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Three Forsaken Poets: Significant Absences in Balkan Modernism
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ABSTRACT
Narratives dealing with the literary histories of South-Eastern Europe frame the canon of the nineteenth and twentieth century mostly in terms of rebirth, or re-awakening of a national culture. The literary history of Balkan modernisms and the avant-garde proves no exception to this rule. Its history has been often narrowed down to an often implicit monolingual canon with an ‘ethnic’ pedigree. This essay, although critical of these excluding mechanisms, does not propose a deconstruction of the national modernist canon. Instead, it wishes to reflect on alternative models for literary history, with alternative parameters that include figures of transition in terms of (national) language and ethnicity. It draws on three examples: Victor Tausk, Stanislav Vinaver and Monny de Boully.

KEYWORDS
Modernism; the Balkans; multilingualism; transnationalism

Significant absences
The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918 enabled the creation of a state for the South-Slav nations, but it also gave a serious blow to a cosmopolitan, multilingual culture that had been thriving in these regions for a considerable period. For the new borders that were drawn were not just geographical. They cut through social networks, interrupted friendships and redrew the outlines of whole biographies. Thus the writer and politician Martha Tausk (1881–1957), who, before moving back to Vienna, together with her husband Victor Tausk had been living in Mostar, Sarajevo and Zagreb, was deeply offended and disappointed when her friend, the Slovenian writer Zofka Kveder (1878–1926), abandoned in 1918 her internationalist, social-democratic stance for the Yugoslav cause. Kveder had been an editor in the Germanophone Agramer Tagblatt, but wrote her fiction in Slovenian, and as of 1917 she published her own journal for women, Ženski svijet, in Serbo-Croatian. Martha Tausk, a relative of Martin Buber, who was born in Vienna as the daughter of printer Moriz Frisch, who had printed the first issue of Karl Kraus’ Die Fackel, became herself in 1918 the first female member of parliament in Austria, in the Landerversammlung of the province of Stiermarken.2

Today, when we mourn the violent collapse of the multinational state of Yugoslavia, it may seem odd that Martha Tausk refers to the Yugoslav project of 1918 as ‘nationalist’ –
admittedly from her own, ‘internationalist, social-democratic’ perspective. But it was not just the social-democratic movement, or the communist for that matter, whose networks were affected by the new national borders of 1918 and 1919. The whole society was subject to a thorough re-drawing of cultural boundaries. Therefore, although the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the first Yugoslav state, may be characterized as an effort to create a multinational state from a number of communities who identified themselves on either religious, linguistic or political grounds, or on a combination of those, it bore all the hallmarks of a national project – first and foremost because of its focus on one single language, Serbo-Croatian as the defining characteristic of national identity. Ethnography and géographie humaine offered racial conceptions of human identity. Both Jovan Cvijić and Vladimir Dvorniković considered the Yugoslavs as a separate race superior to other European nations. In interwar Yugoslavia cultural politics were aimed at homogenization.

I will explore in this essay one particular way for a re-canonization of South-Slav modernism. The central question is how to incorporate authors who wrote a part of or their complete oeuvre in another language than those of the nations comprising former Yugoslavia (for example German or French), or who brought in a (suppressed, self-censored) multilingual heritage related to empire, or who left behind an actual bilingual oeuvre. Still, they actively participated in South-Slav literary culture or represented, as figures of mediation, a transnational literary culture. The examples here will be Victor Tausk and Monny de Boull. The third case here will be that of Stanislav Vinaver who wrote in Serbo-Croatian but whose poetics, as I will argue, are grounded in a profound multilingual experience. These three authors all grew up in a milieu that was determined by the ‘conflicting pressures and demands’ of the ‘old and new nationalisms of East-Central Europe’. As second or third generation assimilated Jews, each of them responded differently to their milieu. Which options did they have? Uprooted as cosmopolitans, or alienated as Fremdkörper in national culture – regardless of whether Bauman is right or not, it is clear that the two basic options were either a national or an internationalist affiliation – tertium non datur. So were they indeed, as Bauman claims about the position of East-Central European Jewry at the turn of the century, ‘doomed no matter what they did’? As Bauman writes,

If they tried, obligingly, to uproot themselves, they ended up in the void, as no other soil was willing to accept them […] Above all, since even a tiny step toward an approchement with one of the competing national cultures meant antagonizing the rest, assimilation threatened to earn the Jews more enemies than friends. (578)

As to the Jewishness of these authors, I contend that although this is evidently a salient and quite distinct feature in their biographies, the particular focus of this essay – the exclusivity of the interwar Yugoslav literary canon – urges to consider their specific cases as part of a wider phenomenon: the disintegration of an actually existing culture of multilingual cosmopolitanism in which evidently many of the involved had a Jewish background, but in which multilingualism was not an exclusive feature of Jewish literati; one could list countless examples, suffice it here to mention the Croat Miroslav Krleža and Rumanian Liviu Rebreanu, both fluent in Hungarian, or Hungarian Deszö Kosztolányi who grew up in Szabatka/Subotica and who maintained a correspondence with various Serbian authors.
Victor Tausk: Ein Provinzler in Vienna

