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and the “West” in Early
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Image from cover: Portrait of Jovan Skerlić (1877-1914), public domain.

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Abstract

The study reinterprets the conflict between Jovan Skerlić (1877–1914), a literary historian, social-democrat politician, staunch advocate of the Europeanization of Serbia, one of the most influential public intellectuals of his time, generally considered to be the “apostle of the West,” and Isidora Sekulić (1877–1958), a writer, who despite the modernist poetics of her works, is regarded as a belated exponent of national Romanticism. The interpretation of their works, focused on their respective constructions of the “West” and “Europe” on the eve of the First World War, reveals how unstable and shifting are the conceptual frames in which conventional interpretations of nationalist and “Westernizer” positions are carried out. The study argues that the stability which the “pro-” and “anti-Western” positions have in the Cold War context cannot be transferred to an analysis of early twentieth-century East European culture. Despite their clash, neither Skerlić nor Sekulić can be branded as either Westernizers or nationalists. The study aims to analyze the position occupied by both of them—in addition to many other East European intellectuals and politicians of the same period—and suggest “cosmopolitan nationalism” as its name.

The histories of all peoples tell of conflicts between significant actors, which cultural historians tend to interpret as nodal points, rifts, or fissures that stand for major collisions between wider historical forces. In Serbia's cultural history at the beginning of the twentieth century one such rift occurred between Jovan Skerlić (1877–1914), a literary historian, a social-democratic politician and one of the most influential public intellectuals of his time, and the writer Isidora Sekulić (1877–1958). Skerlić has been generally considered to be the “apostle of the West,” who viewed the Europeanization of Serbia as the primary aim of his intellectual, public, and political engagement; Sekulić, despite the modernist poetics of her works, is regarded as a belated exponent of national Romanticism. It would be tempting to assume that their confrontation was between Skerlić the Westernizer and Sekulić the nationalist; however, literary and cultural histories tell a different story, in which Skerlić the nationalist took cosmopolitan Isidora Sekulić to task for her lack of national feelings.

Such inconsistencies usually indicate the unstable and shifting conceptual frames that underlie certain interpretations. They point to more significant problems than a century-old quarrel between two writers. The inconsistency in question results from a tendency to analyze all cultures deemed to be “non-Western” in categories borrowed from representations of the rift between Slavophiles and Westernizers in nineteenth-century Russia. Following this pattern, the onset of modernization always divides a traditional society into two clear-cut camps, pitting autochthonists, traditionalists, and nationalists, on one side, against Westernizers, modernizers, and cosmopolitans, on the other. While this may be a necessary and acceptable simplification, it is usually followed by a further oversimplifying turn of the screw: the former are said to be “anti-Western,” and the latter “pro-Western.” This is where the interpretative frame becomes unstable to the point of being useless in cultural history: it not only falsifies the intellectual and political position of modernizers and Westernizers who were nevertheless nationalists—such as, for example, Skerlić's and Sekulić's contemporary Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), a Turkish writer and sociologist who was at the same time a proponent of Westernization and a Turkish nationalist; but it also overwrites the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history of many societies with Cold War rhetoric. While the latter was characterized by a high degree of conceptual stability—“West” and “East” referring to the two military alliances—transferring “pro-” and “anti-Western” or “pro-” and “anti-European” to periods preceding the Cold War historical context only leads to conceptual confusion. The stability which these concepts have in the analyses of the Cold War context cannot be transferred to an analysis of, for example, early twentieth-century East European culture. Should we try to do so, we would be ignoring the fact that the “West” and “Europe” were

and still are highly unstable discursive constructions.¹ “Europe” can be discursively constructed in such a manner that it foregrounds nineteenth-century imperialism, in which case categorizing an author as “anti-European” does not mean the same as when “Europe” is constructed to foreground the Enlightenment, scientific and technological progress, or a cultural tradition. The “pro-” and “anti-” categories become useful only if the content of “West” is clearly specified: namely, if there is no ambiguity as to what someone was for or against.

The present study reinterprets Isidora Sekulić’s and Jovan Skerlić’s positions regarding the “West” and “Europe” on the eve of the First World War. Since “a national discourse on Europe is also a discourse on the nation speaking about Europe” (Frank 2002, 311), it will also reveal their respective constructions of “Serbia.” I hope to demonstrate that, despite their conflict, neither Skerlić nor Sekulić can be branded as either Westernizer or nationalist, but that they both occupy a position which can be described as a paradoxical “cosmopolitan nationalism.”

Unfortunate Small Peoples Are Sublime

Isidora Sekulić’s travelogue *Pisma iz Norveške* (Letters from Norway, 1914) is arguably the most important travel book in modern Serbian literature. Only this book and Ljubomir Nenadović’s *Pisma iz Italije* (Letters from Italy, 1868–1869) have achieved canonical status within the travelogue genre, and they have been often included in school curricula as required reading. Even those who are not great readers are familiar with them, so much so that *Pisma iz Norveške* will be the first association that many Serbs make when Norway is mentioned; even if they do not know anything else about the country, they will certainly know something about Sekulić’s book. “The Norway from her letters became the Norway in the minds of many generations of readers,” maintains Ljubiša Rajić, a professor of Norwegian language and literature at the University of Belgrade, “and according to several consecutive surveys of the representation of Norway among students of Norwegian language and literature, even the television revolution in the representation of distant countries has not been able to challenge Sekulić’s image of Norway’s nature and people. It sometimes seems that readers do not actually want any other image, as they seem to be perfectly content with hers” (Rajić 1997, 9). Though almost a century has elapsed since its publication, Sekulić’s book is still very much alive and influential, and it continues to produce a representation of Norway which, as far as the Serbian reading public is concerned, stands for the country itself.

Out of the twelve volumes of Sekulić's collected works, nine comprise essays and often very brief newspaper articles. It seems that she consciously neglected her unquestionable narrative talent, which is strikingly obvious in her five novels and collections of stories, in favor of promoting what she understood as her cultural mission in Serbia and later in Yugoslavia. A polyglot and polymath with an admirable knowledge of the classics, philosophy, art history, and several European literary traditions and also possessing a sound knowledge of history and the sciences—she had a degree in mathematics and physics—in her essays she covered an enormous number of different topics, from the Greeks to the latest novels of contemporary European writers and traditional Japanese theater.² Frequently, her essays and articles were the first accounts of various topics and themes in Serbian culture. Sekulić wrote on a daily basis, and not for eternity but for contemporary readers, whom she wanted to inform and educate. Her aim was to introduce into Serbian culture the values and standards of other cultures and traditions, as a way of reminding a small and relatively young culture of the wider context, of values achieved elsewhere, and of the need to put more effort into cultural production if it was to withstand a comparison sometime in the future. And effort she certainly made: she produced as much as a small research institute. One of her collections of essays the editor quite appropriately entitled *Služba* (Service), which, in Serbo-Croat as in English, refers not only to mundane, everyday work, to an occupation or a profession, but also to a religious service. Isidora Sekulić performed her cultural service with almost religious fervor, expecting to achieve her personal salvation and redemption by means of an assiduous, everyday fulfilling of what she considered to be her calling. She also cultivated an image of someone who had just left her monastic cell—an image conveyed very frequently in her letters.³

However, in spite of her great enthusiasm for the arts and culture in general, and the impressive range of themes which she dealt with so knowledgeably, her essays display a lack of clear theoretical conceptions and are inconsistent in their approach to artistic and cultural phenomena. Nevertheless, at the time of their publication, these essays must have left a different impression. Her excellent reputation is based on the judgement of readers from the first wave of reception, who saw Sekulić as someone opening cultural horizons in several directions. Miodrag Pavlović, who belonged to a small circle of young writers who gathered around her in the last years of her life, summed up her work in the following manner: “She contributed considerably to the broadening of our cultural horizons which, through great pains and more through the efforts of individuals than of cultural institutions, had been stripped of provinciality, and thus reached global cultural currents. . . . This is not the

kind of job that one can accomplish once and for all. Small languages and literatures such as ours are always threatened by the provincialization of horizons and creative intentions” (1981, 106). Pavlović did not see her primarily as a writer, but as a public intellectual, an enlightener of morals, a cultural missionary, and most of all as a “type of eighteenth-century enlightener” (106). To the eclectic list of themes she wrote about in her essays, Pavlović adds the eclecticism of her opinions and attitudes: her thought was a mixture of Slav populism and Victorian intellectualism, political progressiveness and conservatism, philanthropy and metaphysical subjectivism; it was Slavophile and West-oriented, Roman Catholic and Orthodox. Thus, Pavlović claims Isidora Sekulić was a cultural missionary typical of small Balkan cultures: “In less developed cultures one can often find examples of authors aware of the relative cultural vacuum in which they live, those who cannot resist the temptation of performing various literary and cultural functions, and who themselves eventually come to represent or to stand for various cultural currents. They become national writers because they simultaneously express the opinions and aspirations of several social strata, and sometimes make up for the shortcomings of cultural institutions, and for the incompleteness of cultural epochs in the history of their peoples. Such was the case of Isidora Sekulić” (109). Pavlović also testified that shortly before her death she told him that “everything she had done in her life was merely a handful of pebbles thrown into the holes of our non-culture” (117).

Such cultural missionaries are not typical of Balkan cultures alone. Following Pascale Casanova’s research into the ways of creating a “world literary space,” it can be maintained that a similar type of cultural missionary appears with a certain regularity in all smaller cultures in modern times: they are the “polyglot and cosmopolitan figures of the world of letters” who perform the task of enriching their own national cultural spaces (Casanova 2004, 21). One of the most common ways of enriching these spaces, which have, for various historical reasons, accumulated fewer resources compared to those spaces in which vernacular languages became the instrument of culture much earlier, is “in-translation, conceived as annexation and reappropriation of the foreign patrimony, [as] another way of adding to a fund of literary resources” (325). Such transfers of cultural and literary capital, through the importation of foreign patrimony, facilitate the creation of a basis upon which the creation of national cultural riches can be accomplished with greater speed. For, as Casanova warns, “[l]iterary capital is inherently national. Through its essential link with language . . . literary heritage is a matter of foremost national interest” (34). Familiarity with cultural values is not sufficient; if they are to be genuinely productive, they need to appear in the national language, which means they have to

be translated. The process is contradictory, and Casanova builds a significant part of her argument on this contradiction: the initial motive is national, even nationalistic, that is, the enrichment of one's own culture, which through the national language is closely connected with the political sphere, especially in those spaces which have gained their statehood only recently; but the very process of enrichment takes the given culture away from any presumed "authenticity" and into the orbit of the denationalized, common cultural space of the planet. This is how the national-patriotic impetus of developing one's own culture necessarily leads to its overcoming and to what we in our moments of optimism call a common human culture.

