

## CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE "PERENIAL OTHER"

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### *Abstract*

*In light of the recent migration phenomenon and of the so-called fear for the Islamization of our old continent, my paper is an attempt to deal with the art of travel writing and the image of the Turks as the "Perennial Other" in Central Europe, due to the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, starting with the 14th century. The text I have chosen for my analysis is a travelogue produced by a British writer and traveller through Hungary and Romania in the 1930s: *Between the Woods and the Water* by Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor (published in Romanian translation in the spring of 2016).*

**Keywords:** travel writing, 1930's, Otherness, Central Europe, Ottoman Empire, alternative history

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### *1. Introduction*

In one of the chapters<sup>2</sup> of *Gatecrashing Paradise: Misadventures in the Real Maldives*, Tom Chesshyre, a reputed travel writer, who has been working for *The Times* since 1997, remembers the words of Ben Macintyre, a colleague of his, on the death of Patrick Leigh Fermor in 2011. Macintyre, whose range of articles covers both current affairs and historical controversies, was musing about the significance of travel literature in an age when jetting around the globe is so convenient and accessible:

*'The world is simply too small, too fast, too well trodden to admit of such leisurely, civilized wandering,' (...) 'The jumbo jet enabled any traveller to reach the four corners quickly and cheaply. The internet brought the world to our room. There are no spaces on the map to be filled in, no place on that Google Earth has not seen already. The empty quarters and forbidden cities are full of tourists, and open to all.'* (Chesshyre, 2015)

The 'leisurely, civilized wandering' used to be a major feature of a generation of travel writers that included Patrick Leigh Fermor, Eric Newby, Norman Lewis and Jan Morris – among others. To them, Macintyre added the names of Bruce Chatwin, Paul Theroux and Jonathan Raban, labelled as "adventuring scribes in the 1970s and 1980s." Aproximately the same names are invoked by Susan Bassnett in

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<sup>2</sup> 'The illusion of omniscience'.

her 'Introduction' to *Literature of Travel and Exploration. An Encyclopedia*<sup>3</sup>, as the critic is trying to account for the resurgence, in the last half a century, of travel writing by British authors and its readership not only "as a result of the increase in travel generally" but also "because of the residual colonial history that still remains powerfully present in Britain." And she continues by emphasizing the patronizing role of the models promoted by the British and American cultures in their encounters with less developed ones:

*The British Empire, after all, was built on an export policy of world proportions, whereby British products were manufactured and sold overseas and British culture was exported as part of a civilizing mission. The U.S. melting pot policy of the nineteenth century and beyond was likewise constructed upon the idea of one preferred cultural model over all others. Both the British and the American models posited their own culture as the most desirable, yet at the same time there was widespread interest in those cultures perceived as less developed, less civilized and more "primitive."* (Speake, 2014: xii)

In light of the recent migration phenomenon and of the so-called fear for the Islamization of our old continent, it would be interesting to examine the occurrence/prevalence, be it latent/subliminal or manifest, of such pattern in one of the most captivating travelogues on Central Europe by a British writer. Based on its author journey in the 1930s across Hungary and Transylvania, but written and published only fifty years later, in 1986, *Between the Woods and the Water*, by Patrick Leigh Fermor, connects the two generations of writers previously mentioned and may sometimes be read in a prophetic manner. Could this be the case of the word *romance* in the following fragment from the chapter devoted to Budapest?

*Except for those dark cellars on the Vár, wandering about the steep and exhilarating city unearthed scarce marks of the long sojourn of the Turks; a few Ottoman fragments, the tomb of a dervish on the Hill of the Roses, some hammam-cupolas scattered about; later, a mosque here and there in the province. There had been two centuries and a half for the Town to recover; long enough, perhaps, to surround the Turkish interlude with **romance**...* (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 36).

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## ***2. Patrick Leigh Fermor and the craft of nonchalant travel writing***

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Surrounding historical circumstances with romance could be given extenuating circumstances to a degree that might vary from historians to writers. In this respect, it is not seldom that travel writers are in-between, as a result of their attempt to be accurate and expressive at the same time. And as anyone can see from his writings, Patrick Leigh Fermor succeeded in always maintaining a minimal distance, both

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Speake (ed.), Routledge 2014.

critical and affectionate, towards people and places he came across in his long and spectacular life.

