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## ONCE UPON A TIME IN RURITANIA

**Vesna Goldsworthy, *Iron Curtain. A Love Story***

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In the 1990s, after the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union collapsed, a substantial literature about the West imagining the East (of Europe) emerged. Larry Wolff, in *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization* (1994) starts from the assumption that, despite the great chasm between East and West, the boundaries separating the two have always been variable. While pre-Enlightenment divisions opposed the North and the South, the agenda of the eighteenth-century western states favoured the invention of an “East”, projected against the urgency of stabilizing the concept of civilization. This is the moment when, according to the historian, the tradition of an alleged superiority emerged, a tradition which has dominated geopolitical thought ever since. While the Far East may have benefitted from a degree of romantic embellishment, encouraged by remoteness, the East of the European continent was at a disadvantage because of its proximity, being presented as a handy model of underdevelopment. Maria Todorova, in *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), writes that, a decade after communism had collapsed, the instability in the region sparked the attention of the West again, this time in the sense of an overall stigmatization. The Bulgarian scholar proposes an alternative term to Said’s Orientalism – Balkanism, a strategy not of defining otherness, but of finding the underlying difference within the European continent. For her, Balkanism is also something more concrete than Orientalism, something transitional, not Western, but, at the same time, not entirely non-European. If it is, after all, European, it is a more immature, more barbaric European territory. Todorova senses the ultimate paradox in the process of “Balkanizing” Eastern Europe: while blaming the forced homogenization for the conflicts in the region, the western imagination about the Balkans tends to regard the region in homogenizing terms.

Vesna Goldsworthy’s imagological study about the Balkans completes the list. In *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination* (1998), Goldsworthy illustrates the process of the imaginative colonization of the European East by the West, especially by British nineteenth-century fiction. Whether it is Bram Stoker’s Transylvania or Anthony Hope’s Ruritania and Kravonia, the East of the continent is an exotic and a threatening space, which is mapped textually rather than geographically. If not proper colonies of the western empire(s), the countries in the Balkans have been subject to a form of neo-imperialism, Goldsworthy argues

– not economic, but narrative, literary. What else could be the plot of *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), where an imaginary country in the East is rescued from chaos and war by an English gentleman who happens to drop by?

Vesna Goldsworthy applies this theoretical framework in her own, more recent fiction. *Gorsky* (2015) is a rewriting of Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, set in contemporary London. The British capital is rendered exotic by virtue of being populated significantly by Eastern European emigrés – Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian. The American story of the roaring twenties is rewritten so as to fit a new sort of cosmopolitanism, which could also indicate a reverse imaginative colonization – from East to West. In *Monsieur K* (2018), Goldsworthy uses the intertextual connection with Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to evoke an equally cosmopolitan landscape. This time, it is postwar London, impoverished and grey, in which the survivors of a bygone age strive to adapt to a new world order. The fact that these survivors are not just any Russian emigrés, but also the descendants of the fictional nineteenth-century tragic heroine, spices up the plot even further.

In *Iron Curtain*, the intertextual backdrop is present in the name of the male protagonist, Jason, a poet who hits fame after the publication of a collection entitled *The Argonauts*. Like his mythological namesake, Jason embarks on a trip eastwards to find a special kind of Golden Fleece, in the person of a “red princess”, the privileged daughter of a high official in an unnamed communist country. Goldsworthy's latest novel is set in the last decade of European communism, one that progresses towards the dissolution of the Cold War geopolitical organization of the old continent. Several consecutive literal thaws which dominate the climatic context of the novel foretell the metaphoric thaw of Glasnost and Perestroika, the relaxation that eventually brought about the fall of the USSR. The protagonists of the story play the alternative roles of insider and outsider in each other's country, the clash, merge, and separation between East and West taking a romantic turn. Jason arrives in the communist bloc for a poetry reading at a festival, a fair-haired, light-headed nonconformist, out of place in the “staid” atmosphere of Soviet-inspired patriarchy. Milena Urbanska, Jason's interpreter during the festival, falls in love with him and decides to leave her homeland behind for his sake. Arriving in London, Milena, who has had the privilege to travel in style in other western countries, finds the metropolis, the people and the mentalities entirely different from what she had expected.

Goldsworthy operates a certain relativization in depicting the East and the West in the novel. The unnamed communist country, which could be any Soviet satellite or another imaginary Ruritania, with all its restrictions and deprivations, with the control and the surveillance that any reader from the Eastern bloc can recognize and relate to instantly, is not entirely dreary and pathetic and doesn't always look like the Gulag. This is even less true for the members of the elite. Milena, her mother, and her friends live in large villas in the suburbs, go shopping abroad, are in contact with western culture in their home cinemas, in short, lead a sheltered existence, which brings them closer to the standards of those above average living in the West. Conversely, the West is not necessarily a paradise. When Milena moves to Britain, she is shocked to take in the shabbiness of a metropolis she had pictured as glamorous and wealthy. She lands in a post-Winter of Discontent landscape, the Thatcherite Britain of the 80s, where even well-paid yuppies live in mouldy basements, walk in dirty neighbourhoods and drink cheap wine from coffee mugs.

In Vesna Goldsworthy's novel, the divide between East and West doesn't lie mainly in lifestyle and mentalities. The passion which brings the two characters together, against all odds, wears off soon enough because of the differences in their personalities. Jason is immature, self-centered and a fair-weather Marxist, while Milena, with her more traditional upbringing, has a strong sense of family and duty.

*Iron Curtain* may be partially an autobiography – less so than *Chernobyl Strawberries* (2005), but definitely more so than *Gorsky* or *Monsieur K*. Milena is, as Vesna presented herself in the evocation of her youth's Belgrade, “a spoilt child of communism”, only more determined, strong and realistic. The heroine's voice and outlook, like Goldsworthy's, reveal both worlds, in the years of troubled transition and paradoxes which were the 80s, in a crude, almost naturalistic light, where raw emotions and sharp observation dominate, topped by a vivid writing style and an alert pace.

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