Victor Tausk (Viktor in Serbo-Croatian, 1879–1919), who wrote fiction, poetry and a play, all in German, and who translated South-Slav folk poetry into German, said farewell to literature when he discovered psychoanalysis. He is mainly remembered today as close collaborator of Freud and an important contributor to early psychoanalysis, whose allegedly problematic relationship with Freud has been the subject of a fierce dispute. Whatever the fascinating and often contradictory facts of his biography may be, he is of interest to us here as the literary author that he strived to be, and as the cultural mediator he was. He wrote in German but was also fluent in Serbo-Croatian, and Tausk’s own father Hermann was the editor-in-chief of the Südslavische Revue. It is clear from what is known about his life that Tausk very much desired to leave the South-Slav provinces which he deemed backward – Zagreb, where he grew up, Mostar and Sarajevo, where he had been living during his short and problematic marriage with Martha Tausk-Frisch and where he practiced as a lawyer, and Belgrade, where he was offered a position as a full professor of psychiatry at Belgrade University in 1918, but which he declined.

Tausk wrote drama, Halbdunkel (Twilight, completed in Vienna in 1905), theatre reviews (written in Vienna and in Berlin), and lyrical and philosophical poems, but his most accomplished literary work seems to be the novella ‘Husein Brko. Bosnische Zigeunergroteske’ (Husein Brko. A Bosnian Gypsy Grotesque), written in 1906, first published in 1912 in the Südslavische Revue. The story is that of a father who kills his son, reason for at least one interpreter to suggest that Tausk’s story not just forebodes Tausk’s suicide under the alleged influence of Freud, but also the work of Franz Kafka, ‘whose suffering was similar to Tausk’s’. The thought is tempting: ‘Das Urteil’ (The Verdict) was written in 1913. But there is nothing uncanny about the origins of ‘Husein Brko’: the story is based on a court case where a father tragically murdered his son (Tausk probably heard of the case while he was a practicing lawyer in Bosnia). What the two stories hold in common is that their narrative slides from the real into myth; hence both crave for an allegorical reading.

The story relates in three chapters life and death of Husein, a notorious bandit who roams the frontier of Europe, along the border with ‘Turkey’ (the Ottoman empire). The narrative is rather straightforward realistic: an anonymous third person narrator, restricted deployment of free indirect speech. First, we get to read about Husein’s birth. His mother does not know who the father is and uses black magic to find out his identity. Then follows his adolescence: already as a young boy he becomes sexually active as the lover of his stepmother. There seem to be hardly any family ties in Husein’s community. Next are two scenes that outline his career as a bandit: one in which he is merciful to a young and frightened man named Peter Grgurić, whom he robs but does not kill; the second one in which Husein mutilates his victim, a corpulent Serbian merchant named Jovo, before actually killing him. In the last scene, Husein, who has been hiding on the other side of the Turkish border, is killed by Salko, apparently his father, for the lousy sum of twenty ducats.

The obvious difference is that in Kafka’s ‘Das Urteil’, there is no immediate motive for Gregor’s father to kill his son (or rather to drive him to commit suicide – Gregor jumps in the river), whereas in Tausk’s story there is: financial gain. What is characteristic of the fictional realm of Tausk’s story, moreover, is the opaqueness of boundaries. Family
ties are vague: Husein sleeps with his stepmother; and Husein is killed by Salko, but whether Salko is really Husein’s father is never confirmed. It does not really seem to matter, neither to Husein himself, nor to the narrator. Then there is the vagueness of the geography. Real cities are mentioned (Sarajevo, Prizren), but the geographical marker that seems most relevant to the story is that of the Turkish border: that is where the bandits flee when they are persecuted. The ‘gypsy’ (Zigeuner) community where Husein grows up lies on ‘this side’ of the border: an undefined, unnamed moral wasteland, which we know must be inside Europe as it lies outside Turkey, and which qualifies as Balkan space in the sense Maria Todorova has defined it: Europe’s other inside, or on the border of Europe. Finally, there is the border between right and wrong, which Husein seems unaware of. We do not get insight into why he is merciful to one victim whereas he kills the other.

It would be easy to follow up on Todorova’s concept of Balkanism and highlight the story’s stereotypical representation of Balkan culture. This would open up a whole discourse behind Tausk’s story, and also behind his translations of South-Slav folk ballads, which he published in the years 1907 and 1908 and which he also presented to his mistress at the time, Lou Andreas-Salomé. Because if we consider Tausk a German, or rather Germanophone writer, then both his story and his translations are part of a discourse in which the German language functions as Central European lingua franca. This had been the case ever since Johann Gottfried Herder’s discovery of South-Slav folk poetry, and was intensified in the early nineteenth century by the close cooperation between mediators like Jernej Kopitar, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and Jakob Grimm. Grimm’s rendering of Serbian epic poetry into German was not just a translation into another European language, but into a universal Kultursprache. The discovery of their folk poetry proved to be an ambiguous opportunity for South-Slav cultural emancipation. Although it helped to create genuine attention in Europe for the culture of the South Slavs, it did narrow down Europe’s view of the Balkans to a stereotypical culture of Naturpoesie from which no full blown culture of modernity could be expected.

