

## Western Media and the European “Other”: Images of Albania in the British Press in the New Millennium

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*Edward W. Said's Orientalism invigorated as never before the debate on the biased representation of the Orient in the West. In the first part of the article, after highlighting the significance of Said's work, the author then identifies some weaknesses and limitations of the Saidian approach arguing that, like the Near and the Middle East, other countries and regions around the world have an unsavoury image in the West as a result of an ongoing academic and media demonology. Concentrating on the coverage that the Balkans, especially Albania, have received in the West as from the start of the nineteenth century onwards, in the second part of the essay the author argues that the West has traditionally denigrated the European 'other' no less than the non-Europeans thus resulting in a cultural, historical and political fragmentation of the European continent which continues to have negative implications for Albania and the neighbouring countries as much as for the European Union. In the third part of the paper, through content-analysis of several articles that have appeared in the British press during the 2001-2005 period, the focus is on the disturbing tendency to denigrate the Albanian nation, a tendency which reveals a Euro-centric, post-imperial approach apparent in the Western media towards 'estranged' Europeans like the Albanians.*

*Key words:* Albania, Western Media, British Press, National Image, Sensationalism

In the introduction to his acclaimed 1978 book *Orientalism* (27) Edward W. Said states that '[t]he life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening'. Said was a devout champion of the Palestinian cause but his above

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***Suggested citation:***

Alpion, Gëzim. 2005. Western Media and the European “Other”: Images of Albania in the British Press in the New Millennium. *Albanian Journal of Politics*. I (1): 4-25.

remark, like the book in question, was not inspired only by patriotism and nationalism, something he was keen to reiterate throughout his life and especially in the preface to the 2003 edition (xii):

I do want to affirm yet again that this book and, for that matter, my intellectual work generally have really been enabled by my life as a university academic....for all its urgent worldly references [*Orientalism*] is still a book about culture, ideas, history and power, rather than Middle Eastern politics *tout court*. That was my notion from the very beginning, and it is very evident and a good deal clearer to me today.

The book certainly exonerates Said from any ‘accusation’ of patriotism, but on the whole what he claims in this particular work is mainly about how the Orient and the orientals, especially Muslim Arabs, have been and continue to be misperceived and misrepresented in the West since the 1798 Napoleon expedition to Egypt onwards. In his own words:

The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny. It has made matters worse for him to remark that no person academically involved with the Near East – no Orientalist, that is – has ever in the United States culturally and politically identified himself wholeheartedly with the Arabs; certainly there have been identifications on some level, but they have never taken an ‘acceptable’ form as has liberal identification with Zionism, and all too frequently they have been radically flawed by their association either with discredited political and economic interests (oil company and State Department Arabists, for example) or with religion. (ibid: 27)

The Saidian predicament is felt not only by the Palestinians or the Arabs (be they Muslims or Christians) in the West, however. The ‘web of racism’, ‘cultural stereotypes’, ‘political imperialism’ and ‘dehumanizing ideology’ holds in not only the Arab or the Muslim but any ‘foreigner’ in the West originating from other ‘lesser’ peoples and ‘subject races’.

The degradation of the ‘other’ in the West is not done only for religious purposes, as Said often insinuates in this particular work and throughout his *oeuvre*. The negative image of the Orient in the West may have something to do with Islam, but the faith of the Muslims is hardly the main reason why oriental countries,

especially the Middle East, are often misrepresented in the literature produced by and intended for Westerners.

Moreover, contrary to Said's belief, the West's denigration of the Orient started in earnest not at the start of the nineteenth century, but in 32 BC when Octavius crowned himself King of Egypt just over a century after 146 BC, when the fall of Carthage marked the rise of Rome to superpower status.<sup>1</sup> The Romans envied Egypt's success during almost 3,500 years of Pharaonic rule and to silence the Egyptians' pride they were brutally iconoclastic. This is the time when the West first started the looting and the plundering of 'inferior' cultures and civilisations. On the pretext of heresy, Rome exterminated many people in Egypt and across the Middle East, including those who had converted to Christianity.