Sekulić's first book, a collection of lyrical prose entitled *Saputnici* (Co-travelers, 1913) could have served at the time of its publication as a benchmark of absolute modernity, and *Pisma iz Norveške* was not far behind. However, reproached by Jovan Skerlić, the most influential literary critic of the time, she retreated to a more conservative aesthetic position.⁴ The generation of writers to emerge after the First World War, which included among others Stanislav Vinaver, Rastko Petrović, Miloš Crnjanski, and Ivo Andrić, entered into aesthetic modernity without any difficulty: they were familiar with the values and standards of cultures "rich in resources," and at least two of them, Crnjanski and Andrić, created works which compare favorably with those of their European contemporaries. Sekulić's mixture of ideological and aesthetic positions and values must have struck them as an aesthetic and cultural anachronism. Hence Dragan Jeremić's apt characterization of her as "the last national Romantic writer" (Ribnikar 1986, 246). Did this entail being a "nationalist" as well? Vladislava Ribnikar argues that this must have been so, but she also adds that Sekulić, true to her tendency of harmonizing extremes, did try to bring together nationalism and cosmopolitanism: "Isidora Sekulić was inclined to an understanding of literature which was incompatible with the national and patriotic aims brought to her and her contemporaries by historical circumstances. . . . As an artist, in *Saputnici* and *Pisma iz Norveške* she followed her own orientation, refusing to accept Skerlić's ideal of 'life-giving' literature adapted to national interests and aims. In her essays and criticism, however, she felt a strong duty toward the community and hence her vacillation regarding pessimistic and 'decadent' literature, and the individualism of modern artists" (52). Ribnikar also quotes the balanced judgement of Todor Manojlović: "Sekulić stands on the border of two epochs. Behind her is the simple, naïve, and limited life of our people, with their limited intellectual horizon, their religiously consecrated traditions and memories, and their collective and impersonal poetry. In front of her is the great and glitzy West, with its multifarious, refined, attractive, and problematic modern culture, with all its unanticipated and intoxicating

allure, dangers, beauties, and abysses. Isidora Sekulić was one of the first to enter this newest and farthest West, which still had not won and was still conscripting its warriors and first heralds” (73).

It seems that even Sekulić herself would not have argued against being labeled a nationalist. However, her understanding of the term may not be identical with ours today. During the Balkan wars of 1912–1913, the most nationalistic and patriotic period of the early twentieth century, and between her first visit to Norway in 1911 and the publication of the travelogue in 1914, she wrote an article entitled “Cultural Nationalism” in which she charted her understanding of the term. “During our political and cultural troubles we gave our nationalism many different forms. We have had narrow chauvinism, filled with epic poems, petty aims, powerless threats and hopes” (1966c, 120). This is not a form of nationalism she would identify with. What she had in mind was a nationalism of peacetime, a “normal, quietly active nationalism. . . . This nationalism should be, both in its content and in its form, a pure, high culture. Culture in the best sense of the word. Morality, humanism, ethics, honesty. Honesty and excellence, not only Serbian, but pan-human” (122). In only two sentences Sekulić goes from nationalism proper to something which is characterized by excellence, ethics, humanism, and non-national, universal culture—while still preserving the term *nationalism* for it. This “form of nationalism” loses everything that is properly national and becomes cosmopolitan, because “national consciousness is never civilized, it is always a simple, narrow, peasant’s consciousness with its greedy, hungry morality” (123). Cultural nationalism has a paradoxical aim: “The level of our national life should not be moved, but raised. Our aspiration for national progress should be given another, more complex form. We need a new understanding, not of our relation to our friends and foes, but of our relation to all humanity. Our aspirations must be similar to and a part of the aspirations of the entire civilized world” (123). Nationalism, as she understands it, is an obstacle to cultural progress. In order to make cultural progress possible, nationalism must be replaced by cosmopolitanism. However, she does not use both terms, but calls cosmopolitanism the “nationalism of humanity” (*čovečanski nacionalizam*):

While we further only our own narrow nationalism, and not the nationalism of humanity, we cannot have any high, maximal achievements. Maximal achievements demand maximal energy and maximal liberty, which can be found only if narrowness is defeated, only if we strive toward broadmindedness, universality, all-goodness, and all-honesty. . . . The power-idea, the symbol-idea and the cult-idea of our nationalism should be based not only on our own experience and our national tradition, but on the knowledge and philosophy of the whole world. . . . Purified ideas and systems should be taken from great, nonsentimental and noncholeric minds, and in that way a great, unselfish

and nonmalicious culture should be created. The Scandinavian peoples are a wonderful example of a new and young, but successfully founded national culture, which is Scandinavian as much as it is pan-human. (124)

She could not find this “nationalism of humanity” in contemporary Belgrade, only a “narrow, uncultured nationalism” (127), “pollution, a hatred of everything which is not ours, and a threatening clenched fist shaken from a great distance,” a nationalism which can only serve “for conquest, for educating soldiers and officers, and for resisting bullies and injustice” (126). Sekulić wanted to see something else: “Here again one is reminded of Scandinavian nationalism. And the British type. They may not be very colorful, but they are very cultured nationalisms. They are the nationalisms which make you great” (127). Such a nationalism Serbia did not have, and in order to acquire it, there was only one path: “There is only one means to obtain it, and it is culture as broad, as good, and as human as possible” (126). At the end of “Cultural Nationalism,” the idea of nationalism is turned into its opposite: cosmopolitanism. As for nationalism proper, Sekulić had no doubts: she called it “bloody nationalism,” an “immortal Hydra with a hundred heads” which only “all the political and cultural efforts of all states can prevent from opening its jaws” (176). Bloody nationalism is that “horrible state when a people cannot imagine other peoples in a normal way, cannot trust other peoples and wish them well” (325).

Why did she not simply call cosmopolitanism by its proper name? Why disguise it under the oxymoronic label of “nationalism of humanity”? There are reasons to believe that in the nationalistic fury preceding the First World War, declaring support for the ideals of cosmopolitanism would not have made one many friends, and consequently it could only be sold under the label of the “official” ideology, which was nationalism. She would not allow *Pisma iz Norveške* to be republished for thirty-six years, and when she eventually consented in 1951, she thought that an extensive foreword was needed. It makes for an odd read: almost four decades later, in post-Second World War Yugoslavia, under Tito’s regime, which suppressed nationalism as much as it could, Sekulić still felt the need to defend herself against accusations of being a cosmopolitan and insufficiently nationalistic. Although the foreword was mostly about Skerlić, one can presume that his name only stands for the nationalistic spirit prevalent in Serbian culture and society before the First World War. “Nationalism is a significant and wicked thing; it does not want to know that cosmopolitanism is most frequently a question of culture” (Sekulić 1951, 15). In the years before the war, continues Sekulić, “Skerlić became intolerant of anything

tepid and skeptical, anything that might contradict the tendencies of belligerent nationalism” (16). And not only Skerlić:

We were all swimming in the current of nationalism, with greater or lesser fanaticism. . . . As with all fanatics of great intelligence, as was the case with Skerlić the nationalist, he did not make great mistakes, but he sometimes shot in a direction even though there was nothing to kill. That was the intention of his literary and political criticism of cosmopolitan ideas and styles, of the Europeanness which at the time nourished a pessimistic flair in poetry and the novel. . . . However, who was a cosmopolitan in a small, sickening, simple country such as Serbia at the time, and with what means? . . . Was it us from Vojvodina, who for the sake of our roots escaped to Serbia? Serbs at that time could only have something cosmopolitan, to a greater or lesser extent, in their culture. And in culture, everybody, even Skerlić, must have had cosmopolitan ideas and features, because there is only one culture in all of humanity, it is by its nature cosmopolitan and, if nothing else to this day, culture is, at least, the force that unites us all! (16)

Sekulić’s second, and perhaps more important reason for choosing the oxymoronic label of the “nationalism of humanity” now becomes evident. Both “nationalism” and “cosmopolitanism” would misrepresent the identity position she aimed to occupy. That third position was not simply between the former two, neither one nor the other, nor composed of a bit of both; it was above them and included both. In its center was the notion of culture: national, because it was grown on the soil of a national language, and supranational, cosmopolitan, because the innate momentum of a genuine culture is to transcend its place of origin and to strive to become “panhuman.”

Such was Sekulić’s devotion to culture that it never occurred to her that culture may not in fact be an efficient antidote against nationalism and violence. In spite of similar historical experiences, she would never write George Orwell’s memorable sentence, “As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me” (2004, 11). She did not see that many currents in nineteenth-century European culture, which she loved and knew so well, got along quite nicely with contemporary European nationalism and racism. Sekulić firmly believed that sharing cultural values, participating in the common culture of humanity, taking from it and giving back something in return, weaves a fabric that interconnects peoples into a unified whole, where all possible conflicts can be prevented by mutual understanding. She was a Romantic nationalist who wanted Serbian culture enriched, denationalized, and included in the common cultural space of the planet. In her essay “Cultural Contacts Are Human Happiness,” in which she discusses Cavafy, Day Lewis, and much else, she wrote: “Culture enriches people, art is human happiness, and hap-

piness is international, it has been the same for all humans since time immemorial” (1966a, 133). The history of human culture is made up of chains of hands which pass something on to each other; culture is what goes around and makes people happy. However, apart from making people happy, culture has one more role to play in the lives of small peoples. *Pisma iz Norveške* is also about that.

The most common destinations of Serbian intellectuals before the First World War were Switzerland, Germany, and Italy, occasionally England and, most of all, France. As a travel destination, and even more so as the topic of a travelogue, Norway was quite an unusual choice. Whatever reason she may have had for visiting Norway, Isidora Sekulić wrote a book about it precisely because of what Norway was not: it was not big, rich, powerful; it had been dominated by its mightier neighbors for centuries, and had become independent only recently; compared to the more traditional travel destinations, it lacked both cultural prestige and an appeal to those who “travelled for the sake of education.” France was popular not only as a country whose universities offered a good education, but also as a place where one learned simply by living there, or even by just visiting. The libraries and museums, the experience of urban living, the culture of everyday life, and the latest fashions of Parisian women were objects of travellers’ interests and importation. Norway did not appear to be a country that could offer much in that respect, but as a country which, much in the same way as Serbia, wanted to learn from others.

If going to Paris never needed any justification, going to Norway in 1911, while Serbia was reaching boiling point on the eve of the Balkan wars, must have seemed like trading a place where history rolled in the streets for a place where not much happened at all. Since King Petar I Karadorđević, a liberal and the translator of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, had taken the throne in 1903, the cultural life of Belgrade had blossomed. The literary historian Predrag Palavestra views that period as the “golden age” of Serbian culture, citing constitutional monarchy, liberal parliamentary democracy, open borders, freedom of the press, and prevalent French cultural influence as its main political and social features (1986, 23–24). The Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 homogenized public opinion and created a wave of nationalism, which would in the following years lend support to the war for the liberation of the remaining parts of Serbia under Ottoman rule. Those who had taken part in these events later described them as the closure of a centuries’ long period and as the dawn of a new era. This triumphal spirit would not last long—the First World War was a rude awakening—but at least for a brief moment everybody had the feeling of witnessing an inspiring and positive historical period.

It is understandable that, compared with what she had left behind, Sekulić experienced Norway as a place where there was no history at all. “Long ago, belligerent Norwegian warriors and Vikings were rebels and avengers. . . . They removed all obstacles in a barbaric manner, they celebrated their victories in a barbaric manner, and they sang about their achievements barbarically,” she wrote (1971, 97–98). There was energy and passion in Norway, but only in its distant, barbaric past. It did not last long enough for Norwegians to create a “more beautiful history” (1971, 108), and now they have in their capital only two monuments to their kings—and one of them is a Dane, the other a Swede. “No history is as simple as Norwegian history, . . . and no destiny as uninstrucive as the destiny of Norwegians” (99). They were sometimes in union with Denmark, sometimes with Sweden, but always as the junior partner who is ruled by the senior.

