

Getting over Europe: the construction of Europe in Serbian culture, by Zoran Milutinović, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2011, 290 pp., US\$70.20 (paperback), ISBN 978-9042032712

The author sets out to inquire the ways in which “Europe” (or many social imaginations of that name) was constructed “in Serbian culture, in the selected writings of leading writers and intellectuals between two world wars” (9). Partly anchored in imagology, the study follows manners and practices of expression and transmission of social perceptions and images in literary discourses. Through cross-cultural contrasting, interpretations, and analyses of primary texts, the book offers a thick and captivating snapshot of entangled intimate, personal, and collective discourses of Europe. It examines wider transnational and more “local” Balkan and Serbian imaginations of Europe and of its purported zeitgeist throughout the historical crises and transformations following the “Great War” (1914–1918). The book’s nine analytical chapters delve into the discourses of key (predominantly) Serbian writers and public intellectuals between the two world wars – from Isidora Sekulić and Jovan Skerlić to Miloš Crnjanski, Ivo Andrić, and others. In engaging with the discursive dynamics of identity construction between their personalities, their national-ethnic collectivities, multi-layered social roles and their intimate “Europes,” Milutinović distills themes that according to him underwrite and partly tie together the “European” and “Western” narratives of the different authors. His analysis unfolds as highly accessible to wider audiences beyond the confines of academia. It reads as an intimate dissection of original texts in ways that invariably raise questions about the cognitive and emotive structures shaping collective and individual imaginations of Europe in Serbia. This review will inspect in more depth three particular aspects of Milutinović’s narrative: the manner of his interpretation and analysis of primary discourses, the unique and hybrid genre of the text, and its sociological focus.

First, the author presents a broad thesis that seems to revolve around an ontological stance on “Europe” as a plurality of social images, identities, and representations rather than a natural, finitely known and delineated civilizational, political, and geographic entity. Furthermore, Milutinović claims that describing Europe is in fact an endeavor in individual and group self-definition, imagination, and identity construction that operates via the complex socially, emotionally, and psychologically conditioned processes of “othering.” Thereby, the book suggests that constructing collective and individual identities vis-à-vis an intimately known Europe seemingly unfolds in binary terms as either imitation (unquestioning or somewhat critical) or rejection. The author seems to show discomfort with this process by implicitly favoring those narratives and identities that “overcome” such Europe-bound positionalities and ultimately “get over Europe.” However, embedded in and burdened with Milutinović’s ostensibly descriptive and evenhandedly critical narrative, this normativity is never acknowledged or explicated. This is all the more problematic if one considers that the phrase and implicit praise of “getting over Europe” appear in the very book title, yet its meaning to the author and its apparent centrality to the narrative are never directly addressed.

Seemingly, this personal normativity remains unaccounted for as a side effect of the general framing and manner of Milutinović’s analysis as a descriptive and dispassionate interpretation of social discourses. However, his text reveals the pitfalls of most descriptive narratives regardless of their elegant phrasing (a goal that Milutinović certainly attains) or evenhandedness: every description is a form of prescription. As the author concludes his analysis of Vujčić’s, Crnjanski’s, and Andrić’s respective co-imaginings of the “here” (as “me,” “us,” “East,” or “here-them”) and “there” (as “Europe,” “West,” or “them”), he tacitly endorses their purported ability to liberate themselves from civilizational and

cultural yearnings for Europe, from being subject to the power of the idea of belonging. Milutinović then stops at this tacit endorsement and moves on to the next imagination, never fully acknowledging the very outcome of his analysis. Thus, the reader seems to be left in the author's emotional and intellectual limbo, perhaps wondering if there is a whole unspoken book in *Getting Over Europe*.

The book's repressed normativity produces some analytical inconsistencies as well. A case in point is the iteration of crude binary oppositions across the book that Milutinović conspicuously refrains from critically deconstructing. Whether it is Miloš Djurić's opposition between (Asia's) "soul" and (Europe's) "reason," "Ethics" and "Technique," or Sekulić's "history" and "nature," the author seems to engage with them only occasionally and without an explicit criterion or pattern. This analytical tactic seemingly upholds the approach that merely seeks to chronicle and report on a number of discourses in their authentic forms and convey their original substance. Nonetheless, the author appears critical, albeit implicitly, of Rastko Petrović's evolving "European" identity in Africa, mainly by exposing contradictions, ironies, and tensions in Petrović's narrative. Perhaps one of the more unexpected engagements with the discourse and persona of a particular intellectual is the case of Milutinović's reading of Nikolaj Velimirović. Thereby, the author questions the labeling of Velimirović as a Nazi by maintaining his supposed intellectual similarity with Winston Churchill rather than Adolph Hitler. While this may be a point relevant to his discussion of Velimirović's discourses of Europe, it certainly does not follow the general intent of Milutinović's narrative – one of dispassionate description and abstention from critical deconstruction. Ultimately, as already pointed out, the author seems to endorse those discourses that manage to "get over Europe" – yet the origin of and motivation behind such strategies of identity (de)construction remain unclear.