But with the emancipation of Jewish citizens in Austro-Hungary, German also became a different kind of lingua franca. As the Central European landscape was transformed into a patchwork of national communities, citizens appeared whose language of modernity was German but who did not necessarily identify with that national identity. This new, more complex form of bilingualism added up to the already existing multilingualism under the Habsburg Monarchy of emancipated national minorities like the Slovak, the Czech, the Hungarian, and Serbian and Croatian who lead a double linguistic life, combining their national language with German.

It is worthwhile to consider the story of Husein Brko from this more complex context of bilingualism. If considered as a text that functions solely within a balkanizing discourse, we miss the crucial fact that Tausk wrote not univocally from the centre nor from the periphery, but from a much more complex cultural and linguistic borderland. His story about Husein can even be read as an allegory about centre and periphery, in which Roma characters are a metaphor for a pre-modern condition, for ‘the other’ as represented geographically on the border of modernity. Cultural assimilation, which is usually described as a process in generations is here transposed into a spatial opposition, between centre and borderland.
Cultural mediators between the Germanophone and South-Slav realm before Tausk had opened up a one-way channel of mediation by means of which the centre could create an image of the border zone that did not basically affect the centre’s self-esteem, and the superiority of its culture and civilization. What Tausk opened up was two-way cultural traffic. Husein Brko is not just an archetypical homo balkanicus – morally fickle, sexually potent and inherently violent. He is a literary fiction that, at the same time as Freud is laying bare the subconscious of modern man in Vienna, openly acts according to Freud’s mythical models (Oedipus inverted) in the far periphery of Viennese culture. Tausk’s Husein Brko presents as much a balkanist vision of the periphery as it contaminates the centre, the subconscious life of bourgeois civilization.

Monny de Boully’s migratory aesthetics

The Parisian daily Comoedia of 16 and 17 August 1925 featured an article which welcomed to Paris the Serbian poet ‘Douchan Matitch’, who, as the author, the poet and critic Louis de Gonzague-Frick, predicted, ‘[…] will soon write in our language just as his compatriot […] M. Monny de Boully, whom surrealism has already won over.’ The irony is double: Dušan Matić never started to write in French, and Monny de Boully was never completely won over. Monny de Boully admittedly did write in French for years, and lived in Paris until his death. He returned to the Serbo-Croatian language in which he had set out on his literary career, at the end of his life, for his memoirs Zlatne Bube, published in Belgrade in 1968 and soon after published in French, under the title Sept Semaines en Une. He left behind a small oeuvre, as Aleksić writes (136), almost as ‘many published books as unpublished and announced books’. He published his last volume of poetry in Serbian in 1927.

Solomon Bulić – Monny de Boully (1904–1968, in phonetic Serbian orthography: Moni de Bulić) was born into a well-off Sephardic family in Belgrade. As he wrote in a short autobiographical note in the third person published in the magazine Večnost, in 1926:

He spent his childhood dreaming. His adolescence reading. In the course of eighteen years he visited Vienna eighteen times and travelled all over Europe, except for Russia. As a young poet in Belgrade he frequented the Hotel Moskva where the avantgardists of the day (among others Dušan Matić, Stanislav Vinaver, Rade Drainac, Dragan Aleksić, Tin Ujević) gathered; in 1925 he changed his seat at the Moskva Hotel for one in the café Cyrano, Place Blanche, and began to contribute to Breton’s magazine La Révolution Surréaliste soon after his arrival in Paris. Monny de Boully, ‘ce nom qui sonne clair’, ‘a clear-sounding name’, according to Gonzague-Frick in the same article did not enjoy Breton’s sympathies for a very long time. He was excommunicated, returned to Belgrade but left again for France in 1928.

In the meantime, the Belgrade surrealists under the guidance of Marko Ristić had allied themselves with Breton’s Parisian fraction, and Boully resorted to a group of artists gathered around the magazine Le Grand Jeu. It is clear from his memoirs in Zlatne Bube that he thrived while the group lasted; when the group fell apart, he left for The Hague where he lived for some time with his wife, who was Dutch. He returned to Paris before WWII. In 1941, his parents were killed in a Nazi concentration camp. Boully survived the war and opened an antiquarian bookstore in Paris. He never returned to Belgrade. Apparently he did contact, or was contacted by Marko Ristić, who was Yugoslav ambassador for the
Tito-regime in Paris after WWII. But the Jewish bourgeois life of Belgrade, centred in the Dorćol area, no longer existed. So the suggestion is that there was not much to return to. His memoirs Zlatne Bube were published in Belgrade three days after his death. In 1991, his selected poems, memoirs and letters were published in French.