Long ago, I would say *too long* ago, the smell of blood disappeared both from their history and their poetry. Norwegians prematurely assumed the attitude of bitter resignation which says that all human struggles are eventually concluded by man wanting what God wants. . . . A peasant, who under such unusually hard conditions struggles for a piece of bread, should have remained a predator for much longer, he should have been thirsty and hungry for earthly riches, and should thus have accumulated more raw national strength which later could have been transformed into the energy of modern life. However, he merely copes with his lot, instead of developing his potential. Instead of being strong and resistant, he is sly and crafty. (98)

Too soon have Norwegians “tamed their own blood, and wiped up the bloody stains around themselves” (101). Not only can barbarity, blood, passion, and struggle be transformed into the energy of modern life, they also leave behind traces of culture: as Walter Benjamin would later claim that there was no document of culture which would not at the same time be a record of barbarity, Sekulić here claims that there is no barbarity which is not eventually documented as culture: “Where are their splendid and at the same time dark medieval cathedrals? Where are their paintings of battlefields with horses and heroes awash with blood? . . . And finally, where is the time when the people as a whole are one single Romantic hero who, carried away with ideals, commits great and unusual deeds, when the life of the entire populace is one single rich epic, when the whole nation is impregnated by the power of a single expansive and dangerous passion, which is *la force qui va* in the Romanticism of all peoples, and which elevates and makes one great?” (101). They have skipped a chapter in their history, concludes Sekulić. It is not only the briefness of the barbaric, Viking period, in which blood is shed, battles are fought passionately, raw energy is accumulated, and dark Gothic cathedrals are erected. It

is the complete absence of national Romanticism. This is the time when the barbaric epoch, no matter how brief or even fictitious it may be, is recalled and transformed into paintings and epic poems, and the people become personified as a Romantic hero who commits great deeds following his expansive and dangerous passion. National Romanticism is an explosion of raw force, and as such must be barbaric. However, this is a good barbarity, says Sekulić, because it develops strength and resistance which are later transformed into the energy of modern life and prevents one from sinking into resignation, into accepting what God, or whoever else is more powerful, wants us to be. This is what Norwegians skipped in their history, and what Sekulić was experiencing in Serbia between her first journey to Norway in 1911 and 1914, the year of the publication of *Pisma iz Norveške*: a wave of triumphant national Romanticism.

Instead of passing in an orderly manner through all the stages of national development, as Sekulić sees them, Norwegians became “cultured in the European manner” prematurely. From their small wooden churches, they quickly moved into “whitewashed, bright and sober Protestant ones, which are more reading and preaching rooms than churches” (102). They became individualists before they completed their national consolidation, and everyone began seeking individual liberation before they achieved their national one. To be “cultured in the European manner” refers here to individualism, to the concern for intellectual and moral problems that are not necessarily connected with national ones. So they “napped” in the union with Denmark, and just barely snapped awake: “Shouldn’t a nation which enjoys strength and health as no other in Europe, which has one of the most beautiful countries in the world, a nation which had literature before the cultured English, and which has the highest and the best culture of all small and historically unfortunate European nations, shouldn’t this nation be autonomous and take care of its own business!” (105). However, even after 1905, the year in which they gained independence, the Norwegians remained more “culturally sensitive” than “nationally sensitive.”

For Isidora Sekulić there is an implicit hierarchy of cultures, built not on cultural achievements—in that respect Norwegians score very highly—but on the presence of the “national principle” within it, or the lack thereof. In order to exemplify this, Sekulić resorts to a distinction with which her Serbian reader must have been familiar: the distinction between Serbs from Serbia and those who lived in Austria-Hungary, among which she counted herself. The latter “have an old and strong culture, but a culture which they received from the hands of others and without having their national liberty, as some sort of luxury which was disproportionate to the position of a subjugated people, or as a sort of graft, which did blossom and bear fruit, but not

always in line with the needs of the people” (105). Here she promotes the organic conception of culture, created in the time of Romantic nationalism and based on sharp distinctions between the authentic and the inauthentic, the home-grown and the imported. This understanding of culture not only contradicts what she would later understand as her life mission—dismantling the very concepts of cultural “authenticity” and “autochthony” by trying to bring Serbian culture closer to the orbit of the greatest and the best of world culture—but it is also in sharp contrast with her claims in “Cultural Nationalism,” written at the same time as *Pisma iz Norveške*, in which she promoted the idea of culture as nonnational and cosmopolitan and claimed that to be national in the cultural sphere meant to seek the integration of one’s own culture into the universal culture of humanity.

The advantages of “organic,” “authentic” national culture over “imported,” “grafted,” denationalized “European” culture are presumed to be effective in the political sphere. Organic culture serves as the cement of the nation, or as a reservoir of national strength and energy ready to be mobilized in times of need: “Serbia, on the other hand, was more fortunate than both Norway and the Serbs from Austria-Hungary. Serbia first achieved its liberation, and only then entered into culture, i.e., created culture, delivered its own culture from itself. The significance of having not only a cultural, but also a national-cultural understanding of all phenomena became obvious in 1912 and 1913, when we saw with our own eyes how people following their national-cultural duty went to a national-cultural war. This is why I have more respect for Serbia’s little culture than for Norwegian culture, and why I increasingly lose respect for, say, Swiss culture” (106). What Norwegians skipped in their national development—national Romanticism—Sekulić understands as the reservoir of political and national energy. It preserves memories of times of blood, strength, and barbarity, which can be recalled and put to use when blood, strength, and barbarity are needed again. For Sekulić to be cultured in the European manner means to erase the barbaric capacity in oneself, while being cultured in a national manner obviously means preserving it. Small peoples need to preserve their barbaric potential in order to become and remain free. Being cultured in the European manner, being individualistic and developing a culture which does not smell of blood and struggle is a luxury: something that small peoples long to have, but cannot afford.

The reason for the Norwegians’ lack of history, and consequent lack of an organic national culture, is the harshness of nature: “Nature in this country is so much more superior to the people, both in terms of its beauty and in its ferocity, that everything important and interesting in the Norwegian past appears more as a destiny of the realm than as the destiny of the people” (99). Instead of fighting the

occupiers and creating a “beautiful history,” they were forced to fight nature and to exhaust all their strength in that struggle. Instead of having a history, Norwegians have nature. However, their fight against nature appears to be very similar to other small peoples’ struggles with mightier occupiers. If this were not so, what would be the interest in writing about them?

“And what am I doing in this country of ice and poverty?” ponders Sekulić at the beginning of the book, immediately offering an answer: “I am drawn to trouble and anathema. I admire those who must plough stone, but can still provide bread” (87). Passing through Denmark she already notices that everything resembles “one of our poor villages” (72), although Norwegians claim that Denmark “is a rich country, in which peasants do well” (71). When one crosses the Norwegian border, one feels as though one were “entering the house of a very poor and very lonely man” (73). They live in a country bereft of any roads or villages, and since the soil cannot support them, there are very few of them: “everything is very distant, and there are no people, because it’s so cold and infertile” (80). Norway strikes her as being a cold desert, with a few scattered oases in which a few sad and poor souls live out their lonely days. “There are no restaurants. . . . You don’t see people sitting out in front of their homes. You don’t see anyone peering through the windows” (115). Loneliness, in addition to poverty, seems to her to be the main Norwegian problem, and both result from the cruel climate: “the winter is so long” (83) in this “country in which everything seeks the sun,” where even trees lean toward the sun, where all windows and balconies are built only on one side of houses, and where people walk only on the sunny side of the street (85). In Norway, the climate, geography, and nature determine the way of life, culture and history. The poverty caused by nature demands that all energy be invested in survival, and there is not much left for dealing with national problems. Loneliness isolates people and turns them into individualists, so much so that even Norwegian intellectuals, although having preserved the remnants of the traditional life of warriors, waste their energy on typically abstract problems of individualism instead of dealing with national and political issues (99).

Every unfortunate small people must have its share of honor, however. Although they lack a glorious history and “organic” culture, Norwegians resemble warriors. Their enemy is nature, which in Norway is “a barbaric fantasy of bare stone and water” (71), a place where barbarism, once it disappeared after the brief Viking period, retreated to be preserved. This is where a bloody battle is fought with passion and strength, without any hope of final victory, but without any chance of defeat either. This is what Isidora Sekulić extolled in *Pisma iz Norveške* as if she wanted to compensate for the missing epos of Norwegian national Romanticism.

In order to be the setting of an epic struggle, nature had to be animated and populated with beings from a mythical, epic time. The book begins with Sekulić's retelling of old Norse myths—as if setting the stage for what will come later—and with the parallel between two struggles. As soon as one travels northward, leaving Germany behind, one “feels as if one were at the border of a Northern realm which in its past had borne witness to a struggle against giants and sea monsters, and in the present a struggle against the power and cruelty of stone, water and winter” (69–70). The epic fight is located in nature, the elements are armed for war. From the ship that brings her to Norway, she sees “firm water boards which crash and break each other,” as if “these strange water barriers were armed with swords and knives” (70). The ancient giants from old Norse myths were turned into hills and “tall, rigid, frowning conifers” (88). At sunset, she feels “the breeze of ancient, heathen times and a strange fear which is always present in this country's atmosphere” (97). The drama of nature compensates for Norway's bland history, as in her account of the Skjerstadfjord maelstrom, which resembles a description of a gruesome historical battle:

the maelstrom sweeps up thousands upon thousands of fish, slams them against the rocks with tremendous force, and blood, scales, and flesh mix with the raging water which is at a loss as to where to flow. And when the process is over, the water settles down like a quiet lamb, ships and boats are sprinkled all over it, and masses of pop-eyed fish heads and butchered bodies reduced to bloody splinters dry on the rocks. This repeats itself day in day out. And when the northeastern wind blows, or in the spring when melting snow raises the level of the water, then this slaughter can become so filled with blood, and the wind can howl so loudly, that people make the sign of the cross and ask themselves whether there are benevolent gods anywhere who can stop the horrible feast of the water monsters. (88)

This could have been a scene depicted in one of the large Romantic paintings that so often decorate the walls of European museums. What is more, the bloody battle between sea and soil unfolds in a constant present and never ceases: “The water unendingly seeks rocks, and constantly bites into them, eats and crumbles them. It brutally wrecks the earth to run down into the depths of it, and creates whole towers of stone to be able to raise itself up. In its turn, the washed away and drifting land with its sharp splinters scratches and breaks the calm mirror of water, and absorbs water until it turns the fjord's waves into dead lakes, green as a curse” (94). Thus the power and passion, suffering and victory conventionally found in history, become located in nature, and Norway acquires an advantage over its former master and

stronger rival Denmark. Compared to Norway, Denmark seems a tedious place with a timid landscape, “a rigid stillness, an indifferent quietness of deceased years” (73).

Norwegian nature is not only dramatic and full of horrors, in the way other peoples’ histories are, but it is also the location of danger and uncertainty. The battle is fought not only between natural forces, but between nature and humans as well. Nature in Norway is “strange” (152) and “confusing” (185), ever ambiguous and perfidious; there are always traces of the moon during the day and traces of the sun at night, so one is never sure if it is day or night (186, 191, 227) or simply “a dark day after a bright night” (240). One crosses from a Mediterranean climate into a realm of icebergs in an instant (154). From an idyllic and charming landscape one steps straight into a wild cleft stick (152); a horrible night is followed by a sunny morning (152); overnight a snowstorm changes the landscape so thoroughly that even the locals cannot find their way home, and they die in the mountains when they were born (152–53). The perfect stillness of a beautiful landscape can be transformed instantly into something terrifying (193). Norwegian nature is as animated and alive, threatening and ambiguous, as any instance of the Romantic “horrible beauty” that attracts one only to come crushing down a moment later.

This very much alive, beautiful, and threatening nature is represented by Sekulić in terms that Romantic nineteenth-century writers reserved for the *sublime*: fjords are “magnificently beautiful and dreadfully silent” (74), a storm is “evil and mean, but entirely magnificent and beautiful” (214), and everything is “silent, quiet and good in this sublime magnificence of beauty, virginity, power and threat” (211). Norwegian nature is threatening, magnificent, and frightening—in a word, it is sublime.