With the advent of Islam in the seventh century AD, West European countries, now Christianised, would use religion as a pretext any time they tried to exert their power over the peoples in the Middle East and across the expanding Muslim world. The crusades make for a clear early example of the extent to which the 'pious' West was prepared to use religion for the sake of justifying its looting and pillaging of the 'infidel' Orient. Portugal and Spain also employed religion as an excuse for the colonisation of 'the heathens' in both hemispheres. Christianity offered a smokescreen also to European powers like Britain, France, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and Germany to give 'legitimacy' to their colonial policy and to convince public opinion at home about, to use Rudyard Kipling's infamous phrase, 'the white man's burden' to civilize the 'barbarians'.

If Islam is the only reason why the West apparently has something against the Orient, one would expect the European powers to maintain a very friendly attitude towards any Christian country not included in the West. This, however, has never been the case. The Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch and the Danes, for instance, behaved as cruelly towards the converts to Christianity in the Far East and South East Asia over the last five centuries as they behaved in the colonies where the people refused to accept the Europeans' religion.

The same can be said about the way colonisers from Western Europe treated the peoples of Latin America. In spite of the fact that all the countries in this region adopted the white conquerors' faith, they were hardly treated with any leniency. Nor did their standing enhance in the eyes of the European masters throughout the colonisation period. To this day, the image of countries like Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Columbia is similar to the image they had when they were colonies. These countries are not geographically speaking in the Orient. Their image in the West, however, is as negative as that of any oriental country.

Nowadays, the stigmatization of non-Western countries is done mainly through the media. Referring to the negative impact of media representations of the Orient, especially the Near East, on the image of the peoples of these regions and their cultures on the West, Said notes:

Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardisation and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of 'the mysterious Orient'. (2003: 26)

Television, the films and all the media's resources, however, have had the same negative impact also on other non-Western countries. The Latin Americans, for instance, are stereotyped and pigeonholed in the West not less than the orientals. Like the Near East, Latin America makes headlines in the West mainly for the wrong reasons. Referring to this constant negative media coverage of the region, Richard S. Hillman notes:

Attitudes, values, beliefs regarding the conduct of politics, business and life in general remain vastly and profoundly misunderstood by many. The media has sensationalized issues such as political corruption and instability, narcotics trafficking and immigration problems, overshadowing attempts to promote democracy, trade and development, tourism and regional co-operation. (2001: xiii)

In his 'quarrel' with the West, Edward Said conveniently ignores also the important fact that European powers have a long tradition of denigrating countries and regions which geographically, historically, religiously and politically speaking are part of Europe. One such region is the Balkans, and one such country is Albania.

In the Western psyche the Balkans have been traditionally seen as Europe's 'bad appendix', as an incorrigible region where ethnic tensions and conflicts are endemic. In the last two hundred years several European leaders have often expressed their low opinions about this region as a whole. In the 1820s, for instance, the German-born Chancellor of the Austrian Empire, Prince Klemens von Metternich, who was known as 'the coachman of Europe', made it clear that as far as he was concerned, the Balkans are not part of Europe. In his words, 'Asia begins at the Landstrasse', the highway leading south and east of Vienna into Hungary. In the late nineteenth century, 'the Iron Chancellor' Otto von Bismarck, one of the founders of the German Empire, held that the Balkans were not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. Several European leaders have often made

disparaging remarks also about individual Balkan and central European countries. Bismarck, for instance, had no qualms in declaring that ‘Albania is merely a geographic expression; there is no Albanian nation,’ and Archduke Franz Ferdinand considered it ‘an act of bad taste for the Hungarians to have come to Europe’.