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### 2.1 A zigzagged biography/literary career of a synergetic personality

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When he set out to walk, in December 1933, from Rotterdam to Constantinople, Patrick Leigh Fermor was only 18 years old and had barely graduated high school.<sup>4</sup> Three years later, after he had reached Istanbul, he decided that he should continue his walk by reverting to Mount Athos and Greece. It was there that he met his first great love, the Romanian princess with imperial Byzantine roots, Balasha Cantacuzene. Eventually they moved together to her estate near Galați, where he remained until WWII broke out. They met again in 1965, when he was finally allowed to visit Romania and it was then that she gave him a lost notebook, the only one preserved<sup>5</sup> from his transeuropean march of the 1930s. Right before the war, he had left with a friend in London two trunks, containing some of Balasha's paintings, the letters to his mother written during his journey, and sketches and diaries from the same period. Unfortunately, they all ended – after having been sent for safe keeping to Harrods Depository –, by being sold at auction, in 1947. He survived the trauma though, years later, in an interview taken by his biographer, he confessed that it “still aches sometimes, like an old wound in wet weather”. (Cooper, 2013: 219)

During the war he proved to be a real hero, as he coordinated the Greek partisans in Crete and organized the kidnapping of a German general. After the war he started a career in travel writing, with *The Traveller's Tree*, published in 1950, which marked the fact, through “the continuity of its voice with pre-war writers – that a bridge had been successfully thrown over the turbulent decade of the 1940s” (Hulme, Young, 2002) Therefore, when he and Balasha met again, the little notebook she had managed to keep might have served as a trigger for writing and giving testimony, at last, on his walking through a golden age, Europe's Golden Age and his as well. But it was only in 1977 that the first part of an intended trilogy appeared, “coinciding with a raft of books by younger writers (...) which in different ways announced a decisive shift in modern travel writing” (ibid.) *A Time of Gifts*, with a title inspired from a poem<sup>6</sup> by Louis MacNeice, was hailed as a masterpiece of the genre:

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<sup>4</sup> His last was King's School Canterbury, thought to be the oldest continuously operating in the world, as it had been founded in 579 AD. Leigh Fermor was expelled from King's for holding hands with the greengrocer's daughter. According to Artemis Cooper, his biographer, the “expulsion came before he had sat the School Certificate”, so young Fermor was somehow at the first major crossroad of his life.

<sup>5</sup> Known as ‘The Green Diary’.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Twelfth Night,’ and the line that inspired Leigh Fermor goes as follows: “For now the time of gifts is gone.”

*It is hardly possible in a brief review to do justice to the excellence of this book, by one of our finest travel writers. Its author has the ability, rare among travellers, to make the landscape come alive for the stay-at-home reader, and does so all the more remarkably in this instance in describing a journey of 35<sup>7</sup> years ago. (...) Now, depending on memory and on such scraps of his diary as have survived, he has reconstructed this journey with such immediacy, such evident truth to fact and to spirit, that it might have happened yesterday.* (Middleton, 1978: 357)

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## 2.2 The craft of nonchalant writing

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The sentence “Now, depending on memory and on such scraps of his diary as have survived, he has reconstructed this journey with such immediacy” brings up the question of accurately and expressively writing about people and places authors of travel literature encountered, sometimes many years before the publishing of their testimonies. In this respect, one can retain a discussion hosted in 2005 by *Forth Genre: Exploration in Nonfiction*, in which several travel writers identified some of the major features travelogues share. They speak about “the emotional vertigo of travel, that sensation of exile that comes with romantic disappointment” (Abildskov, 2005: 79); about the travel memoir/narrative perceived as “a subset of personal storytelling” (Morano, 2005: 80); about the genre as probably “one of the many lenses through which experience is examined and stories are shaped” (Morano, 2005: 80)