Sekulić’s description of the stormy ocean has a lot in common with Kant’s account of the dynamic sublime. Kant believed that the dynamic sublime is awe-inspiring because it is overwhelming in the sense of making us feel helpless and paralyzing our will. Although the sublime is most often encountered in nature, anything awe-inspiring can be sublime, for instance, human heroism, which stands firmly in the face of a mightier adversary. This is the second stage of the sublime, and Kant insists that what we have in mind when we say that an overwhelming and awe-inspiring force of nature is sublime is in fact the feeling that it evokes in us. It is not our helplessness and submission to what seems to be overpowering, but the feeling of the possibility of resisting it that Kant calls the sublime. The sublime manifestations in nature “raise the soul’s fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence” (1984, 120). We confront the law of nature, which is objectified

in the power of the raging storm, with our rational idea of freedom, of an activity that refuses to be limited by natural determination. This is how the dynamic sublime offers us an opportunity to discover our moral nature and freedom which demands to be realized in our activity. In spite of the power of nature, Kant claims, the feeling of the sublime “keeps the humanity in our person from being degraded” (121). In this second step, the feeling of awe is transferred from the power that dwarfs us—in this case, from the power of nature—to ourselves, as we confront that power with our moral nature. The sublime is, in fact, in the observer, and not in nature itself, not in the raging ocean which is more powerful than we are, not in the terrifying power which overwhelms us.

That power, following Kant, need not be only a natural one. It can also be a human power—a stronger adversary, or a terrifying and more numerous army—so much more powerful that it seems to be an irresistible natural disaster. However, the very act of resisting such a power is sublime and awe-inspiring:

For what is it that is an object of the highest admiration even to the savage? It is a person who is not terrified, not afraid, and hence does not yield to danger but promptly sets to work with vigour and full deliberation. Even in a fully civilized society there remains this superior esteem for the warrior. . . . Even war has something sublime about it if it is carried on in an orderly way and with respect for the sanctity of the citizens’ rights. At the same time it makes the way of thinking of a people that carries it on in this way all the more sublime in proportion to the number of dangers in the face of which it courageously stood its ground. A prolonged peace, on the other hand, tends to make prevalent a mere commercial spirit, and along with it base selfishness, cowardice, and softness, and to debase the way of thinking of that people. (Kant 1984, 121–22)

Although their Viking period is long gone, Norwegians are still proud warriors who resist such power in nature. Their war never ended, it has only changed its appearance. Every morning they wake up to it and resist barbaric nature with their moral law and their courage. Already, the very act of resisting what seems to be more powerful is sublime, because it testifies to the existence of moral law and the rational idea of freedom in the resister. Moreover, their resistance is proof of their moral culture: “It is a fact that what is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured and lacking in the development of moral ideas” (Kant 1984, 124). Only cultured peoples with highly developed moral ideas can, faced with the power of nature, or with the power of a mightier army, discover the moral universe instead of the fear in themselves; only such peoples have the strength to confront the power as free and moral beings, regardless of the result of their struggle. The raging ocean or a

mightier army can be frightening, but they are never sublime. Only unfortunate small peoples, who have a moral culture and courage based on it, and who stand up to the mightier force, are sublime.

This is what brings together Norwegians and Serbs in *Pisma iz Norveške*. Norwegians are sublime because of their unending war against their adversary, and although they know that they will never triumph over it, they do not surrender but fight it and survive—which is the only victory unfortunate small peoples can hope for. They win not with their strength, but with their moral culture, which makes up for the limited power of small peoples. This victory is two-fold: they plough stone, yet still have bread, and their moral culture is the result of that laborious process. The moment when the small confront a mightier adversary is the beginning of their moral universe; this is the moment when the subject triumphs over the object, the small over the powerful. Those who create a moral culture through opposing a more powerful adversary cannot be barbarians. They are the true heroes of culture, while the powerful are barbarians, for they have neither the opportunity nor the need to develop a moral culture of this sort. Thus Norwegians might not be “nationally” cultural, because they did not confront the Danes and the Swedes, but they are still cultured because their moral culture developed in the struggle against mightier and barbaric nature.

Any Serbian reader, then as today, could have recognized the metatext of this construction: the Kosovo myth. With its seeds in the traditional oral epic, which was itself a popular medieval application of the Gospel story to the understanding of history, the Kosovo myth was created in the latter half of the nineteenth century and found its full political exploitation in the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁵ The oral epic tells of Prince Lazar’s path to martyrdom: faced with the overwhelming and awe-inspiring Ottoman army, he can choose to submit to it, and thus preserve his throne as an Ottoman vassal, or fight it with full knowledge of his inevitable defeat and certain death. By choosing to surrender without a fight, he might safeguard his “earthly kingdom,” while choosing the latter he will lose his earthly kingdom, but win “a kingdom in heaven.” What exactly this heavenly kingdom stood for in the medieval epic is open to interpretation, but its most probable meaning derives from the master plot of medieval Christian culture, in which Jesus renounces all earthly power, claiming that his kingdom is not a worldly, but a heavenly one. Thus Prince Lazar, who decided to fight and lost both his kingdom and his life, becomes a martyr by imitating Christ, following in his steps, repeating his choice, and dying for his faith. Lazar’s decision would be rewarded not on earth, but in Christ’s heavenly kingdom; the one who seems to be losing, in fact wins. As indeed with all myths,

this one was also open to reinterpretation in different historical circumstances. Thus it was possible in the nineteenth century to replace the heavenly kingdom with everything ideal and immaterial—ethics, for instance—and to reinterpret a Christian story along lines that were better suited for a secular age. The ethical reinterpretation followed the pattern of the Romantic sublime: faced with an overwhelming adversary, Lazar discovers in himself the rational idea of freedom, moral law, and courage. Instead of submitting to the awe-inspiring enemy, he confronts him and dies, but as Kant put it, he keeps the humanity in his person from being degraded. Instead of fear, he discovers within himself the sublime realm of freedom and morality, and thus becomes sublime himself. Moral victory belongs to him.

This is how Isidora Sekulić saw small peoples and their choices. They can either surrender and disappear, or become sublime by discovering the realm of freedom and morality in themselves. In her otherwise heterogeneous mixture of ideas, attitudes, and values, this was a constant to which she adhered. And she did not hesitate in repeating it. In 1940, when another awe-inspiring power cast its shadow over Sekulić's country, she recast the argument in quite explicit terms. "This is our concern: we are a small people. . . . We have neither gold nor a great industry with which we can compete; neither do we have any mysticism or delusions of grandeur. What we are left with is a concentration of mind and reason, and moral discipline. This is our old Kosovo mysticism. We need to focus on being, language, morality, and God" (1966c, 299). Kosovo mysticism became for her the means by which small peoples can stand up to mightier adversaries, superior nature, or whatever else may come to threaten them; in a world of power, small peoples have no other choice but to become sublime. "We are small and we are alone. However, that should not prevent us from struggling against the chaos in ourselves, and from counting ourselves among those who remain on their feet, because we do belong among the best. Let us proclaim the concentration of what is best in us! Let us proclaim to the people that their rational sobriety is needed. There is no time for hesitation and delay. . . . We are small, but if we concentrate, we shall be whole. Let us not envy great peoples, and not pity ourselves. Let us never bow down" (300–01). Let us be sublime. However, in order to be sublime, one needs highly developed moral ideas and a preparation which only culture can provide. Without it, awe-inspiring forces can only be looked upon as frightening, Kant warned. Norwegians had "the highest and the best culture of all small and historically unfortunate European peoples," and one need not fear for them. But what of the Serbs? Would they be able to face overwhelming force without trembling and discover the sublime in themselves? That was Sekulić's "service." That is why she had to work so tirelessly at throwing "handfuls of pebbles into the holes of our non-culture."

A Norwegian Returns the Compliment

At the same time that Sekulić was praising Norwegian culture and its sublime resistance to the forces of barbaric nature, a Norwegian traveller returned the compliment in his own manner. A Norwegian officer, Henrik August Angell (1861–1922), visited the Balkans many times between the Greek-Turkish war in 1874 and the First World War, mainly in his capacity as a military observer. He came to like Montenegrins and Serbs and published four books on them, the last one appearing in 1914, the same year as *Pisma iz Norveške*.⁶ A full comparison between the Serbian cultural missionary and writer on the one hand, and the Norwegian officer, who thought the only guarantee of small peoples' freedom lay in their military morale and in arming themselves, on the other, would not be very instructive. However, it is difficult not to notice how much the books mirror each other. Writing about Montenegro, Angell never tires of repeating how unfavorable an influence the climate and the geography have on the lives of its people, and how much their poverty results from it. "They are very poor," he says, because "they have to struggle with destitute nature" (1997, 20). Like Sekulić, Angell was surprised that such poor people do not steal (23; Sekulić 1971, 84). The other always steals, and it is worth noting with surprise that our expectations are betrayed. Surprise is caused not only by what is different, but also by what is the same: Sekulić is surprised by "skating paths" in Oslo (76), and Angell by the "skating rink" in Cetinje (82–88). How come the other, who also knows of snow as we do, came upon the same idea that one can slide on frozen snow? Both writers are townspeople, and both are surprised by the hospitality and civility of peasants (Angell, 48; Sekulić, 184). Angell found more similarities than differences between Montenegro and Norway: their cottages were similar (118), their small villages were exactly alike (124), their funeral rites (126), their music (159) and their folk stories (89) were the same, they received guests in the same manner (130–31). Even the Kosovo myth, which unsurprisingly his hosts would not let him leave without hearing, reminded Angell of the story of Harald, the Norse king who confronted the mightier English in the battle at Stamford Bridge in 1066 and whose soldiers decided to fight even though defeat was certain (145). What he found different, he ascribed to a temporal difference in their developments: Montenegrins still set a great value on personal reputation, while Norwegians no longer did. All in all, Angell was very pleased with his stay in Montenegro, although he was dismayed by the fact that many ladies in Cetinje were dressed as if out of the latest Parisian journal (83); people were agreeable, post and telegraph services were first class (96), and in almost every village one found someone with a good knowledge of a major

European language (97). The only real and unexpected difference between Norway and Montenegro he found was the way they treated their women. Since he arrived in the port of Cattaro (Kotor) in January, when the roads were covered with a thick layer of snow, he needed a guide to show him the way to Cetinje and to help him carry a heavy pack. A guide, a young Montenegrin called Jovo, is found quickly, but upon seeing his pack Jovo mutters: “Only a woman can carry this.” He quickly returns with a “young, smiling Montenegrin beauty.” She lifts up the pack, Jovo takes the remaining small things in one hand, and off they go to Cetinje (30–31).

If something really surprises Angell, it is that what he sees is not what he read about Montenegro in German newspapers. He read about a “revolution” in Montenegro, and about the prince being dethroned, but when he arrived in Cetinje there was no revolution to be seen, and the prince was firmly in his place (122). The discovery that newspapers may not be the most reliable source of knowledge about the other turns into bitterness and despair in his 1914 book, in which he described his experiences as a military observer during the Balkan war in 1912:

Every day in the European press one could read about the cruelty and the dishonourable behaviour of Serbian soldiers. One thing that I remember in particular is that a correspondent from Budapest had reported in a major English newspaper that thousands of Albanians had been massacred between Kumanovo and Uskub (Skopje). They had been hanged in such a way that their bodies formed an avenue. This was a shameless lie, because between Kumanovo and Uskub there isn't a single bush that one could hang a cat from. One can see a dozen poplar trees around Kumanovo, but Albanians were not being hanged from them when this Budapest correspondent dreamed it up. It just so happened that at that time I was in that small town, and I lodged, of all places, at the police chief's home. I accompanied him through the streets; I rode across the battlefields with officers; and followed the routes of Turkish and Serbian armies on foot. I would have had to have been blind to not have seen the shadow of at least one of these thousands that been hanged, and deaf to not have heard about them. (1917, 92–93)

It is not surprising that a cultural missionary would praise the firm cultural foundations of a fearless people's struggle and survival, and that an army officer would celebrate “a small people, harassed and oppressed by powerful neighbors, [who] have finally risen up, have fought for their lives, and have called up all men able to carry arms, and have thrown themselves against their hereditary enemies with such fury” (9). Unfortunate small peoples have worries that fortunate and powerful ones never dream of; and only they can recognize each other's sublimity.

