretation, arguing that the voice of Tancred’s dead beloved (whom he has unknowingly killed) is the key of the traumatic encounter, making Tancred aware of the first trauma and of the pattern of repetition:

The voice of his beloved addresses him and, in this address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated. Tancred’s story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent’s repeated and unknowing acts but also as the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know. (Caruth 3)

Broadening the spectrum of trauma-marked discourse, Caruth identifies one of the markers of textual traumas as being “insistently recurring words or figures,” engendering stories “that in fact emerge out of the rhetorical potential and the literary resonance of these figures” (Caruth 5). Sites of trauma, in this more comprehensive perspective, are entailed by “a literary dimension that cannot be reduced to the thematic content of the text or to what the theory encodes, and that, beyond what we can know or theorize about it, stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound” (Caruth 5). In this sense, one can argue,

memories and images hovering above an episode, ever-present, yet never elucidated, like discourse about the Balkans or Balkanising discourse all evince both the characteristic of hovering relentlessly above a site of memory and also of repeatedly returning to voice that trauma.¹⁰

Returning to Bercovici's image of the ever-present Balkans hovering uncomfortably among us, it is very interesting to note that Bercovici himself is the author, among other works, of the book *That Royal Lover* (1931), which often exemplifies the type of essentializing dictum on the region that Todorova and Goldsworthy take issue with and which, one can in addition note, is permeated by a discourse that resonates with sites of trauma for historical/collective memory. A passage from *That Royal Lover* is particularly eloquent of this presentation of trauma (the destruction of a country) and illustrates the relentless return to that site in attempts to voice the original wound:

True, the Romanian wheat fields grow enough grain to keep the rest of Europe in bread. But this, too, is kept well in hand by a few feudal barons and speculators who manipulate the resources of the country in such a manner that the news of its riches should never spread too far and attract too much attention elsewhere. As a country Roumania had been treated like a "good thing" and had not been too extensively advertised by those who knew.

Then, suddenly, and for none of these qualities or advantages, the attention of the world was focussed on the kingdom of Roumania; because of an all too active Queen – Marie, wife of King Ferdinand of Roumania and grandchild of Queen Victoria of England, and because of her too unruly and spectacular household of sons and daughters, as anxious as their mother to keep the center stage of the worlds; as anxious as prima donnas and moving picture actresses and acrobats and tenors to hold the attention of the public. Romania became the laughing stock of the world, the Ruritania of musical comedies, a country of pseudo romance, of medieval intrigues – a country seemingly existing for no other purpose than to furnish amusement to lovers of vaudeville jokes and models of settings for moving picture cameras. (Bercovici 9)

Moreover, as I have attempted to show elsewhere, this attention to a sometimes scandalous, sometimes alluring, sometimes nurturing, but almost always feminized version of Romania is a common feature of these representations,¹¹

¹⁰ There are many possible intersections between strategies of exploring otherness and psychoanalytical discourse. I have analyzed elsewhere the way in which the Western beholder adopts the position of expert who explains, as in a psychoanalytical scenario, the fractured or deficient reality of the identity or region investigated, cast as an imaginary patient.

¹¹ This, I have argued elsewhere, is true for outside observers, like Robert Kaplan, who identifies a "flavor of the harem" surrounding Bucharest and the Athenee Palace in the early 1990's, or Tony Judt, who uses (and severely misreads) the image of Briana Caragea in the February 2000 issue of *Plai cu boi* for his famous article "Romania, Bottom of the Heap". It is also true of Konrad Bercovici, or even Petru Popescu's *The Return* where returning to the home country is mediated by recollections of, and encounters with, frightening, engulfing or nurturing instances of femininity. It is also interesting that a key feature of this type of

repeatedly investigated for an attempt to precisely localize the origin of the slip into a tragic-comic identity: markers such as ‘suddenly’, as well as the images of the débaucherie of Queen Marie’s household, act as clues of the original wound.

The same type of attention to historical memory (crafted, as Todorova has shown, out of individual and collective memories) and to its traumas pervades newspaper accounts of the region spanning Balkan as well as postcommunist identities, as well as accounts of those accounts (the site of cultural work that is of special interest here). For example, in the Introduction to the extremely valuable, visible and emblematic collection *New York Times 20th Century in Review. The Balkans*, which came out in 2001, Roger Cohen tries to make sense of the articles documenting Balkan history and ends up repeating what can be termed as a favorite image of Balkan identity: an agglomeration of historical events, which paradoxically project the Balkans into a time warp and which are the cause of a trauma ever-revisited yet never heard. Explaining the difficulty of writing and understanding the Balkans, Cohen thus points to the region’s violent history.