Travel writing is about enjoying, even through saving ticket stubs, brochures, and train schedules; about taking photographs and notes, eventually losing them; about remembering exceptional details, or often paying attention to an almost empty side street, in stark contrast with large or crowded boulevards such as Champs Élisées in Paris or La Rambla in Barcelona. It is about realizing how rewarding the experience of movement is in itself, and therefore forgetting to record it; or about simply settling, because the child-like traveller has to stop and stay for a while in a stable place in order to grow into a mature writer. When travelling, one views “places and people and interactions with a halo of potential around them, always.” (Morano, 2005: 86) When staying, one develops a biased perspective, according to Eric Leeds in *The Mind of the Traveler*, “viewing the world as comprised of fixed rather than moving points” (Copeland, 2005: 82)

And it is when staying and drafting and (re)writing that the *amazing* is privileged over the *ordinary*, something that does not happen in common diaries. A quite normal fact, if we admit that “there are loads of everyday details recorded in many a diary or notebook and a sense of the ordinary, which is something to be cherished.” (Abildskov, 2005: 87) But if the *ordinary* is cherished, then how should the *amazing* be approached? And what does a travel writer do when

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<sup>7</sup> Actually, it was 45 years.

encountering both the *extraordinary* and the *ordinary*? Magically or not, Patrick Leigh Fermor must have found the formula, even from the very first book he published. About *The Traveller's Tree*, the same Peter Hulme writes that it was a proof that "the English gentlemen were still able to travel the world and to write with witty nonchalance about what they encountered." (Hulme, Young, 2002)

*Witty nonchalance* perfectly describes Leigh Fermor's personality and accounts for the success of his books. "Don't worry, Paddy's not a typical officer or guerilla leader. He's not a typical anything, he's himself... a sort of Gypsy Scholar." These are the words of Daphne Fielding, a friend of Patrick Leigh Fermor, as quoted in a 2016 book by Christopher McDougal, *Natural Born Heroes*, which attempts at re-telling the war episode in Crete. The abduction of a German general, something that no one had succeeded before, was performed by a group of people under the command of somebody who, according to a British war memo, quoted in the same book, "does not submit willingly to discipline, and I think requires firm handling" (McDougal, 2016: 138) Nevertheless, the Gypsy Scholar with discipline issues – even from his high-school time –, had one essential quality. He was an exceptional communicator and a natural born story teller: "When Paddy opens his mouth, shut yours," Lady Diana Cooper, the socialite and celebrated beauty, later advised her granddaughter, the writer Artemis Cooper", who was going to become Paddy's biographer, and the truth is "Paddy's stories cracked like fireworks" (McDougal, 2016: 139).

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### ***3 Remembering and re-inventing Central Europe***

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The gift of story-telling was doubled, in Leigh Fermor's case, by a gift for languages and an insatiable curiosity. That is why his European journey of the 1930s was not a mere physical one, with its single material trace, "The Green Diary", being made available online only in the summer of 2016, at the National Library of Scotland, where the writer's archive is located. It was at the same time a spiritual journey, of the gifted yet slightly reckless teenager to the young man avidly absorbing information from his hosts' books, read along a miraculous pilgrimage. And last but not least it was about the professional attitude of the mature writer, who was constantly asking for reliable information and support from those in the capacity to give them, when slowly forging his masterpieces.

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#### ***3.1 Sic Transit Gloria Transylvania***<sup>8</sup>

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When published, in 1986, *Between the Woods and the Water* was welcomed with the same critical enthusiasm as its prequel and readers started to ask about – and

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<sup>8</sup> This is actually the title of a review by Graeme Gibson, in *The New York Times*.

encouraged the flamboyant author to proceed with –, the third part. It never<sup>9</sup> happened, but the first two books remained “the classic narratives about the countries along the Danube in the 1930s, as fascism was taking hold.” (Burgin, 2013: 165). *A Time of Gifts* stopped at the Hungarian border, and *Between the Woods and the Water* continued across Hungary and into Transylvania. The second book also provides, for the “final years before World War II, the most poetic description of the Danube” (Thomas Kabdebó, in Speake, 2014). Moreover, the books give the reader a sense of Europe in those years, based on the author’s relevant historical knowledge.