Either the West or Death

Jovan Skerlić, one of the most influential intellectuals in Serbia before the First World War, viewed the year 1912 as the “bright days.” “Serbian soldiers fought like lions,” he wrote. These

admirable Serbian peasants, whose blood and sweat had been sprinkled on present day Serbia and thus created it, descendants of those who were the first in the Balkans to raise the bloody banner of rebellion, now improved by education and freedom, have filled with admiration even those who already knew of their enormous *élan vital* and their great efforts. Now a petrified and astounded Europe witnesses a miracle: the Turkish army, which used to make the world tremble with fear, and which still enjoys a reputation as one of the bravest and most dangerous armies in the world, flees in a wild stampede, overcome with fear of peasants from Šumadija dressed in simple peasant clothes and with *opanak* on their feet. (1964a, 287)⁷

In 1912 the Balkan states closed a chapter of their history by ending the centuries-long Ottoman rule, and the triumphant spirit in much public discourse of the time is to be expected, even exaggerated claims such as Skerlić’s announcement of the “last act of a magnificent historical drama: the struggle between Europe and Asia, civilization and barbarity” (284). However, even such a bright and festive period could not be allowed to pass without a bitter note. Throughout the nineteenth century the Balkan elites believed that liberation from foreign rule could have been achieved more easily had it not been for the great European powers, who because of mutual distrust and competition supported the Ottoman Empire’s survival. Skerlić was no exception:

What is called Europe is actually a cluster of mutually envious, predatory, and soulless bullies, who have not been able to agree upon how to divide the booty, and these countries have their own interests in artificially sustaining this living corpse called Turkey, which is a disgrace and a permanent threat to civilization. Europe, which today is a creditor, a speculator in stocks and an industrialist, relentlessly exploited Turkey, the latter in turn exploiting its Christian slaves even more ruthlessly and cruelly. Forsaking its own traditions, Europe sent its fleets to Turkish waters whenever the pitiful interests of its concessionaires and exporters in Turkey were at stake, and remained blind and deaf to the periodic slaughter of Serbs, Macedonians, and Armenians by the Turks. Had it depended on the humanity of a Christian and civilized Europe, which masked its selfishness and greed with false claims in the interest of peace, the Balkans would today be one huge graveyard. (285)

Only when the Balkan peoples realized that they had nothing to hope for from Europe, claimed Skerlić, did they create the alliance of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and

Montenegro and in several weeks ended the rule of the Ottoman state. “Skeptic and mercantilist Europe” saw something which it had not seen for a long time: “what can be achieved by a people determined to die for freedom” (286). A contemporary French diplomat commented on the 1912 war in a very similar manner: “For the first time in the history of the Eastern Question the small states have acquired a position of such independence of the Great Powers that they feel able to act completely without them and even to take them in tow” (Mazower 2000, 98). This is how the chapter in European history commonly known as the Eastern Question was closed. Mazower aptly sums up its meaning: the Habsburgs “disliked the Slav liberation struggles on their doorstep. France and Britain wavered between supporting oppressed Christians against Muslim despotism and preserving the Ottomans against Russia. Balkan aspirations for self-rule were thus contained by the competing and clashing interests of the Great Powers. . . . The international management of this unpredictable process of Ottoman decline and national insurgency became known as the Eastern Question” (78–79).

However, this is a twenty-first-century definition of the Eastern Question. In 1913 William Miller, a British historian of the Ottoman Empire, defined it in a manner that better reflects the prevailing understanding at the time: it was “the problem of filling up the vacuum created by the gradual disappearance of the Turkish empire in Europe” (1936, 1). This is exactly what Skerlić and other Balkan intellectuals and politicians objected to; they did not see themselves as a *vacuum* which some other empire was free to fill after the withdrawal of the Ottomans. Their resentment of the policies of the Great Powers was not caused by the lack of their support, but by the fear that the rule of one empire might be replaced by the rule of another. For Serbs that would be Austria-Hungary, which “looked towards the lands of the south Slavs as other major Powers carved up Africa and expanded their empires overseas” (Mazower 2000, 92). When they had managed to obtain autonomy from the Porte and even after independence, they remained dependent on the Great Powers, which were “heavily involved in the new states’ internal affairs,” which “defined borders and adjusted territories at diplomatic conferences and imposed their wishes on all parties through gunboat diplomacy and economic arm-twisting” (Mazower 2000, 90–91). Liberation from the Ottomans was only half the task. They also had to put up resistance to those who saw them as a vacuum waiting to be filled. For Serbian nineteenth-century culture, this image of a vacuum and the Great Powers’ attitude of ignoring and excluding was epitomized in the Berlin Congress of 1878, where a new Balkan map was drawn up without the presence of any Balkan representatives around the table. As late as the 1950s, Stanislav Vinaver, “Constantine” in Rebecca

West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, could not resist commenting on this in a book on Laza Kostić. His comment is humorous, but it nevertheless expresses an understanding of the policies of the Great Powers deeply ingrained in Serbian culture:

At the Berlin Congress, which Laza Kostić attended as [Foreign Minister Jovan] Ristić's secretary, and where our survival, our "to be or not to be" was being decided, Ristić had to remain at best "in the foyer." Our representative, the foreign minister, let alone his secretary Laza Kostić, did not enter the ballroom of Radziwill Palace where Bismarck presided over the Berlin Conference. There the great and the powerful of this world gave haughty speeches and spilt false pearls of insipid and worn phrases about European culture and the mandate of European humanity and the sacrosanct rights of the great, while the small and the smallest, whose futures were at stake, were refused entry to the illustrious convention (at the very least, they could have been let in to show their dancing steps—for they had to dance to the greats' tune). The small were unsuited to the glittering world ball! Let them dance their *pipirevka* and *kokonješte* in their native hovels! And warn them to be tactful; they should carefully adhere to tact! It is most important that their tact be flawless. We were always required to be polite; tact above everything else, never lose your tact! (2005, 13)⁸

This aspect of "Europe," constructed as the Europe of the Great Powers, which perceived the Balkans as a vacuum available for penetration and possession, is part and parcel of Skerlić's discourse. That is why in his description of the last act of Serbia's liberation from Ottoman rule the reader sees Serbs chasing the Turks back to Asia, while at the same time looking over their shoulders to see if Europe is watching, as if they were saying, "can't you see—we are not a vacuum." For Skerlić, the act of liberation is not complete if it is not accompanied by European recognition and approval. If Ottoman rule had been a wound which only began to heal in 1912, the other, symbolic but still open, wound was Europe's contempt for the small peoples' legitimate aspirations and their ability to achieve them. That Austria-Hungary would be adverse to Serbia's liberty did not affect Skerlić as much, but he could not forget democratic Europe's derision for Serbian liberation: "Out of its hatred of autocratic and Orthodox Russia . . . , European democracy, which for the very same reason had so much sympathy for Poles and Hungarians, did not at all care for Balkan Slavs, and Serbs least of all. Serbs were seen as agents and servants of Russian autocracy, and that is why the English liberals were so skeptical toward us, and why one could hear Turcophile and Serbophobe voices in German social-democracy" (1964a, 252). And what pained the social-democrat Skerlić most of all was the contempt of the European left, which in his opinion should have taken the side of all those who fought for their own freedom. He rubs salt into an old wound by quoting the contemptuous

words of Friedrich Engels (“I take the liberty of considering the existence of those primitive small peoples in central Europe as an anachronism”) and of Max Spiel (“behind the Balkan peoples’ struggle for liberation lies a hidden threat of Russian hegemony”), and puts a cool hand on a fevered brow by quoting a recently found article of Karl Marx, reprinted in the German social-democratic journal *Neue Zeit*, in which Marx claimed not only that “Slavs in Turkey suffer a great deal in slavery, in which they are kept by the class of Muslim *sipahis*,” but also that “Turks, South Slavs, and Greeks actually have more common interests with Western Europe than with Russia” (252). What is even more important for him, is that Marx himself confirmed the idea that had been the backbone of Skerlić’s political and public engagement, and he does not miss the opportunity of quoting him: “Whoever wants to support the idea of democracy in Europe today should try to support by all means available the development of industry, education, the rule of law, and the will to freedom and independence in Turkey’s Christian vassal states in Europe. The future of peace and progress of humankind are most closely connected with that. If one really wants to be able to harvest some day, one must take the greatest care in how one ploughs and sows seeds” (257).

Small peoples are obliged to look over their shoulders to see what “Europe” is thinking, while they are busy furthering their own interests under their own steam, because the success of their endeavours depends on “Europe’s” opinion. And the rules of that game are not of their own making. If they happen to break a moral rule or two in the process, say if they take part in corrupting public opinion in the West, it can give rise to a bitter and ironic comment, but cannot become an occasion for reconsidering the rules. “Whenever a foreign country closes a deal for a loan on the French financial market,” writes Skerlić,

it goes without saying that the financial group that takes out the loan must buy the benevolence of influential newspapers. That has been the case with all the Serbian loans, hence the sympathy for Serbia on the pages of certain newspapers when large loans are granted. Parisian newspapers can be bought not only by financiers, but also by states that have an interest in preventing any talk of their misdeeds and conspicuous political endeavours. . . . This is how Turkey bought the silence of Parisian and other European newspapers during the massacres in Armenia; . . . small European countries, Serbia among them, pay a regular annual tribute to the big newspapers, and that explains why certain papers, which send “complimentary” copies to our ministries, start showing signs of indisposition toward our country each New Year’s Eve. Those fits of ill will pass quickly following the New Year, which is the time when good friends give presents to one another. The unprincipled, corrupt press . . . is the menace and public liability of our times. And it is so not only in France, it is the same almost everywhere else in Europe, especially among our closest neighbors, in Austria and Hungary. (184–85)

The small must play the game by rules not of their making, but this does not mean that they fail to spot the discrepancies between the sermon and the preacher's behavior. Imperialism's double standards irritated Skerlić even more than the corrupt press: "That same Europe, which so desperately fought against the invading Saracens, Tatars, and Turks, and against the spread of Islam, is now trying to impose its own religion on the Chinese, even though it does not believe in it itself. And that same Europe, which at home honorably suppresses alcoholism, now uses cannons and machine guns to force the Chinese to poison themselves with opium from European-run factories. Never in history was force more brutal, the weak with fewer rights, and heinous crimes covered with shinier words" (50).⁹

It seems clear that an author with such strong anti-European feelings would reproach Isidora Sekulić for her indifference to the "national cause" and for her nonnational first name. Imperial, selfish and greedy "Europe," with its corrupt press and its double standards, looks morally inferior to a healthy small people, such as the Serbs, and the rotten apples deserve to have a finger pointed at them by an anti-European. However, Skerlić's sense for differences and nuances was much more developed than that of those who, even to this day, operate by the binary classification of pro- and anti-European. Never before or after him has any Serbian author so frequently used the word "Europe." It was certainly not a mere geographical notion for Skerlić, but exactly what he meant by it still needs to be interpreted. If his sense of nuance failed him, it was when he spoke of "the East" and "the Orient," which in his writings never refer to anything even remotely positive. The "Orient" for him was not merely a geographical concept, but an illness that needed to be cured and an evil that had to be fought against. For the most part the East and Easterner were for Skerlić simple terms of abuse. Comparing his contemporary Ljubomir Nedić, a literary critic whose views Skerlić did not share, with the poet Dragutin Ilić, Skerlić wrote: "Nedić is a man of Western culture; Ilić, on the contrary, is an Easterner" (1964b, 41). Nedić might have erred in his opinions, but he still possessed a redeeming quality and could have been forgiven; there was nothing, however, that could redeem Ilić the Easterner.