Members of Le Grand Jeu (The Great Game) were a number of French writers and artists (Roger Vailland, René Daumal, Roger Caillois and others), but also the Czech painter Josef Šima, Arthur Adamov, who was of Armenian-Russian descent, and Benjamin Fondane, Romanian-Jewish. With the last two writers, De Boully had in common his cosmopolitan, East-Central European background. But the closest friend of De Boully became the Dutch writer Hendrik Cramer, member of Le Grand Jeu. Their friendship lasted until Cramer’s untimely death in a Nazi concentration camp (he was arrested and deported for smuggling petrol for the resistance in Marseille), was symbiotic and yielded a number of literary texts. Cramer devoted his ‘Verhalen uit Haití’ (Haitian Stories, 1937, first published in French translation in Les Cahiers du Sud) to De Boully. De Boully writes in Zlatne Bube that Cramer’s departure from Paris meant a catastrophe for him. De Boully relied on his older and rather outspoken friend, as he writes, to ‘open his eyes and to keep them open in the shipwreck of Le Grand Jeu’. Cramer, who had been a sailor, bore as a nickname ‘The Captain’, and De Boully describes the demise of Le Grand Jeu as a personal catastrophe for himself. It seems that art and life are indistinguishable here, and that De Boully needed alliances such as the one with Cramer as much personally as he used them artistically. After Cramer left Paris, De Boully left for The Hague, where he felt ‘bored and lonely’ (144). After two years Cramer visited him in the Netherlands. De Boully welcomed him at the Rotterdam docks and wrote a poem in French about their encounter, ‘Accueil au Capitaine’ (A Welcome to the Captain) which was published in Les Cahiers du Sud and for which, as he writes, he received a lot of praise, among others from Gaston Bachelard. It was not the first time that Boully needed a real encounter in order to create his fictions. Earlier on he had cooperated with Risto Ratković, and avant-garde poet from Belgrade, and later on an encounter with Arthur Adamov lead to the poem ‘Er L’Armenien’ (Er the Armenian). The encounter between Cramer and De Boully as it took place in reality seems to have served as a fulcrum point for De Boully.

As to the style of ‘Accueil au Capitaine’: it is in free verse and bears at least one hallmark of surrealist poetry: wildly associative images. What Ljubomir Micić, the Zagreb-based editor of Zenit, wrote to De Boully in the 1920s, certainly does not apply to this poem: ‘Your poem is not modern enough. It is too old-fashioned in form and not irrational enough’. In the poem, two different kinds of uprootedness are brought together. The first one is geographical and is the experience of the traveller, the ‘Captain’ who has crossed the Atlantic, hence travelled through actual space. The second one is linguistic: ‘Salomon of Babylon’ has stayed behind on the European continent and is said to be lost between words and their meanings, between ideas for poems and their future realization: ‘How to select the hidden bread from the seeds of future harvests?’ is what he asks the Captain. The Captain in turn tells Salomon that he encountered his friend, or imagined he encountered him, in the metro at the other side of the Atlantic; and since ‘[his] secret voice whispered to [him]’ (156) that death was near, he ‘cried for [his] best friend, out there across the Atlantic Ocean’.

There can be no Salomon of Babylon, De Boully’s poem suggests, without his friend the Captain. Salomon quotes to the Captain the letter he received from him from New York,
‘the handwriting of which was hardly readable’ (157). Here, the Captain wrote that Europe gave him

a sense of soaked disgust. And yet, my friend, by leaving I have stayed at home […] Europe enchants me, seduces me, tortures me: she is the ulcer that will eat the flesh off our teeth, the leprosy that will devour our face. (157)

Through De Boully’s poem, through Cramer’s stories dedicated to de Boully, and through the letters they exchanged, both bilingual authors, writing in French, established firm ties, both in fiction and in reality. These ties created a micro-constellation of Europe that for them, without their poetic intervention, would not have existed except as a formless entity, a Babylonian continent with multiple, yet meaningless tongues. Strikingly enough, in Zlatne Bube, it is precisely the metaphor of roots, of rootedness, that De Boully uses to describe his absolute attachment to poetry throughout his career. He qualifies his ‘natural need for mythologizations’ as ‘innate’ [innée] and ‘ineradicable’ [indéra-cinable] (143). So here we find a deeply existential conception of poetry as a home, as a firm and ineradicable basis; poetry which De Boully best wrote and perhaps only wrote as long as he was surrounded by a group of people, itself multilingual, an artistic community which helped him to situate his words between ‘le son et le sens’, as he quotes Paul Valéry (143).

Both in French and in Serbian literature, De Boully counts as a minor poet. ‘On the whole’, Jovan Deretić writes, ‘Monny de Boully is more of interest as a figure on the literary scene than as a creative artist’ (534).16 But De Boully’s stature changes when one focuses on the migratory aesthetics he practiced, in two European languages; then he becomes one of those travellers, wanderers perhaps, like Hendrik Cramer, but also like Theo van Doesburg, Benjamin Fondane and many others, whose European trajectories represent a firm network that seems feeble and marginal only from a national perspective. From a personal point of view, such networks were of vital, sometimes existential importance. What also changes when one focuses on liminal figures like Monny de Boully is the type of supranational network the avant-garde represented. It is true that the French language was the lingua franca of the surrealist movement. In the case of surrealism, most of the time literary histories tend to stress the centrality of the French movement, and then add that the Belgrade surrealists were second best in Europe after their French colleagues. The obvious gain for the Serbian national tradition is emancipation and full participation on the European level – even when this means that they figure as Breton’s altar boys [acolytes] a humiliating, balkanizing portrayal of the Yugoslav surrealists in Breton’s retinue.17 Such bilateral models rule out the essentially non-national, cosmopolitan affiliations of a considerable number of its members, including that of the De Boully.