Actually, he never missed a chance to get informed, and on the other hand he was lucky to have always met people very preoccupied with the past. The Polymath, for instance, from *A Time of Gifts*, “was a tall, scholarly-looking figure with a long amusing face and large blue eyes. (...) ‘Enquire Within About Everything’: flora, fauna, history, literature, music, archeology – he was a richer source than any castle library.” (Leigh Fermor, 2003: 133). Another one of the same stock was, in *Between the Woods and the Water*, Robert Winkler, Paddy’s host at Tomești in Transylvania: “He was a tall, thin, scholarly man, living alone with his books and his guns on the steep edge of the forest. He and his library were a treasure-house of relevant knowledge” (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 170).

Patrick Leigh Fermor had not been the first to explore Hungary or Transylvania and to write about their mysteries and strangeness. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Hapsburg Empire started to experience a gradual political decay, and that made western travellers, some British among them, employ a colonialist discourse when describing the territories they were travelling through. Thus, Andrew F. Crosse, in his *Round About the Carpathians*, published in 1878, had written that Romanians were like children needing guidance and a “firm hand”, whereas the Saxons’ attitude of self-sufficiency must have been a sign of the “deterioration of a race which does not progress” (cf. Steward, in Speake, 2014). The whole empire is seen like an anachronistic “hotch-potch of races, so to speak, all in one boat, but ready to do anything than pull together.”

Fifty years later, in the 1930s, Leigh Fermor was witnessing the consequences of the Trianon Treaty. Immersed in the libraries of his hosts, he would listen to stories about past greatness and even get caught in the arguments of spouses, especially with those from mixed families. When visiting the Hunyadi castle, which enchantedly reminded him of the Hradcany and the banks of Loire, he noticed the way the Hungarian side of the famous warrior had been minimized in the explanatory notes in Romanian.

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<sup>9</sup> It was made up and edited from his manuscripts by Artemis Cooper and Colin Thubron, and published by John Murray in 2013, with the title *The Broken Road*, two years after Patrick Leigh Fermor’s death.

Count Jenő reacted with fatalism, "They seem to think the Treaty of Trianon awarded them Hungarian history as well as territory," he said, moodily uncorking a bottle. "It's like Corsicans celebrating Napoleon without mentioning France." Turning our backs on the rust and slag some of the iron-works nearby, we had settled under a tree. The castle soared straight ahead. "Well," the Countess said, laying plates on the grass and handing round chicken sandwiches, "I expect the Hungarians underplayed the Rumanian side." I expect they did. (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 118)

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### 3.2 Picturesque vs. Political correctness

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Writing about minorities or about ethnic groups that at a given time used to have a minority status has always been complicated and challenging. Linguistic communities, be they settled or on the road, stirred the curiosity of foreigners travelling in the area, who wrote about them in an age when *political correctness* was not exactly the norm. Still, we have to keep in mind that Patrick Leigh Fermor elaborated his comments half a century after his travel & living within Central Europe. A kind of *gentle detachment* could be felt from his tone, probably fueled by nostalgia for the Golden Age of the pre-war years.

Such is the case with the gypsies he saw during his first night in Hungary, after crossing the border bridge at Esztergom, on the Easter Saturday of 1934 – "There were black and white Dominicans, several nuns and a sprinkling of uniforms, and near the doors a flock of Gypsies in clashing hues leaned whispering and akimbo." (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 15) The *picturesque* approach is maintained when later, after leaving Budapest and heading to Transylvania across the Great Hungarian Plain, he met a party of Gypsies, who "had settled for the night by yet another sweep-well", his arrival on a fine chestnut horse engendering curiosity and a state of agitation inside their tribal aka marginal way of life:

*Snotty mites and tar-babies wore vests that came to their middles and some had nothing on at all, except one or two insecurely hatted in cast-off trilbies so loose they swiveled as they walked. (...) except for the reeds and withies and the half-woven baskets on which brown hands were already busy, the whole tribe might have fled half-an-hour ago from a burning slum.* (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 46)