Skerlić saw Serbs as a people who, by belonging to the Slav family, already possessed a number of negative features—"a weak will, a lack of personal initiative, passivity, an incapacity for sustained effort and relentless work"—although he oscillated between ascribing these features to the Slavs as innate, as customary in *Völkerpsychologie*, and explaining them in historical terms as "the consequences of centuries-long political and social conditions" (1964a, 273). The "four-centuries-long slavery to an Eastern and fatalistic people," was a great catastrophe which only

served to augment the Slavic character trait of passivity with a world view that a personal initiative never changes anything:

Slavic apathy and passivity in Serbs was strengthened even more through the influence of oriental fatalism. It was our immense misfortune that we slaved for four or five centuries under an oriental people. Both Turkish sloppiness and the Muslim idea of fate left strong marks on our national character. When our Slav passivity was injected with oriental fatalism, we became, both through our inborn characteristics as well as by the influence of circumstance, a people whose energy could be seen only sporadically, a people who at work never show relentless effort, who still do not have what makes other modern peoples great: personal exertion and perseverance at work. (273)

That was the illness that needed to be cured. The synergy of passivity and fatalism, and the lack of energy and willpower, were the causes of “that horrible squeaking of a poorly-oiled and awful social mechanism” in Serbia, which was felt particularly strongly by those who “had the misfortune to get to know the full and broad life of the ‘rotten West,’ and for whom the bridge on the Sava seems to be a prison window” (1964c, 42).¹⁰ Even Zemun, a small Austro-Hungarian town over the river from Belgrade, seemed like free territory to Skerlić viewed from the “prison” of Serbia.

Liberation from the rule of the “fatalistic people,” no matter how beneficial it might have been, was not enough. Once that necessary condition had been fulfilled, a genuine task of searching for the right path had only just begun: “We have left the narrow track on which our ancestors travelled slowly and peacefully, but we do not know of any new paths, and if we happen to stumble upon one, our steps are uncertain. We are the first generation to engage in intellectual work as a new people, whose ancestors never worked with their heads, and each one of us today must, under one’s own steam and by oneself, rapidly cover the same distance that among older peoples was covered by several generations” (1964c, 219). His diagnosis was brief: “[Serbs] suffer from the adjustment of a young people to modern life,” and in order to improve themselves, they needed to rid themselves of “the virus of Eastern inaction, of uncultured wilderness, of provincial pettiness and philistine shop-windows” (219), of the “prisonlike dark and malicious faces one meets in the streets, of all that burden and stench of the unfortunate East!” (42).

How can a “sluggish, unenduring, fatalistic people” (1964a, 85) shrug off its double burden of Slav character and Eastern tradition? For Skerlić this was the most important question; his entire work can be read as an attempt at finding the path that would lead to the “spiritual and moral renaissance of this backward country” (200). He believed that there was only one answer to this question, and he never tired of

repeating it: “the ideal, the direction, and examples can be found in one place only, in their genuine source: in the West. First of all, one should be a good European. . . . Everything good, beautiful, and great that humanity knows comes from the thinking, free, active, and energetic West” (89). Despite his politically or nationally inspired criticism of Europe, “one should be a good European” was Skerlić’s *delenda est Carthago*. His most important books can be understood as a series of long footnotes to this sentence, as evidence provided by a cultural historian to the understanding of his people’s past and their journey into the future.

The theme of Skerlić’s *Srpska književnost u XVIII veku* (Serbian Literature in the eighteenth Century, 1909) was the Serbs’ “entry into culture.” For Skerlić, the eighteenth century is not a turning point in a long history, as it was conventionally seen in his time—namely, a transition from the Orthodox-Byzantine medieval cultural pattern to western Classicism and the Enlightenment—but the real beginning of Serbian culture. The eighteenth century “means . . . the exit from the Middle Ages and entry into the Modern era, parting from Byzantinism and approaching the West. . . . Our culture and our literature began in the eighteenth century” (1964e, 7). Medieval tradition, so dear to the Romantics, did not exist for Skerlić at all, or at least did not exist as culture. Everything before Dositej Obradović in the late eighteenth century was “barbaric and medieval Balkan darkness” (17), “primitivism and barbarity brought from the Balkans” (33), “Byzantine spirit and Russian theology” (352). Only in the eighteenth century did Serbs living under the Habsburg monarchy “receive Western culture and thus lay the foundations of their modern literature” (7), and “by entering an organized European state they joined the circle of modern peoples, founded their education system and created their secular literature” (17). In that process the central role was taken up by Dositej Obradović—whose life and works take up one-fifth of Skerlić’s book—a rationalist, an anticlerical Enlightenment thinker, a secular pilgrim who spent a good portion of his life travelling and studying and who went to Serbia for the first time only at the end of his life. Skerlić’s conclusion follows *Omladina i njena književnost* (Youth and Its Literature, 1906), his book on nationalism and the anti-Westernness of the Romantic generation: “Dositej is an enlightened Westerner who wants Serbs to adopt the rich culture of the advanced Western peoples, which is tested by experience; the Romantics despise the ‘rotten West’ and believe in ‘Serbian culture,’ whose content they never even try to define. The difference between Dositej and the Romantics is the difference between a sensible man, who looks serenely into the future, and a confused people who look drowsily into their past” (356–57).

The nationalism of the Romantics in the 1860s and 1870s can also be interpreted as offering an answer to Skerlić's most important question—where to after liberation from the fatalistic Oriental people?—and he naturally finds it to be irredeemably wrong. Instead of looking to the West, the Romantics searched for spiritual and moral renaissance in the past:

our tragedy as a small people was that the nineteenth century found us enslaved, miserable, and poor; our present was bleak, we lacked the courage to look forward, and we remained hypnotized by our memories from the past. In order to awaken national feeling, consciousness, and pride, to raise this amorphous mass to the level of a people, [the Romantics] turned to the past, old glory, and the victories of medieval rulers. The first to speak up were historians and philosophers; historical memories were taken as ideals for the future; linguistic trifles were supposed to create national individuality; one went down the road of historicism and national Romanticism. This is how an absurd stage was reached: looking for belief in life in graves, and expecting the past to show us the way to the present and future. . . . Instead of words of initiative and confidence in life, they sought inspiration in epigraphy and heraldry, medieval knighthood and dusty parchments; Dušan, Simeun, and Zvonimir were resurrected; dangerous ideas that those days could and should return were circulated; and peoples who had nothing, who still had to gain their basic human and political rights, including the right to survive, during the orgies of heated Romantic imagination became intoxicated with insane imperialism and a superiority complex. (1964a, 92–93)¹¹

Although Skerlić never tires of pointing out the anti-“Western” disposition of the Romantic generation—abbreviated as “the rotten West” and repeated endlessly in his writings—he cannot but notice that the Romantics found their inspiration not in Russia or in the East, but in Europe. When in *Omladina i njena književnost* Skerlić wanted to explain the comparative context of Serbian Romanticism, he included three chapters on “foreign influences,” namely Central European Pan-Slavism, and German and Hungarian Romanticism. Since all Serbian Romantics lived in Austria-Hungary, spoke German and Hungarian, and studied at German-speaking universities, it is only natural that their cultural horizons were shaped by the currents of Central European Romanticism. This is where they found the cult of the Middle Ages, a strong resentment of the commercial traits of the modern world, and—although somehow paradoxically combined with the image of the “evil Turk”—the allure of the Orient. However, those features are characteristic not only of German Romanticism, embodied in the archconservative and ultramontane Hofburg official, Friedrich Schlegel, but more generally of Western European Romanticism as well. In addition to “the rotten West” expression, Skerlić regularly quotes verses from Laza Kostić's translation of Byron's *Don Juan* whenever he wants to ridicule the

Romantics and to show how hopelessly backward, antimodern, conservative, and anti-“Western” they were: “*ne tražite spasa na zapad, tim svetom vlada grošičar*” (don’t look for help in the West, for it is ruled by a shopkeeper). The fourteenth stanza from Canto III of *Don Juan*, thus translated by Kostić, expresses Byron’s advice to the Greek insurgents. Curiously, it is not far removed from Skerlić’s own understanding of the Great Powers’ policies during the Eastern Question:

Trust not for freedom to the Franks—
They have a king who buys and sells;
In native swords, and native ranks,
The only hope of courage dwells;
But Turkish force, and Latin Fraud,
Would break your shield, however broad.

Do not expect any help from the selfish and mercantile West, ruled by their shopkeeper-king; take up arms and try to free yourselves, even if your prospects are not the best. Skerlić quoted Kostić’s translation very often, but he never bothered to mention that the author of these verses was neither a Central European overcome by *ressentiment*, nor a Serb enchanted by his Byzantine past, nor indeed a Russian “Asian,” but a West European poet. The traits which Skerlić dislikes in Serbian and Central European Romanticism were obvious in Western European Romanticism too. This is not to question Skerlić’s knowledge of cultural history, but to try to understand what meanings “the West” and “Europe” held for him. Claiming that German Romanticism had strong “anti-Western” traits would not surprise anyone, the West being understood as the politically and economically more advanced societies of France, the Netherlands, England, and Scotland. However, when Skerlić uses Kostić’s translation of Byron as the main illustration of the anti-Western feelings of Serbian Romantics, then the meaning of both “the West” and “anti-Western” cannot be simply geographical for him. He must have meant something else altogether.

Skerlić was aware of the paradox that he created by presenting as enemies of “the West” those who in the 1860s and 1870s had tried, as had Dositej Obradović in the eighteenth century, to “adopt the rich culture of the advanced Western peoples.” Although Serbian Romantics “liked to denounce ‘the rotten West’ and ‘the poison of European civilization,’” according to Skerlić, “believing that there is a specific Slav and Serbian culture which is destined to renew the ‘Gotho-Germanic world,’ they were nevertheless under the strong influence of Western, and in particular German literature” (1966, 319–20). This is where Skerlić’s concept of “Europe” and the “West” becomes somewhat clearer. He does not mean that Germany, where the Jena school produced a rich corpus of “anti-Western” works, and Austria, where

Friedrich Schlegel found an audience responsive to his political ideas, do not belong to Europe. If such voices could disqualify a country from belonging to Europe, England would belong neither to Europe nor the West, and it would not at all be clear where to look for Europe any more. Skerlić finds the “West” and “Europe” in Austria too, as his description of the bridge on the Sava, “the prison window,” aptly shows. They were for Skerlić political and cultural values more than specific places, as in his description of Russia:

Despite its veneer of civilization, Russia remained Asiatic. The upper classes and ruling circles borrowed foreign customs and fashion, but not the essential in foreign civilization. In spite of the civilized façade, their souls remained obscurantist. For them, natural freedom is a lie; political freedom and popular sovereignty are nonsense; freedom of consciousness is a betrayal of the fatherland’s church; freedom of the press is the freedom to plot conspiracies; the freedom of a life of one’s own choosing is the source of all vices; equality among people is a mere illusion; equality before the law is the highest injustice; the devilish triad of liberty, equality and brotherhood causes rifts in society and ruins it. The result of these ideas is a senseless hatred of the West, “the rotten West,” its critical spirit and its free institutions which gave the West its rule over modern humanity. (1964d, 293)

The values rejected by the westernized upper classes and state officials in Russia are “Europe” and the “West.” They can also be rejected in the geographical West, as was the case with the Romantics; the true “West” is wherever they are seriously advocated and defended.