**Stanislav Vinaver: unrecognised poet of doom**

The case of Stanislav Vinaver (1891–1955) is perhaps the most apt illustration of Bauman’s thesis that Jewish writers were ‘doomed’ no matter what option they chose. If De Boully, intentionally or unintentionally, uprooted himself, Stanislav Vinaver’s biography reveals not just an ‘approchement’, as Bauman euphemistically labels the cultural and political assimilation of Jews in the first half of the twentieth century in East-Central Europe, but a deep commitment to the Serbian national cause.18 Vinaver fought in the Balkan wars
and participated in the First World War as a soldier in the battalion that retreated through Albania to Corfu, an event which is at the core of Serbian national narratives about the Great War.

That Vinaver’s position in the Serbian political establishment was not unambiguous becomes clear in a passage from Miloš Crnjanski’s diplomatic memoirs Embajade (Embasies, the original is actually the Spanish plural). In August 1938, after the Anschluss and with Hitler’s Germany threatening to annex Czechoslovakia, Crnjanski and Vinaver, diplomats in the service of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, attended a conference of the Little Entente in Bled. Vinaver, Crnjanski writes,

because he is a “Jew”, is having in these times of racist, anti-Semite laws a difficult period, also in his private life […] While we walked along the lake he said to me that if he wouldn’t have had children he’d commit suicide. (380)

To make things worse, an outraged Czech diplomat had just reproached Vinaver for the passivity of the Little Entente. Then they came across the poet Jovan Dučić, who held the rank of ambassador, and who ignored Vinaver because he was still angry because of the parodies of his work Vinaver published in his Pantologija (1920). Afterwards, Dučić attacked Crnjanski for hanging out with Vinaver. Crnjanski writes:

I defended Vinaver. I told [Dučić] that [Vinaver] was a good and unhappy man, that he was, is and would always remain my friend. Finally, I said, Vinaver – and witnesses can corroborate my story – was under fire together with our compatriots, for the sake of Serbia, and went into the offensive. You, mister Dučić, were not.19 (382)

Vinaver’s fate during WWII is unfortunate: as he held the rank of officer in the Yugoslav royal army and the Germans treated Jewish officers as prisoners of war, he was detained in a prison camp near Osnabrück and thus survived. His mother, however, was killed in a Nazi concentration camp.

After the war, under the new regime he translated a lot and published little. In 1963, eight years after his death, Radomir Konstantinović offered an astute perspective on Vinaver in an introduction to his selected essays, Nadgramatika (Sur-Grammar). Before embarking on a discussion of Vinaver’s poetics, Konstantinović ventures criticism against Vinaver’s ‘nationalist attitude’ (9) and mentions his politically charged contributions to magazines in the 1930s, like Miloš Crnjanski’s Ideja. It is not clear from the context whether Konstantinović’s criticism is inspired by genuine aversion against Vinaver’s ‘right-wing’ ideas and attitudes, or whether he is merely ideologically paving the way for the re-introduction of an author whom he had personally known and admired but who had taken a critical stance toward the Tito-regime. In the years following WWII, as Svetlana Slapšak writes, Vinaver published under the new regime in samizdat form, ‘sold discreetly in student clubs and in cafés around the Faculty of Philosophy and Philology in Belgrade’, and that he ‘parodied the new ideology without constraints, destroying the new authorities and new values’.20 Neither Slapšak nor Konstantinović offer an explicit discussion of the cultural context of Vinaver’s avant-garde poetics, nor of his uncomfortable position as an assimilated Jew who seems to have remained an outsider among the Serbs – either anti- or philo-Semitic. The subject is also absent in two other recent discussions of Vinaver’s work.21

The only academic study that explicitly addresses Vinaver’s cultural identity is Predrag Palavestra’s Jevreji u srpskoj književnosti (Jews in Serbian Literature, 1998), an odd survey of
Jews (the criterion is ethnic, reflecting the Zeitgeist of the 1990s) in Serbian culture. The book is as Serbophile as it is philo-Semitic. Palavestra qualifies Vinaver’s ‘commitment [opredeljenost] to and mastery of the Serbian language’, meaning the Ekavian dialect, the language spoken by Serbian ethnicity, not as assimilation, not even as a merging of identities, but as a pure form of affirmation of the self, ‘a token of natural acting, like breathing is a natural part and a precondition of human existence and survival’ (191). It is almost as if Palavestra writes polemically against Kafka and his famous metaphor for writers working in a culture of assimilation as four-legged animals, torn between two or more languages and cultures.²² (After reading Palavestra, one wonders whence comes the constant emphasis on Vinaver’s mastery of the Serbian language by all above mentioned critics. The common place of Vinaver being a great stylist is almost like the compliment paid to strangers who have managed to master the language of the host community. As Bauman writes about the case of assimilated Jews in Polish national culture in the 1920s: ‘the Polishness of the Jews was easily distinguished by the exaltation […] which followed (almost logically) from a situation in which the examiners’ attention never relaxed, testing never ceased, and there was no way of guessing whether one’s performance, however spectacular, would be accepted as satisfactory’.²³