The Jews were another reference ethnic group in the 1930s Central Europe, and Leigh Fermor succeeded in capturing images of their waning world from the very first encounter with its representatives, on 27 April 1934, when crossing the border from Hungary into Romania, at Curtici. It was the sixth frontier of his journey, he had decided to take the train, as "Someone had said (though I don't think it was exact) that the Rumanian authorities let no one over the frontier on foot" (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 81), and on the platform he noticed another *party*, this time "of

bearded and spectacled rabbis in long black overcoats” (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 84) that had just got off and were having an apparently scholarly impromptu during the train stop: “They were talking Yidish and I somehow picked up the notion that the ones with the foxes’ brushes were Southern Poles from Cracow or Przemysl, perhaps belonging to the zealot sect of Hasidim; and I think they were all bound for some important meeting in Bucharest. (ibid)

Just like the Gypsies, the Jews seemed to be all over the place in Central and Eastern Europe, from Budapest to Bucharest and Cracow. Yet unlike the Gypsies, who never settled but felt at home almost everywhere, the Jews kept settling but always felt that their home was somewhere else, perhaps in what others consider to be an infamous British artifact, the political and ideological construct of Palestine & Israel. When meeting, in the Retezat Mountains, a rabbi and his two sons, Patrick Leigh Fermor got to ponder over the fate of their people in a Shakespeare inspired discourse, after a fruitful discussion over Tora: “Their period of mundane glory passed away; hard days followed; and by the time it had given birth to Christianity and then to Islam, Judaism was in the position of a King Lear hag-ridden by Goneril and Regan, but with no part written for Cordelia, or anyone to act it.” (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 201) Antisemitism is also approached, yet the excitement of the intensely intellectual debate is somehow to be read against the remark on his former prejudices: “I had thought I could never get on friendly terms with such unassailable-looking men.” (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 199)

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#### ***4. Blaze of (the Ottoman) glory***

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The tragic destiny of some ethnic minorities in Central Europe must have been a source for a disquieting reflection in the years after WWII. As he was writing his books with his eyes turned sometimes to a more remote past Patrick Leigh Fermor strived to assess the extent of the at least cultural, if no longer physical, presence of those communities in his days. Some of them had left their marks in a way that would still affect the life of the other ethnic groups and this might be of particular relevance in the Central European countries.

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##### ***4.1 The synergy of visible and less visible traces of the past***

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Wherever he met or whenever remembered having seen visible emblems of a past more or less troubled, he realized and emphasized their double dimension, the impact of not only what was present there but of the absentees as well. For example, the curved sword the Turks had introduced to Arabs and Persians in the Early Middle Ages was appropriated by Hungarians and turned, centuries later, in the modern era, into a parading item, a symbol of their older, glorious times. Nevertheless, in the same episode described in the very first chapter of *Between the Woods and the Water*, “Bridge Passage”, the festive environment in the pre-war years, with Hungarians celebrating Easter in the Esztergom cathedral, the author



takes the image of the ambiguous/not straight shape of the swords as an opportunity for a descent into what used to be the hell of history for both parties engaged in the conflict:

*Those scimitars leaning in the pews, with their gilt and ivory cross-hilts and stagily gemmed scabbards – surely they were heirlooms from the Turkish wars? When their owners rose for the Creed, one of the swords fell on the marble with a clatter. In old battles across the puszta, blades like these sent the Turks' heads spinning at full gallop; the Hungarians' heads too, of course... (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 16)*

In order to resonate with the places he was travelling through, Leigh Fermor followed the route of earlier Western travellers. In the chapter "The Great Hungarian Plain", for instance, he tried to picture for himself the image of an unusual character, the wife of one of the English ambassadors to the Sublime Porte, in 1716, Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu<sup>10</sup> "during a halt, half-furred and half-flimsy in Turkish dress, reading Pope's *Homer* under a poplar tree." (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 51) Such projections in an imagined past, combined with the meticulous attention paid to details, "Törökszentmiklos – the name commemorated the Turks, for a change, and St. Michael as well" (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 59), make us reflect on the assertion about the time that "must pass before a trip shares itself into a story" in the writer's mind and that he/she has "to wait until unessential details drop out of (...) memory and only a sort of fairytale, or parable, remains." (Copeland, 2005: 79).