This is, in Skerlić’s view, the cardinal sin of the Serbian Romantics. Instead of following Dositej Obradović’s “West,” which might have brought them to an understanding of these values—as was the case with the socialist Svetozar Marković, who in Russia learned “European” values from Russian socialists and thus, at least in Skerlić’s view, became a Westerner—the Romantics fell into the trap of German obscurantism and became nationalists.¹² Although they did not follow the eastern road, which led to the Orient or Russia, their turning to the past, their searching for “authenticity” and their attempts to root themselves in “Serbianness” strike Skerlić as an aberration, as a diversion from the only possible route of salvation from backwardness.

One should, once and for all, unlearn the moldy phrases about ancient glory, our ancestors’ bones, Dušan’s empire, Serbian *gusle* and the fairy Ravijojla.¹³ People do not live by rhetoric. This is the stuff older generations in their inactivity used to rock themselves to sleep with, and this is why they left us such a mess and backwardness as an inheritance. There is a patriotic newspaper with the incredible, completely fantastical title *Our Past!* Our past, as if it

were the journal of an archaeological society, and not the newspaper of a people which may be breathing its last breath, which is not at all sure that it will succeed in preserving its place under the sun in this horrible struggle for survival. (1964a, 83)

Their nationalism not only failed to cure already existing ailments, but also helped create new ones. Reaching into the past, into the Middle Ages, Orthodoxy, and Byzantium, Romantic nationalism created a rift between Serbs and other South Slavs of the same language, who shared a different past. Skerlić was one of the most fervent Yugoslavs of the time and considered all Serbo-Croat speakers members of the same people: “eleven million people speak the same language and have the same soul, and there is no *distinguo*, philological, anthropological, theological, or political, which could make two out of one” (1964c, 275). The religious division separating Serbs, Croats, and Muslims Skerlić saw as one of the ailments, if not the ailment, that kept holding them back: “Our poor people suffered and still suffer from the division into three religions, each of them considering themselves the best and the most rational, while in actual fact each religion entails not only the intellectual paralysis of the individual, but also the sacrifice of great and eternal national interests to the dogmas and rituals of nonnational and foreign—Byzantine, Roman, and Arabic—churches” (1964a, 267). This is why he saw the quarrels of Serbian and Croatian philologists, historians, and politicians as a waste of precious time and energy, in which both Serbs and Croats were lacking, and which would have been better spent focusing on the most pressing task of the generation: catching up with the “West.”

[T]his tribal persecution and aimless competition is not anything like national or ethnic strife, it is more like medieval skirmishes between small Italian city-states, feuding French vassals, or minor German principalities. . . . We small, corner-bound peoples can never understand such simple and comprehensible truths. From the same material in the West there would have arisen one people, healthy and strong, but we are creating three or four small and weak peoples, who are pretentious, intolerant, and blind to their best interests. Their struggle is an incomprehensible absurdity, a comedy sad as much as it is ridiculous. . . . One and the same people, identical in its language, oppression, poverty, and ignorance, you have divided into two furious camps! Others are breathing down their necks, a foreign knee is pressing against their chests, people’s lives are systematically being poisoned, people are without any rights, and they fight over Zvonimir and Dušan! . . . [P]eople live in darkness, ignorance, and illiteracy, and yet they argue over Serbian and Croatian “culture”! Solely for sport and personal gain, politicians quarrel over who stole the language from whom, and the people, peasants from Zagorje and Srem, cry out for bread in one language, which they may not speak for long! (1964a, 34–38)

Their nationalism is anti-“European” and anti-“Western,” not because there is no nationalism in the West, but because every nationalism is anti-“Western” and anti-“European”: “French nationalists, as nationalists do everywhere, preached a savage hatred of foreigners and of all humankind, disguised as love for the fatherland; they awoke in the people the dormant urge to rob and do violence, they tried to revive the cult of force, of military adventures, of murderous and destructive military glory” (1964a, 159). The fatherland is not helped by nationalism, for the fatherland “does not need us to be conceited, arrogant, malicious, and envious, ‘always ready to bark at a foreigner, to insult him if we cannot destroy him.’ Chauvinism does not serve the interests of the fatherland; it only makes it hateful and disgusting in other peoples’ eyes” (160).

What then is authentically “European” and “Western”? Values: energy, initiative, work, democracy, socialism, rationalism, secularism, progress, and education. Those who deny these values are the “East” or the “Orient.” They are regularly found in Asia, which for Skerlić had no redeeming qualities, and for the most part in Russia as well, unless they are Russian socialists, the mentors of Svetozar Marković. These values can be denied in the geographical West too—which was the case with German Romanticism—but the chances of finding them embraced on the western side of the continent were for Skerlić much higher than anywhere else. In an article he wrote to convince young Serbs that studying at western universities was not as unaffordable as some may have thought, he recapitulated his main points:

Those four centuries of slavery under a fatalistic and barbaric people did not pass without leaving any traces. Oriental spirit entered our blood as a poison. We suffer from a lack of energy and initiative, we are incapable of long and sustained effort, and that gummy, sleepy, disgusting East is still in and around us. There are many people who recite litanies against the “rotten West,” and who talk about some “Serbian” or “Slav culture” with inspiration, while they have received from that same “rotten West” their clothes, their habits, institutions, appetites, but they have not received that which makes the West great, and what it can teach us well: the feeling of personal dignity, freedom, initiative, a serene, active, and steady spirit—which created all Western civilization. For them, the West is good and worthy of imitation only when eminently Serbian institutions, such as the census, militarism, the senate, and gambling houses are imported; however, as soon as they sense in our stifling atmosphere some wind of free thinking and criticism, fresh currents of political democracy and social change, the West becomes “rotten.” We are suffocating in this passive, stale, Oriental spirit, and there is only one cure for us: to open wide the door to the West and its ideas, to the West which thinks, which acts, which creates, which lives a full and intensive life, the only life that deserves to be called human. (1964a, 66–67)

Either the “West” or death, there is no other alternative for Skerlić: “for new nations there are but two roads—either to accept Western culture and live, as the Japanese have done, or to oppose it, and be overrun, as has happened to the American Indians and Australian Aborigines” (95).

The idea encapsulated in this “either the West or death” message can also be found elsewhere in the Balkans. Skerlić would have been surprised to learn that an “Easterner,” the Turkish writer and sociologist Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), expressed it at about the same time and in a very similar manner. In his programmatic article “Towards Western Civilization,” Gökalp listed the reasons for Turkish backwardness: the ethical, religious, scientific, and aesthetic revolutions that occurred in Europe between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries did not take place in the Muslim world; great urban centers with advanced social densities did not develop; and due to the absence of a social division of labor, specialization, or individualist personality, large-scale industry did not appear (1959, 274–75). For Gökalp these were not the consequences of different historical dynamics, but of an intrinsic feature of the “East”: Eastern civilization is averse to progress, he maintained, and Western civilization is the avenue to advancement. While Skerlić blamed Turks and their centuries-long rule for the condition of the Serbs at the beginning of the twentieth century, Gökalp the Turk blamed the Ottoman Empire and its centuries-long rule for similar conditions in Turkey.

While shifting blame and externalizing guilt can be explained psychologically, Gökalp’s claims testify to the conviction widespread at the time that only the nation-state could be the proper vehicle of both modernization and “Westernization.” Hence Gökalp’s fusion of Turkish nationalism with modernization understood as Westernization: “There is only one road to salvation: To advance in order to reach—that is, in order to be equal to—Europeans in the sciences and industry as well as in military and judicial institutions. And there is only one means to achieve this: to adapt ourselves to Western civilization completely!” (276). However necessary it might have been for the survival of the people, complete Westernization for the Turks brought an obvious peril, and Gökalp was not oblivious to this: “How can the Islamic world ultimately survive under such conditions? How can we maintain our religious and national independence?” (276). How can they be at the same time of the Turkish nation, of the Islamic religion, and of European civilization? This question has been repeated many times wherever modernization appears in the form of Westernization, and it reveals more than the author’s realization that modernization, as it is often repeated, makes “all that is solid melt into air.” It reveals the paradox of rapid modernization in all societies outside the European West: faced with the

threat of being crushed and annihilated by more powerful and already modernized societies, crush and annihilate yourself in order to survive, reinvent yourself in their image in order to be preserved, disappear such as you are in order to live. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to believe that in Westernizing societies this paradox gave rise only to opposing voices of Westernizers and their opponents, be they called nativists, autochtonists, or Slavophiles; as Gökalp's example shows, even the most ardent Westernizers were aware of the paradox. Skerlić, as we will see shortly, was no exception.

For Skerlić, joining the “West” did not just mean claiming one's share in material progress and accumulating wealth, although it is clear that he did not consider improving the living conditions of a backward and poor people a disgraceful aim. What he advocated was a large-scale cultural transformation in the broadest sense, which would then gradually and naturally bear fruits in all other domains. He saw this transformation as having an ethical and a political dimension: first democracy—more precisely, social-democracy—and then a change in the ways of comportment toward other human beings, toward work, and toward one's world view in general. If not accompanied by a moral transformation, scientific and economic progress is meaningless. Skerlić viewed material progress as subservient to what should be the ultimate aim—cultural and moral transformation: “Civilization does not consist solely of scientific, industrial, and artistic progress. One is right in saying that one can use a telephone and still remain a barbarian. Civilization is a moral improvement; everything else should be subservient to that aim” (1964a, 55). The transformation he was hoping to see was not only the installation of telephones in Belgrade homes, or simply importing the results—material, scientific, artistic—of centuries-long developments in the West. It was more about becoming what the “West” was, than about having what the “West” had—about changing the cultural pattern that held Serbia back. If Serbia were to adopt the values that made Western progress possible, it would be able to achieve the same results itself, and actually *be* the “West.” This is why Skerlić saw any form of superficial imitation as fundamentally flawed, unless it involved the adoption of the “West's” basic values.

Isidora Sekulić was not the only writer to experience his wrath. However, writing about her, he at least recognized her talent and her knowledge of literature. The “decadent” poets Sima Pandurović (1883–1960) and Vladislav Petković Dis (1880–1917) on the other hand, did not deserve any concessions, and he attacked them with all his might. Not only was decadent poetry a thing of the past, which twenty years later reached “the periphery of culture, the Balkans, Egypt, and Persia, and the like,” but it was also quite an inappropriate import, resembling Baudelaire's

and Verlaine's poetry as little as Belgrade's bohemian Skadarlija street resembled the Latin Quarter or Montmartre (1964c, 77–78). His evaluation of decadent poetry from the beginning of the twentieth century was later revised by literary historians, and today it does not seem that Pandurović's and Petković's sins were so cardinal as to justify Skerlić's wrath, spread over countless pages and repeated on so many occasions that it remains the first thing that comes to mind when his name is mentioned. Skerlić's other critical judgements seem more or less balanced, and in general he leaves the impression of being a benevolent critic, more than willing to offer praise and recognition where it was due, and moderate in voicing criticism. Pandurović's and Petković's decadent poems enraged him so much not because they were belated imitations—indeed, the writers whom Skerlić praised were also belated imitators of West European genres and movements—but because they talked of rope in the house of a hanged man. In Skerlić's view, a feeble and anaemic people, burdened with Slav passivity and dejected by slavery under a fatalistic oriental people, was already decadent enough. Why make it into “a whole philosophical system and inject into our already slack people suspicion and hopelessness, which have never created anything?” (45). Why “follow rutted, neuropathic decadence, why slavishly imitate the West not in what makes it great, in which it can be our only teacher, but in sick hallucinations of a society nearing its end?” (1964a, 70). Serbs would be better served with some serene, uplifting, and forward-looking poetry, with something in Dositej Obradović's style, something that injects energy and motivates work and creation, and if it must be pessimistic, let it at least be “that high and noble pessimism of select minds . . . which does not corrode, break and bring down, but strengthens, challenges, and inspires for work and creation” (1964c, 58). Not everything Western is fit for Serbs.