Language seems indeed to be a key to the cultural and biographical context of Vinaver’s poetics. A crucial text expressing his views on language and identity is the essay ‘Jezičke mogućnosti’ (‘The Potential of Language’ originally published in 1923). The opposition he creates in this essay is between Serbian and European culture. Vinaver starts by signalling a discrepancy between the Serbian language and modern experience, especially after, one could say, quintessentially modern experience of the Balkan wars and the First World War. The language of epic poetry, the culmination of which Vinaver sees in the work of the Montenegrin poet and bishop Petar Petrović Njegoš (1813–1851), has proven incapable of expressing modern experience. And as long as the poets of the Serbian language continue to think and work in epic discourse, as long as

we fail to create in language a gurgling and roaming, convincing rhythms and streams for a technique of our new life, we will either have to translate literally from German or French, or simply to speak German or French […]; we will even have to think in these languages, evidently incomplete and stunted because a nation [narod] can lead a real and conscious life only in the sea of its own language. (147)

Vinaver, in this quintessential modernist call, akin to Virgina Woolf’s ‘new expression for our new sensations’, feels optimistic that ‘we will succeed’.²⁴ He can already feel the ‘singing and fragrant rustling of the radiant wings of the future’ (148). Failure would be ‘the worst national catastrophe one could imagine. Our culture would be deprived of its language. We would lose the very possibility of an integral culture’ (148). The problem with the language of epic poetry, and with the epic mind as such, according to Vinaver, is that it is ‘crude [sirov], although not in relation to itself: it is the culmination of a certain condition, it is the perfect expression of this condition, it is ripe, only this ripeness is old-fashioned for Europe’ (151). What is expressed in the Serbian language so far ‘is the culture of the tribe, of Serbian-ness [srpsstvo], the Serbian individual and the way he relates to Serbian-ness, not to himself, or to the sea, to the skies and the birds’ (152).

Rhetorically, Vinaver addresses the Serbian nation from the inside, while being part of it. He assumes the role of saviour, of prophet who warns the people against the doom of
modernity. But he calls them not to resist, hide or flee. He calls them to surrender, to start to express themselves in a way that gives them a voice in modernity. So whom is he warning? One reading could be that he himself is the one under threat – because if Serbian culture fails to modernize itself, then there will be no place for him and his writing under the Serbian sun. The Serbian language needs to become European, or the project of assimilation, of Vinaver’s assimilation, will fail and he will be condemned to write in a ‘crude’ language.

Radomir Konstantinović stresses how entangled life and literature are in the work of Vinaver – to be more precise: how Vinaver’s views on the Serbian language as a literary language that is epic and not yet capable of carrying the full weight of modernity, mirrors Vinaver’s own restless nature. And although Konstantinović does not say so explicitly, and adheres just like Vinaver in his essay strictly to a discussion of the meaning of various forms of verse and meter, the central conflict, the main source of Vinaver’s restlessness is him being an alien body in this epic Serbian culture:

All his texts radiate Vinaver’s optimism, which I would call vitalism, probably because they were always written in the presence of danger, in a continuous awareness that we will get lost in the world if we do not find the right expression and language, our own technique. (18)

Still, in the passage quoted above, Konstantinović fails to identify ‘we’. For, who will get lost in the world? Where does the danger come from? Vinaver is canonized as a supreme translator into Serbo-Croatian, as a master of style, not as a major poet. The crucial question, I think, is the following: did Vinaver fail to become a major poet because he failed to modernize the Serbian language? Following his own analysis, the task he set for himself was an existential one, for what was at stake was his own cultural survival. And yes, his endeavour was doomed to fail, that is, if one assesses his work from within the national Serbian canon, which considers the literature of modernism and the avant-garde as the first national accomplishment on European level, the first generation which could emulate their European peers. But as a diagnostician of a national modernism as imperative and as an unaccomplished ambition, Vinaver stands out as an eminent cultural critic, precisely because of his sense of being out of place in the Serbian language (his argument rhetorically disguised as the Serbian language being out of place in Europe). Here one cannot but agree with Slapšak who remarks that Vinaver ‘diagnosed the sickness but innovative responses were impossible’ (416).

The irony of Vinaver’s life may very well be that his most celebrated role, the one for which he will be remembered also outside the Serbian and the Yugoslav realm, was as a guide of Rebecca West in her celebrated fictionalized travelogue Black Lamb, Grey Falcon (1941), where he appears as the quintessentially Balkan character Konstantin. No text matches that of West in terms of the influence it exerted, and perhaps still exerts, on the image of the Balkan cultures in Europe. But Europe does not get to know Vinaver, it gets to know Konstantin, and has no clue about the drama of modernity in which he acted.