Such disorientation has been commonplace before the often violent transformations of the Balkans over the past 130 years. The post-war arrival of communism in Bucharest and elsewhere complicated the task, already arduous, of disentangling national identities from the legacy of sprawling empires. Economic backwardness accentuated susceptibility to autocratic readers. As a result, no other part of Europe has proved so volatile. The instability may produce sensations of vertigo in the visitor dismayed by the speed with which the ground may shift and the living appear to fall beneath the shadow of the dead. (Cohen, v I xi)

Reading the Balkans as a place of hyper-historicity, thus going against the project of modernity, which would culminate, returning to Fukuyama, in a hoped-for end of history, this density of history makes Cohen later use Churchill’s famous remark that – as Cohen paraphrases it – “the problem with the Balkans was the region’s capacity to produce more history than it could consume”. The explanation of the traumatic episodes in terms of an impalpable yet highly visible presence – “the shadow of the dead” - is an attempt to make the wound speak, in Caruth’s terms, spiraling into interpretations and localizations of the original hurt in an effort to enlighten the reader and elucidate the trauma. “Making sense,” Cohen goes on to argue, can be achieved by returning to the original sites (documents) upon which memories have been crafted:

But cumulatively these dispatches do help make sense of Balkan history. They place the reader at the center of events from the last spasms of the Ottoman Empire in World War I to the war NATO fought with Serbia over Kosovo. Several themes emerge: the struggle for the nation-state, the ravages of communism, the enduring nature of psychological wounds inflicted by war in states where history has often been manipulated to serve authoritarian regimes

writing is the attempt by the benevolent Western beholder, or by the returned expatriate, to explain the trauma.

rather than confronted to serve some semblance of a truth that may console. So the Balkan gyre sweeps round and round. (Cohen, v I xi)

A similar perspective appears in a historical account of 2007, *Balkan Strongmen. Dictators and Authoritarian Rulers of South Eastern Europe*, where the horror stories of the past turn out to be prophetic, especially as they have yet to be heard:

Have we seen the last of this phenomenon in the Balkans? It is probably too early to tell, but it is certainly not inconceivable that individuals like those discussed here might resurface in one form or another. As the Balkan tradition, particularly in the western parts of the peninsula, drags on in its poverty and corruption, there is some sense of nostalgia for the stability of the past. (Fischer 17)

The language in which this prophetic warning is couched is remarkable, and it is gothic (almost Poesque) in its representation of the return of traumatic experience in unwitting acts of the present, because the voice of the wound remains to be heard and heeded. The diagnosis of the Balkans seems to be that this space is stuck in repetition, and hence healing cannot take place. The ascribed density of history makes for a paradox: the Balkans are both highly historical *and* caught in a time warp, while memories of trauma remain an ever-present yet ever-hidden origin.

Hyper-historical and hence traumatic, Balkan history in Cohen's account has not been processed and is thus doomed to repeat itself until it is understood, in an explanation that bears striking resemblance to the mechanism of traumatic memory identified by Caruth. If Baudrillard called our age of media hyper-real, because it produces a spiral of representation in which the simulacrum becomes more real than real, hence the excess of history, and if Călinescu spoke of kitsch (a modern notion) as aesthetic overkill, the Balkans (in the Anglo-American imagination, but, interestingly, also in internalized representations) seem characterized by a hyper-historicity, a historic overkill that makes the region paradoxically compelled to repeat and rehearse its traumas, compelling experts to explain that trauma.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Re-Membering Trauma

Re-membering (recalling as well as re-assembling) the geography of trauma brings together apparently disparate discourses about the region, sometimes explained in terms of East-West divide, neocolonial patterns of representation, postcolonial identities and competing historical and power discourses. If, as shown from an analysis of some key foundational works from the literature in the field, it does appear that the Balkans and (post)communism certainly have their place firmly entrenched on the global mind map, often pertaining to a non-quite-Western locus of imagination, this investigation has tried to show that Trauma Studies can be a particularly useful lens through which to read representations as well as theories of the Balkans and postcommunism. Caruth argues for the power of the unsaid and unexplored undercurrent of texts, engaging the theme of trauma in less overt ways:

What the parable of the wound and the voice tells us and what is at the heart of Freud's writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells us, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. (Caruth 4)

In this sense, the passion and representational violence with which this discourse is vested tells of stories, memories and encounters that are yet to be brought to light. Moreover, Caruth points to the remarkable potential opened up by Trauma Studies in a realm where discourses meet, at the points of tension between "knowing" and "not knowing":

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (Caruth 3)

Repetition, imprecise memory, the compulsion to repeat, horror and violence are tropes identified within explanatory or descriptive models of these topics, and reading them as discourses permeated by the vocabulary of trauma opens up new ways of understanding and destabilizing established polarities between East and West, literature and theory, analysis and confession.

Recognizing the tropes of trauma-marked discourse also furthers the analysis of the strong temptation to find explanatory – and prophetic – models for the Balkans and for postcommunism. Recognizing the inevitably vested stance of the observer can also be a radical step forward, following the trend established in Trauma Studies by researchers like Kali Tal, who speaks about the need to define subjectivity in a recognition of the manner in which this positioning – our traumatic or psychological make-up, one might add – colors apparently objective perspectives (Tal 4). In addition, this line of argument allows for the engagement of a discussion with the vested interests of scholars of postcolonialism reticent to include the Soviet Union as perpetrator of colonialism, alongside Western Empires. As Ștefănescu argues, the subject of the postcolonial status of postcommunist states does not sit comfortably with many academic milieux, and

[i]t is rather difficult to resist the conclusion that traditional historiography is written under the spell of West-centric ideology and it consequently fails to acknowledge similar status to its ideological and political rival. Radical anti-capitalist pronouncements seem equally biased in refusing to admit that Marxist-Leninist states were able to display the very oppressive behaviour they pretended to oppose. (Ștefănescu 15)

What is perhaps even more striking, as Ștefănescu remarks, is that scholars from the ex-communist block also seem reluctant to explore the confluences of (post)communism and (post)colonialism. At the intersection of Trauma Studies and

Postcommunist studies, it thus becomes possible to open up discussion of the ways in which revisiting Balkan memory inevitably implies an engagement with a traumatic memory speaking just as much about the beholder/observer as about the object under analysis. In this sense, it is also useful to keep in mind Dominick Lacapra's rethinking of acting-out and working-through as two modes of engaging with memory, heightening also the awareness of the implications of transference and of the patterns of repetition it engenders.

Such a future endeavor would also be a certain step in denaturalizing description, thus adding to the efforts of scholars who have sought to demonstrate that representation is a power game, by voicing arguments to the effect that representation, like memory, is fraught with personal memory and oblivion, suffering and violence, lieux of trauma ever-revisited and ever-avoided. Pursuing the model put forth by Tal, and pursued in Trauma Studies, the cultural critic moves back and forth between the impact of trauma and its representation: "The subject of this work is psychic trauma; it moves back and forth between the effects of trauma upon individual survivors and the manner in which that trauma is reflected and revised in the larger, collective political and cultural world" (Tal 5). Drawing on this vision, both postcommunist and Balkan encounters are sites of trauma that need revising and re-voicing in view of a potential healing, the compulsion to repeat being a compulsion to voice the wound. If, as Bercovici says, the Balkans, like the poor, shall always be with us, and if Sakwa's prophetic "we are all postcommunists now is still shown to ring true," as recent rhetoric on the global political stage indicates,¹² acknowledgement of the intricate relationship between beholder and representation borrowed from Trauma Studies models of analysis would indicate a future ground for understanding a shared trauma experience, or at least a shared responsibility of trauma. The discussion pursued in this paper has shown that missed encounters hovering over traumatic episodes are quickly relegated to blatantly neocolonial perceptions engaging several types of colonial power structures. With an enhanced awareness of entanglements between past and present, violence and discourse, the hidden and the overt, the personal and the collective, in the spirit of directions brought about by an active dialogue with the field of Trauma Studies, this paper has tried to suggest that one can also envisage a passage from collective memory and from history back to the episodic in a more authentic encounter, voicing the wound and knowingly navigating between personal and collective memories.

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¹² What is often represented in the media as a recent diplomatic standstill between Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin over the Snowden affair brings back the trope of the Cold War, Obama himself mentioning in "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" on the 6th of August 2013 that "There have been times where they slip back into cold war thinking and a cold war mentality" (see "Ties Fraying, Obama Drops Putin Meeting").

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