In Leigh Fermor's travelogue, this is obvious even with trivial items of clothing, like the hats seen in the county where he had been hosted by the family of Count Meran. Years later, one of their relatives, Max, himself a descendant of Emperor Leopold II, felt compelled to give Leigh Fermor a perspective on the text the writer had sent for clarifications: "I think it is very fair to the people living beyond the Iron Curtain if you let me have a look at your manuscript before it is published" (Letter September 16<sup>th</sup> 1981) Living in exile in Vienna, Max wanted both Leigh Fermor and his future readers from all over the world to not get a distorted image of Central Europe, past included. "The coachmen hats, (so wonderfully drawn by you) were made of felt.", and added that Leigh Fermor must have seen them at Körösladány, whereas people in Csákberény, Max's region up north, "had two black ribbons attached to the rear that sort of floated behind them." (ibid.) In the final, published version, the writer, besides merging the two images, is trying his hand at another historical guess:

*I was very struck by the hat which went with the coachman's black-frogged livery. It was a sort of black felt pork-pie – or could it have been velvet – with a brim turned up perpendicular and a black ostrich feather across the crown, fixed in a*

<sup>10</sup> Famous for her *Turkish Embassy Letters* and for promoting in England a primitive form of inoculation for preventing smallpox, which she witnessed while in Turkey.

*semicircle from front to back while two black ribands ending in fish-tails fluttered behind. Was it a legacy of the Turkish spahis or the janissaries; or could it have survived from the early invading Magyars?* (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 68)

The truth is Patrick Leigh Fermor was as good at writing letters as he was at storytelling. He had developed an incredible network of correspondents in Hungary and Transylvania, as “Very many of these people talked English; when an exception cropped up, German was used, sometimes, I think for historical reasons, rather reluctantly; but it was the universal second language.” (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 30). Later on, with some limitations, he had quite the same experience in Wallachia and Moldavia, where French played the part of German and also of the universal first language. He trusted those people not only as friends but also as reliable sources of information with regard to their way of life and its historical implication. Hundreds, if not thousands of letters, contributed to the final shape of *Between the Woods and the Water* and of the parts from *The Broken Road* the writer took beyond drafting. Nevertheless, apart from the magic of his style, or behind it, there is also the very exacting approach, since he wanted to make sure that all the pieces of the puzzle – travel notes, memories, answers, from letters, to repeated inquiries, etc –, would synergistically fall into place.

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#### *4.2 Fleeing from the Turks: migration and settlement*

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The puzzle that made its way into the final fabric of the book had an almost perfect correspondent in the geographical and social reality of the 1930s. Leigh Fermor would pass from one manor to another, encountering people from different levels of the social hierarchy, families with various ethnic backgrounds to which he would easily and happily adjust due to young age and an openness that stayed with him up to the end of his life. In the chapter “The Marches of Transylvania”, when reaching Ötvenes/Utviniş, near Arad, he speaks of it as of “the last of this particular concatenation of friends and houses”. (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 104) Today we would use the word *network* instead of *concatenation*, a *network* in which such manors would work as either a connection point, a redistribution point – “I had met the inhabitants the first evening at Tibor’s.” So it had been at Tibor’s place where Leigh Fermor had fallen under the spell of redistribution –, or a communication endpoint. Luckily, Ötvenes proved not to be such an endpoint, as another *concatenation* (read *network*) emerged and the young traveller was given even more options.

But how these networks came into being is a question at which one may find intriguing answers in Central Europe. At Ötvenes, “The family were Swabians who had settled here when these territories were regained from the Turks, and the spread of their acres had soon enrolled them into the dominant stratum.” (ibid) A similar situation had been encountered months earlier, when reaching Visegrád, on the quay of which he was surprised that he could hear as much German as Magyar.