**The interstice at the centre of attention**

How to redraw the outlines of a South-East European modernist canon with the three above discussed authors in mind? No matter how divergent their linguistic and aesthetic
choices may have been, they are representative in one respect: they all share a sense of restlessness which from a national perspective can only be defined in a negative way, as uprootedness and alienation. Monny De Boully wrote in two languages and therefore perhaps failed to show the full force of his work in both languages; and so he ended up on the margins of two separate canons. Stanislav Vinaver diagnosed early in his literary career what he saw as the shortcomings of the Serbian language and devised a program for its modernization that was aesthetic and existential at the same time, but he failed to live up to the task he set for himself and instead hovered between the vocation of poetry, the craft of literary translation, and the trap of improvisation – the last being perhaps his greatest talent, but one that has left no traces except in the stories others tell about this gifted and complex figure. Finally, Victor Tausk’s fictional writings in German about South-Slav culture open up a space of wandering: his sudden and radical abandoning of literature for psychoanalysis as an alternative realm of truth represents perhaps the most radical instance of the dramatic scope which any true engagement with modernism in the Balkans – the urge to find mental (artistic and/or intellectual) forms for the quintessentially modern experience – potentially involved.

What De Boully, Vinaver and Tausk also share when one looks at their oeuvres and biographies is that they appear to be unaccomplished writers. As poets they never found a genre in which they could be unproblematically productive, and this is the reason why it has been so difficult to canonize them. All three of them had no language to which they could relate to without unease; the same goes for their place in cultural and intellectual life. All three of them are therefore – to steer for more affirmative shores – explorers of a culture at borderlines, a culture of borders, of the interstice between languages, genres, disciplines, and also between literary cultures in various regions of Europe. In this respect, they are extremely contemporary and vital, and in a way they can be said to precede an understanding of European (literary) culture which we today deem relevant, one in which borders do not designate the outer limits of a cultural space, but in which borders run through the very centre. The more intense the liminality, the more European one’s position. In the words of Etienne Balibar, nowadays ‘[…] borders are […] becoming border zones, regions, or countries where one can reside and live. The quantitative relation between “border” and “territory” is being inverted’.26

Under which conditions can these authors be inscribed into the existing canon? For this to happen, the canon itself, both that of the European avant-garde and that of the single national literary cultures of South-Eastern Europe, need modification. There is at least one element which both the cosmopolitan and national traditions have in common, at least in the case of modernist literature. Literary cosmopolitanism lives by homelessness, it feeds upon it, is determined by it and depends upon it. If we agree with Edward Said that nationalism also stems from a sense of uprootedness, then we may have opened up common ground. According to Said, nationalism ‘affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs; and, by so doing, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages. […] All nationalisms in their early stage develop from a condition of estrangement’ (176). For Said, nationalism is not a pre-modern phenomenon but one that is directly related to the existential discontent and alienation of the modern age. The literary cultures of South-Eastern Europe are no exception to the rule. Here, national consciousness was triggered by a continuous threat to disappear – to be overrun by Magyarization,
Germanification, Italianization, not to mention the possibly most enduring fear, that of being overrun by Ottoman culture.

But admitting that both cosmopolitan and national writing stems from a sense of homelessness—political, cultural and existential—does not suffice. One has to imagine ways of interpretation that can link up these divergent literary cultures and reconstruct ties that may have not seemed very relevant at the time, but which are all to more significant from our current perspective. Any reconceptualization of the notion of ‘modernism’ in the Balkans therefore faces a larger task than just critically dealing with the ideologies of the various national communities. I submit that an essential part of a new perspective on this phenomenon should incorporate those voices that actively participated in the literary cultures of Balkan modernism, but who were marginalized and only partially included in the national canon, and sometimes wholly excluded from it, because of linguistic choices that were incompatible with the narrow understanding of literary cultures based on texts in a single national language. Hence the notion of significant absences, of whole oeuvres and their authors from the national Serbian, Croatian and/or Yugoslav canon; and as a result also from the canon of the European avant-garde. I guess the main task one faces when trying to incorporate, or re-incorporate, these texts and their authors in the modernist canon, is to find ways of reading and interpretation that look for a diversity of voices in the literary text and the cultural context.

In at least two instances in modernism’s afterlife these significant absences created a cultural vacuum. When in the 1960s Danilo Kiš (1935–1989) began to write his fictional Holocaust trilogy based on his family biography, he had hardly or no examples of modernist literature in the Serbo-Croatian language that explicitly dealt with the pre-WWII world of Central Europe. It was from this world that his father, an assimilated, multilingual Hungarian Jew, had emerged. Hence, for instance, the importance to him of a Serbo-Croatian translation of Bruno Schulz in the 1960s in Belgrade. Kiš, who was bilingual Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian knew no German and discovered the work of a writer like Ödön von Horváth (1901–1938), a novelist and playwright who wrote in German but who had roots throughout the Danube basin, only in the late seventies or early eighties, when he wrote a story about him, ‘Apatrid’ (The Man without Fatherland), Kiš leads also to the second cultural vacuum. He lived in Paris in exile as of 1979; as an exile he became an iconic figure for the massive wave of post-Yugoslav emigration in the 1990s, but notably for writers such as Dubravka Ugrešić, David Albahari, Aleksandar Hemon and Semezdin Mehmedinović. The Belgrade dissident oppositional publishing house B92 used the following excerpt from Kiš’ story on Horváth as motto:

Gentlemen, you want me to show you the house where I was born? But my mother gave birth to me in a hospital in Fiume, and that hospital was pulled down long ago. Nor will you be able to put a memorial plate on my house, because that has probably also been torn down. Or you would have to put three or four plates with my name: in various cities in various states, although I could not help you out here, as I don’t know where my parental home is, as I don’t recall where I have lived in my youth, and I hardly know in which language I spoke.