Second, it is commendable that Milutinović's narrative makes for an accessible and engaging reading for both academic and non-academic audiences. The book is addressed to "those working in Slavic or East European studies [...], imagology, and European studies" (back cover). In a broader sense, however, the text is truly multidimensional: at one time it reads as an inspired "novel about novels" (e.g. in engaging with Miloš Crnjanski) – an original work of art in other words – while at other times it unfolds as a standard literary analysis that interprets a given narrative based on its historical and social context, the primary author's personal and intellectual background, syntax, lexicology, semantics, etc. Finally, Milutinović does not shy away from engaging with political and social theory, sociology and post-colonial approaches, which renders his analysis rich and varied, revealing a number of invaluable insights into the narratives of Europe in and beyond Serbia. However, the downside of Milutinović's multifaceted approach and hybrid analytical-artistic genre is that it does not fully reap the benefits of the many approaches it draws on due to their mutual limitations and the resultant inability to fully commit to their distinct analytical "toolboxes." The various approaches and philosophies that inspire Milutinović certainly reinforce one another through discourse analysis; however, much is lost due to the inconsequential and sporadic usage of post-colonial theories, structuralism, post-structuralism, and social constructivism in political and social theory. Instances where the author comes close to fully and comprehensively committing to an interpretive lens reveal a great detail of insight. Such is, for example, his usage of Saussure's notion of structural existence to convey the contrasting meanings of "the bridge" and "the train" in Andrić's narrative of a small Balkan town immersed in the forces of modernization. Another such instance is his instructive invocation of Derrida's *sous rature* ("under erasure") to shed light on Pocock's discomfort with the term "barbarians" – an outdated scholarly notion unfortunately applied to the twenty-first century

construct of “Yugoslavs.” Nonetheless, Milutinović’s use of the various theoretical lenses is not strategic and consistent. Neither is his original literary reflection on the imaginations of Europe scrutinized in the book. The use of these approaches is at best tactical; they are deployed and abandoned somewhat erratically – densely and frequently alternating between disjointed philosophies, authors, and fields of inquiry. Analytical eclecticism can lead to learning synergies; however, it may also come at a price.

Third, one of the important pillars of Milutinović’s analysis that remains blurred and unaccounted for is the narrative’s sociological focus. The author zeroes in on the imaginaries and representations of Europe among Serbian public intellectuals (mostly writers) between the two world wars, thus limiting his analytical scope to elite discourses only, moreover – only a particular section of Serbian social elites. He does not make an argument about their broader social representativeness – nor does he necessarily need to. However, what is missing is a rationale behind this key decision. Do Serbian intellectual (and narrowly artistic) elite discourses between the two wars have a particular social or historical quality that merits thick description? Did the author consider expanding his study to include the manners of speaking and describing Europe in popular or professional journals and periodicals of the time (e.g. *Politika*, *Nedelja*, *Nova Evropa*, *Borba* (Zagreb), *Ilustrovani list*, *Srpske novine*, *Pravda Beogradske novine*, *Srpska straža*, *Ratnički glasnik*, *Ekonomist*, etc.)? Does this particular focus perhaps stem from limitations in accessibility of other primary sources and, consequently, other social groups? Most importantly, how did the author arrive at the sociological focus ultimately adopted in the book? The core of this critique relates to the very architecture and fabric of social framings of Europe in Serbia. Serbian intellectual elites between the two wars did not reflect and write in a social vacuum, and the author mainly recognizes two kinds of dominant social structures that potentially informed their work and were, in turn, reinforced by it. One is the transnational space of European public intellectuals immediately prior to and throughout the interwar period, and the second one is the general interwar moment in European history with its milestone events, social continuities, and disruptions. Therefore, what is missing in terms of either structure or agency (or, indeed, both) is a domestic social fabric that includes wider popular discourses, as well as other elites – political, military, economic, etc. While highly engaging in their description, imagination, and lexicology, it remains unclear why the discourses of novelists and literary critics should be privileged.

In conclusion, *Getting Over Europe* is a captivating and insightful work of potential interest to a truly rich variety of audiences. Its methodical narrative and richness of historical and literary detail reflect the work of an author whose erudition and breadth of academic foundation are reminiscent of Renaissance scholars deeply immersed in liberal arts and philosophical underpinnings of science. The significance and originality of Milutinović’s contribution outweigh the book’s repression of its normative narrative, the author’s dithering over analytical eclecticism, and the somewhat arbitrary sociological focus. Ultimately, Milutinović’s effort to juxtapose and contextualize abundant imaginations and representations of Europe among Serbian public intellectuals stands out in the history of similar attempts due to the author’s creative and unassumingly analytical tone, comprehensiveness, and depth of reflection.

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