He realized that once defeated, the former conquerors had to withdraw from the occupied territories, some of which they had practically deserted in earlier times: "When the Turks were driven out, thousands of peasant families from South Germany had boarded flat-bottomed boats and set off from their cities of the Upper Danube, chiefly from Ulm; sailing downstream, they landed on the depopulated shore and settled for good." (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 25)

Unlike the Swabians in Visegrád, the Serbians in Szentendre were the descendants of people "who had fled *from* the Turks three centuries ago" and at the time of Leigh Fermor's journey, "they still talked Serbian and worshipped in the Greek Orthodox Cathedral which their ancestors had built." (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 26) This back and forth movement along and to and within areas of conflict accounts for the enchanting – at least in the eye of the traveller –, ethnic hotchpotch. It also points at an unusual perennial & scary Other, the Ottoman Empire that has left its undeniable imprint on the peoples and ethnic groups of Central Europe. An Other that, just like Derrida's *specter of Marx*, might be the "*revenant* whose return so many raised voices today are attempting to conjure away" (in Wolfries, 1998: 141).

The *revenant* must have been present in the mind of the traveller when at Mohács he decided to spend the night in a bargeman's tavern in order to be able to see the famous battlefield where Suleiman the Magnificent defeated the king of Hungary in 1526, "a defeat as fatal to Hungary as Kosovo to the Serbs and Constantinople to the Greeks." (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 59); Another sultan, Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople, is remembered in "Triple Fugue", a chapter the action of which takes place in Transylvanian towns where the legend of Vlad the Impaler was still vivid. Leigh Fermor recounts the scene in which Mehmet II's punitive army was stopped by the terrible view of a wide valley populated with corpses, rotting on "a forest of spikes". The scene is concluded in a manner that reveals what was at work in the mind of the Wallachian ruler, something that today we would call the Stockholm syndrome, as Vlad had adopted the terrifying practices witnessed while being a childhood hostage in Istanbul: "The Sultan, whose aquiline features and snowy globular turban we know from Bellini's painting and the engraving by Pisanello, had been brought up on blood, like a falcon: he recoiled in horror – some say in respect for the ruthlessness of his rebellious vassal – and burst into tears." (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 155)

The *revenant* was present when the traveler planned to deflect from his way to Yugoslavia "to take the river-steamer round small loops of the Danube to the Bulgarian town of Vidin" (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 219) He very clearly states the reason of the twisted attraction he felt for his intended destination. Unlike Hungary, which "had been subjected to a long Turkish occupation" centuries before and with a not so visible *trace*, or unlike Transylvania and the Rumanian principalities – vassals of the Turks but never occupied by them –, Bulgaria exerted a weird fascination on account on its different past. Five centuries of Turkish occupation

had turned it “into the darkest, most backward and least inviting country in Europe except Albania – unjustly, as I was soon to learn.” (ibid.) Strangely enough, a last minute change of mind, the result of being advised to postpone Vidin and not to miss the Kazan, will take him to a small world on the brink of extinction, where the *revenant* was even more haunting.

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#### 4.3 *The ultimate settlement and the Imperial Other*

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Patrick Leigh Fermor’s last memorable halt, before crossing the Danube into Bulgaria, was the already famous island of Ada Kaleh. He mentions the earlier names of the place and the surrounding legends, the most intriguing one being that of the Argonauts. Their ship was said to have dropped anchor at Ada Kaleh on their way back from Colchis. The great mystery related to the event was the navigation through the Iron Gates and Kazan. “Medeea probably lifted the vessel clear of the spikes by magic” (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 228) was the writer’s conclusion, a guess that he will resume when later he refers to, this time, a particular historical event.

The Turkish inhabitants of Ada Kaleh, presupposed descendants of former soldiers of either Murad I or Bayazid I, must have followed the pattern of the same back and forth movement along and to and within areas of conflict. “Left behind by the retreating Turks, the island has lingered on as an outlying fragment of the Ottoman Empire until the Treaty of Berlin in 1878.” (ibid) Apart from thoroughly paying attention to historical details, the writer keeps a sharp eye on features, clothes and colours, even if in the beginning of the encounter he confessed of being “elated (...) as if I had suddenly seated on a magic carpet.” (ibid) Although downfalling, along the centuries, from imperial glory to geographical and linguistic isolation, the people on the island managed to retain some of the earlier greatness. “In spite of their patched and threadbare clothes, their style and their manners were full of dignity.” (ibid) This is particularly outlined in a scene in which the young traveller is offered both a treat and a sample of sheer *orientalism*.