The story was first published by the Croatian independent publisher Feral Tribune in the early 1990s, and is also quoted in Dubravka Ugrešić’s Museum of Unconditional Surrender, the quintessential Yugoslav exile novel from the 1990s. Thus Von Horváth, who never wrote in Croatian, became an iconic figure both in Croatia and in Serbia for the
increasingly self-conscious post-Yugoslav exile identity, whether in internal or in actual exile, against the rising nationalist tide. Figures like Tausk, Vinaver and De Boully rightly deserve their place next to Von Horváth, as ‘men without fatherland’.

Notes

1. Dorfer, Lebensreise, 51.
2. Ibid., 58.
3. Although the official languages of the First Yugoslavia were Serbo-Croatian and Slovene, the former was privileged; this continued in post-WWII Yugoslavia, which had Slovene, Serbo-Croatian and Macedonian as official languages.
5. Roazen, Brat; Eissler, The Fictitious.
6. I wish to gratefully thank Annabet Tausk-van Dijk, who generously provided me with some data concerning her grandfather’s biography. Her father, Marius Tausk, has written a biographical sketch that can be considered, in spite of its polemical perspective, the best and most reliable factual account of the life of Victor Tausk (see: Marius Tausk, “Wer War”). The same volume contains all Tausk’s writings, both literary and psychoanalytic. I also wish the reader to alert that Tausk keeps on stirring the literary imagination. Already during his life, he was the subject of a roman-à-clef by his former mistress Grete Meisel-Hess, Die Stimme (1907). Here, one recognizes Tausk in the character Zdenko Dimitri, a man of unclear Slav origins who appears, metaphorically, as a vampire to Maja, a singer, the novel’s main character: he sucks the life out of her. Tausk is also the subject of two recent novels, Vienna Triangle by Brenda Webster (2009) and Bilo nam je tako lijepo (2011) by Sibila Petlevski.
7. Roazen, Brat, 137.
8. Todorova, Imagining, 188.
13. My source here is the late Dragan Klaič. I find it significant that in an essay that deals with three literary authors on the margins of the national canons, a considerable part of the (biographical) information has to rely on oral sources. We are badly in need of a history of (East-Central) European cosmopolitanism.
15. Ibid.
16. De Boully’s appearance in Claude Lanzmann’s autobiography Le Lièvre de Patagonie (2009) seems to confirm De Boully’s marginalized role. The writing of his stepfather is hardly mentioned, more of interest to Lanzmann seems the bohemian side to De Boully, especially the fact that he introduced him at an early age to women and sex – a portrayal that verges on stereotypically balkanist.
17. Aleksić, “Breton,” 53. A similar, rather hilarious example can be found in Raymond Queneau’s settling of accounts with the surrealist movement in his novel Odile (1937)
18. As Zoran Milutinović writes à propos a comment Vinaver makes about the role which was assigned to Serbia in nineteenth century European politics: ‘[it] is humorous, but it nevertheless expresses an understanding of the policies of the Great Powers deeply ingrained in Serbian Culture’ (Milutinović, Getting Over, 61).
21. See Tešić, Zanosi; Milutinović, Getting Over.
22. Kafka, Briefe, 337.
24. Woolf, Essays, 60.
25. Konstantinović’s statement mirrors his own pre-occupation with the persistence of pre-modernity in Serbian culture, even among major modernist poets. Five years after his essay on Vinaver he published his own *Filozofija Palanke* (A Philosophy of the Palanka) on the closed, epic culture of what he dubbed the realm of the *palanka*, traditional small town life.


27. See Snel “The Return of Pannonia” for a discussion of the real-imaginary space of Pannonia, a fictive realm in the Danube basin which connects authors who wrote in various languages (Kosztolányi, Krleža), and which resurfaces in the work of Danilo Kiš.

28. In an [unpublished] interview I conducted with Péter Esterházy in Budapest in 2008, he described Kiš’s Hungarian as ‘a smooth and soft Southern-Hungarian dialect’. Kiš’s Serbo-Croatian is a complex case in point. He grew up speaking the Ekavian dialect in Vojvodina, then spent his adolescence in Cetinje, Montenegro, where he spoke the ijekavian dialect. He again switched to Ekavian when he moved to study at Belgrade University.

29. See Snel, “Post-Yugoslav Literature” for a discussion of Kiš’s literary legacy among post-Yugoslav writers in exile.

30. Kiš, “The Man,” 219. Translation is mine. Fiume is the Italian name for the coastal Croatian town Rijeka, at the time of Horváth’s birth part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, it is Italian/Serbo-Croatian speaking territory.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Bibliography**