Immediately after Skerlić's death Bogdan Popović, his teacher and friend, attempted to give an overall evaluation of his work. While being generally very positive about Skerlić's literary criticism—“a critic with sound judgement and reliable taste—Popović also pointed out some of the misjudgements of the last years of his life and explained them as results of his political bias: “In these years, Skerlić read literature as a member of a political party or of a social camp; he lost his independent judgement, his unwavering sense of justice, his desire to seek the truth and face all things without prejudice” (1932, 79–80). Among the following generation of writers Skerlić's shares had already lost most of their value. Ivo Andrić wrote diplomatically about Skerlić the politician and ideologue of national liberation, without mentioning his literary criticism. A whole generation, maintained Andrić, understood Skerlić's work as a program or a criterion: Skerlić for them “was and remained primarily a

symbol of liberation” (1976, 217–18). Not a word about Skerlić’s literary work, or his project of “Europeanization.” Stanislav Vinaver, another member of the same generation, wrote a book to rehabilitate the Romantic poet Laza Kostić from the disdain and condemnation with which Skerlić’s “sober anti-poetry of Flaubert’s pharmacist Homais” had rejected him (2005, 21). As Skerlić’s reputation as a tribune, politician, and reformer faded away, evaluations of his work began to crystallize more and more frequently around the causes of his mistakes, and the memory of him being a harbinger of “Europeanness” slowly began to wither away. Thus he had to share the fate of Isidora Sekulić, whose efforts to introduce the values of the European literary canon began to fall into oblivion once these values were integrated into Serbian culture. Those born only fifteen years after Skerlić’s death assigned him a place in the history of Serbian culture which seems to be definite today: a historically significant author, but hardly an inspiration or an example to follow. Miodrag Pavlović wrote: “As a literary critic, Skerlić was a functionary of society in literature, but not a representative, interpreter, or protector of literature in society. His sins against poetry in general and individual authors in particular are not accidental mistakes, but a part of a social, political, and national program, and thus a sociological symptom” (1964, 89). Radomir Konstantinović, who in his introduction to a collection of Skerlić’s essays focuses on Skerlić as a tribune of “Europeanization,” eventually highlighted “one of the greatest paradoxes of [Serbian] literature: at the moment of our full *literary* Europeanization, this sworn European was its greatest opponent” (1971, 23). What was unquestionable according to all the quoted authors—Skerlić as the greatest champion of “Europeanization”—Milan Kašanin relativized by questioning Skerlić’s suitability for the task. Skerlić’s knowledge of the wider world was limited, he wrote, and his familiarity with contemporary European literature, philosophy, and the arts was not broad enough (2004a, 199). Skerlić lived in the atmosphere of the 1880s and 1890s, and not in the Europe of his own time. He read Hugo and Renan, but not Bergson and Mallarmé; he wrote about Alphonse Daudet and Anatole France, but never about Paul Claudel or André Gide. His “Europe” was an ideological one, maintained Kašanin, politically and ideologically limited to late nineteenth-century France. When discussing a national culture, he discussed a political system, not the arts. Hence his representation of “semi-Asiatic Russia”: “He did not listen to the Mighty Handful’s music, he did not see Diaghilev’s ballet and the Moscow Art Theatre, he did not read ‘Apollo’ or Ivan Bunin, he did not hear Shalyapin sing, he never took Igor’ Grabar’s *History of Russian Art* in his hands—in Russia he saw only despots and Asians” (201). Even as a politician and an ideologue, he was mistaken: “In a country in which the value of all banks put

together could not compete with the assets of the average Swiss chocolate maker, Skerlić thundered in Parliament against *bankocracy*, ignoring the fact that there is neither a civil state without civil society, nor civil society without banks, and that in agricultural Serbia the trouble was not that there were banks, but that there were not enough of them” (215). After the First World War a whole new generation was entering the scene, which had its own “Europe,” different from Skerlić’s. To them, his “Europe” seemed quite limited and insufficient, out of touch with what “Europe” really was. It was no longer a place of positivism, rationalism, and progress; it was avant-garde movements, Bergson’s antirationalist philosophy, and postwar disappointment with “civilization.” Every successive generation constructed its own “Europe,” and not only wanted Serbia to emulate it, but also judged the previous generation’s construction to be non-“European” or even anti-“European.”

Skerlić viewed Serbia’s 1912 liberation from the Ottoman Empire as evidence that it had adopted “Western” values and had become energetic, tireless, well-organized, and devoid of anarchic individualism; Serbia was taking steps toward freedom and away from oriental fatalism. Hence the title of his 1912 article “Svetli dani” (Bright Days): they had finally dawned in this country of oriental darkness. He was disappointed with “Europe,” which could not recognize and support its own values in the actions of small and weak peoples determined to follow it in what made it great, but also disappointed in Serbs who wanted to follow “Europe” in what did not make it great—in its decadence. Not everything coming from Europe was “European” enough for Skerlić. Isidora Sekulić had the misfortune to publish *Saputnici* in 1913, at a moment when, in Skerlić’s view, the efforts of the entire nation should have been directed toward the final act of liberation, which he also saw as an act of Serbia’s “Europeanization.” Skerlić failed to see that Sekulić’s book was one of the clearest signs of what he had long wanted to see—Serbia’s literary “Europeanization,” her entry into absolute literary modernity—and that as a consequence Sekulić should have been one of his heroes, not one of his villains. Sekulić long remembered his unjustified fury, and eventually responded to it—thirty-six years later!—in her foreward to the 1951 edition of *Pisma iz Norveške*. She remembered how while once walking in a park, she had seen Skerlić, his wife, and their daughter sitting on a bench. The little girl asked her father: “Papa, pourquoi fait-il sombre?” and Skerlić replied, “Parce qu’il ne fait pas clair” (Sekulić 1951, 21). There you have it, despaired Sekulić, he accused *me* of cosmopolitanism, while speaking in a foreign language with his only child himself! Two people, who devoted their lives to the “Europeanization” of Serbian culture and society, accused each other of cosmopolitanism and a lack of national sentiments. However, both

Skerlić's 1912 article "Svetli dani" and Sekulić's *Pisma iz Norveške* testify that neither was insufficiently "national"—on the contrary, they both seem to be quite well attuned to the main currents of the nineteenth-century nationalist program. And at the same time, both were cosmopolitan, if we take this word to mean what it must have meant to them: the opposite of autochthonism and isolationism; the aspiration for Serbian culture to be imbued with the same values as other European cultures, and to be able to communicate with, and to withstand comparisons with them; the ambition for Serbian society to modernize itself following the model of successful modernization in "Europe"; and the need to suppress "bloody nationalism." They were even in agreement regarding the methods to achieve these objectives—not by merely imitating, but by fundamentally transforming culture and society, so that it would be possible to create values simultaneously "European" and Serbian.¹⁴ It was a *cosmopolitan nationalism* which demanded a greater effort from the national culture—so that it could be recognized in the international context—as well as the recognition of that culture from the imaginary concert of "European" cultures. Although Skerlić and Sekulić ended up in a conflict based on misunderstandings and misreadings, both of them exemplify Serbian culture's attitude toward "Europe" at the beginning of the twentieth century. "Europe" was constructed as a repository of values needed for the process of modernization, and as a canon of intellectual and artistic achievements. The acquisition of both was understood as a necessary step toward Serbia's full integration into the modern world. However, at the same time their "Europe" had a dimension of economic and political imperialism, a corrupt press all too willing to cooperate with its centers of power, and the hypocrisy of the "civilizing" discourse—all of which was in sharp contrast with the values shaped by its highest intellectual and artistic achievements.

Notes

1. On “Europe” as a discursive construction see Delanty 1995, White 2000, Stráth 2000, Herzfeld 2002, Dainotto 2007; on the “West,” see GoGwilt 1995, Lewis and Wigen 1997, Bonnet 2004.

2. “Between 1920 and 1940 no one knew contemporary European literature better than she did. She followed English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian literature in journals, books and newspapers with great curiosity and enormous energy, never missing a single *Times Literary Supplement*” (Kašanin 2004b, 33).

3. See Sekulić 1986.

4. While highly praising her style and talent, Skerlić reproached Isidora Sekulić for self-centeredness, egotism, intellectualism, purely bookish inspiration, and cosmopolitanism. *Saputnici* appeared at the very beginning of the Serbian-Bulgarian war in 1913, when many were dying on the battlefields and in hospitals from cholera. “I tried to read this book on a train,” wrote Skerlić, “in the atmosphere of blood and death which was felt everywhere. . . . In conversations on the train and at train stations, where only the despairing faces of old men and scared faces of women were to be seen, one could hear only the ominous words *wounded, perished*. . . . In Lapovo I saw a heartbreaking group of several hundred women with small children, many of them already wearing mourning clothes, who awaited the arrival of the train carrying wounded soldiers. And when the train arrived, when these unfortunate women rushed onboard, where all the miseries of war were to be seen, and when they found out who would never return, not even limbless, one would hear screaming, wailing, lamenting, the painful cries of mothers and wives. And then a horrible procession would be formed, of stretchers, men with makeshift crutches, strung together with sticks found in woods, young men with broken limbs, with pierced stomachs, shattered heads, with their eyes gouged out. Compared with this sight, which freezes one’s blood, which can never be erased from memory, which makes one realize the depths of human pain and suffering—what would one make of seventeen pages of phrases about a headache! Never in my life have I so strongly felt the pathetic emptiness of words and the vanity of bookish literature.” Skerlić also alluded to Sekulić’s non-Serbian first name, adding that “*nomen est omen*” and implied that she was indifferent to her people’s suffering (Skerlić 1964c, 278–292).

5. On the genealogy, meaning, and political context of the Kosovo myth, see M. Popović 1977.

6. *Gjennem Montenegro paa Ski* (Through Montenegro on Skis), Kristiania, 1895; *De sorte fjeldes sønner* (The Sons of the Black Mountains), Kristiania, 1896; *Et stækt folk: Montenegrinske fortællinger* (A Strong People: Montenegrin Stories), Kristiania 1902; *Naar et lidet folk kjæmper for livet: Serbiske soldaterfortællinger* (When a Small People Struggles for Life: Serbian Soldiers’ Stories), Kristiania, 1914.

7. *Opanak* is a traditional type of footwear made from leather.

8. *Pipirevka* and *kokonješte* are South Slav round dances.

9. Writing in 1900, Skerlić was obviously referring to the Western powers' taking of Beijing during the Boxer Uprising, but erroneously ascribed to it the causes of the Opium War in 1841.
10. The Sava River at that time separated Austria-Hungary from Serbia; the bridge connected Belgrade and Zemun.
11. Dušan, Simeun, and Zvonimir were the medieval rulers of the Serbs, Bulgars, and Croats respectively.
12. Skerlić always insisted on the parallel between Svetozar Marković and Dositej Obradović, seeing in the former a reincarnation of the latter: "This young man's role in our public life in the nineteenth century was the same as that of the ex-monk Dositej Obradović at the end of the eighteenth century: the introduction of European, Western, rational ideas into the stifling and primitive atmosphere of our Eastern, and in every respect, backward life" (Skerlić 1964b, 8–9).
13. The *gusle* is a South Slav one-stringed musical instrument. Ravijojla is a fairy from the South Slav oral epics.
14. The idea that imitation is not the right path to "Europeanization," and that the latter can be achieved only through a fundamental transformation can be found in other Balkan cultures as well. It is best expressed in a letter sent by Pero Slijepčević to Milan Kašanin in 1928: "What is needed today is not something which will repeat a word uttered in Paris or London, but something which will be both ours and on the frontline of the general European direction" (Kašanin 2004b, 76).

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