*Seeing my quandary, a neighbor told me how to begin: first, to drink the small glass of raki; then eat the mouthful of delicious rose-petal jam lying ready spooned on a glass saucer; followed by half a tumbler of water; finally to sip at a dense and scalding thimbleful of coffee slotted in a filigree holder. The ritual should be completed by emptying the tumbler and accepting tobacco, in this case, an aromatic cigarette made by hand on the island. (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 229)*

No wonder that the traveller fell prey to the magic of the place, submitting to the overwhelming charms of the decorative, puppet-like image of the present inhabitants – “children were identically clad-miniatures of the grown-ups and, except for their unveiled faces, the little girls might each have been the innermost of a set of Russian dolls.” (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 230) and of the medieval past, “the eastern end of the island looked as though it might sink under the weight of his

fortification" (ibid) It was a place where empires met – the Ottoman, the Russian and the Austro-Hungarian –, yet all of them extinct at the time of the travel.

Their clashes, and here the Holy Roman Empire is also included, are remembered when trying to fall asleep beside the Danube, an episode similar to the one "at the Easter full moon before crossing the bridge at Esztergom", a round-up anticipating the closure of the narrative. In the Teleki's library, somewhere in Transylvania, he had read about the battle of Nicopolis in 1396 and he knew it was in that area "that the Crusaders' army had crossed the river into the Sultan's dominions." (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 233) an endeavour that seemed geographically and physically impossible. No access route existed at the time and the turbulent depths of the river must have been a formidable challenge:

*How did they do it, then? There was no Medeea to lift them into the air, like Jason and the Argonauts... with the return of sleep, a vision began to take shape. The long and winding procession of the Crusaders, flagged with the crosses and bars of Hungary, the black raven of Wallachia (...); the Palatinate lozenges, and, above all, the fleurs-de-lys of France and Burgundy; and perhaps (only perhaps, alas) the same lilies quartering the Plantagenet leopards; all advancing along the chasm and levitated just above the turbulent currents by sorcery. **There was no other way** (Leigh Fermor, 1988: 235)*

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## 5. Conclusions

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According to legends, the *Plantagenets leopards* were present at Nicopolis, after having successfully *levitated* above the Danube. "Some accounts mention a thousand English men-at-arms," writes Leigh Fermor, "under the Black Prince's stepson (Richard II's half-brother) the Earl of Huntingdon". (Leigh Fermor 1988: 233) The number of people and of ships is questioned by historians. And the truth is that unlike in France and Burgundy, no sad English ballad or lament is to be found about this tragic crusade. So, no *trace*, but if we were to adopt a derridean perspective, the lack of documents is supplied by our 20<sup>th</sup> century author. Leigh Fermor would not have missed the opportunity to bring forth a touch of Englishness, to highlight the presence and active involvement of his conationals in the key moments of European history.

Huntingdon's England was not an imperial one. Two centuries later, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's England was on the verge of taking over the seas from Spain and was looking forward to establishing commercial relations with the Ottoman Empire, which had been close to conquering Vienna. In the 1930s, Leigh Fermor's Britain had the largest colonial empire ever. Still, the British writer had his cast of doubt over the fate of empires when, in the previous book, *A Time of Gifts*, speculated about the creepy possibility of an alternative history. "What if the Turks

had taken Vienna, as they nearly did, and advanced westward? (...) And suppose the Sultan, with half east at his heel, had pitched his tents outside Calais?"

Both questions are referred to in an almost similar manner by Tom Chesshyre in the book mentioned in our introduction, as he had *A Time of Gifts* as a faithful companion in his 21<sup>st</sup> century travels. And the specter of the *revenant* seems to be, in the year 2015, almost on the verge of materializing:

*It was an interesting perspective. If the Turks had taken Vienna, my current trip might have been quite different. Would there have been tourist islands with sommeliers, cocktail bars and dancing? Or would I have been joining the Sam crowd and kneeling in the direction of Mecca? Maybe the sun and the salty air were getting at me.* (Chesshyre, 2015)

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