There are several reasons – geographical, ethnic, religious, economic, political – why, although in Europe, the Balkan nations are not considered as Europeans, and why they continue to have such a negative image in the West in spite of their contribution ‘to the general progress of European civilization’ (Halecki 1952: 3). Western Europe’s dominance and its unsavoury opinion of the Balkans have their beginnings in the days of the Roman Empire. Rome’s victory over Gent, the last Illyrian king, in 169 BC signalled the start of the long colonisation of the Balkans. Since Rome’s annexation of Illyria, apart from some spells of self-rule, the Albanians in particular have been constantly living under occupation. The mass arrival of the Slavs in the Balkans from the fifth century AD onwards, meant that the Balkans remained a region where tribe-nations had been constantly vying for and often fighting with each other over territory. The conflicts in the Balkans since the dawn of the Slavic migration have often been and remain to this day essentially conflicts about expansion, colonisation, consolidation and protection of ethnic borders. This ongoing ethnic strife has often given the Balkans an unsympathetic image in the West. The contradictions between different and similar ethnic groups in the Balkans have made the peoples of the region easy targets for strong colonial powers whether they came from the West or the East. This was particularly the case in the fourteenth century when the Ottomans’ progress into the peninsula was facilitated by the lack of unity among princes of several ethnic groups. In spite of some valiant attempts to unite against the common enemy initially in 1389 and throughout the 1443-1468 period, the Balkan rulers were too divided to unite together against the Turks. The old Roman motto ‘*divide et impera*’ was used skilfully by the Turks throughout their long stay in the Balkans. The Hapsburg Empire was equally eager to exploit the bitter contradictions of the Balkan countries.

The Balkan peoples have also suffered as a result of the several schisms that have befallen Christianity since the fourth century, and the religious decisions they have made at particular moments in their history. In the case of the Albanians, the conversion to Islam in the wake of the death of their national hero Skanderbeg in 1468, a conversion which was made possible partly through coercion, partly through bribery and partly as a matter of convenience for the local rulers who wanted to retain their power, was to have a detrimental impact on the image of the Albanians in the West. The European Powers acknowledged Albania as a Turkish colony for almost five centuries mainly because they wrongly believed, some still

do, that all Albanians are Muslims. Albania's perception in the West as an 'Islamic' country has also been reinforced because of the Serbian propaganda since the end of the nineteenth century onwards to present the Albanians as 'fanatic adherents' of the Islamic faith and as such as 'non-Europeans'. Documents made public recently by the US government reveal that during the Cold War the West as well as the USSR often referred to Albania as a 'Muslim' country in spite of the officially atheistic stance of the Albanian government.

Following the disintegration of the Turkish Empire in the early twentieth century, the European Powers were quick to intervene in the Balkans not so much to help the peoples of the region as to serve their own interests and establish their control in several parts of the peninsula. The decision to carve up the Balkans, especially Albania, in 1913, was further proof of the West's negative impact on the region.

Western powers' influence over the Balkans waned considerably during the Second World War and especially throughout the Cold War. Except for Greece's lucky escape thanks to the financial support coming from the United States in 1947, something which proved vital later for the integration of Greece into the European Community, all Balkan countries adopted Communism. The Cold War was essentially an irreconcilable ideological conflict during which the differences were often seen as manifestation of the battle between good and evil. In this bitter contest between two contradicting social systems – Capitalism and Communism – the image of the Communist Balkans suffered even further.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 offered the Balkan peoples another chance to join the family of the European nations. The dramatic changes in Europe's political map towards the end of the second millennium brought to the surface again the ancient issue about the Europeanness or non-Europeanness of the Balkans. For their part, after several decades of Communist propaganda and isolation, only now the Balkan citizens could see for themselves the negative image they had in the West. This unsympathetic image about the region was hardly helped by the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia throughout the 1990s. In the case of Albania, the country's image was tarnished further by the exodus of refugees heading towards Italy in 1990 and the civil unrest in the wake of the collapse of the fraudulent pyramid schemes in 1997.

Every Balkan country is keen to join the European Union. Except for Slovenia, however, no other candidate at the moment is deemed suitable to join the expanding exclusive club of the European nations. Several Balkan countries believe that their hopes and ambition 'to join' Europe have been dashed because of the negative image the region has in the West. This is the reason why many hopeful candidates are keen to distance themselves from the Balkans. The tendency to present themselves as 'non-Balkans' is strong among the region's EU

members Greece and Slovenia, and among the frustrated hopefuls like Croatia. Many Croats are deeply insulted if foreigners consider their country as part of the Balkans (Dauti, Robelli: 2005). The Croats' aversion towards the Balkans seems to have intensified also by the advice of their Western promoters. One such 'effective promoter' of Croatia in the UK is Brian Gallagher, who has repeatedly advised the Croats to distance themselves from the Balkans. In his article 'Will Croatia join a Balkan NATO?', which appeared in *Hrvatski Vjesnik* on 26 July 2002, Gallagher praises the Slovenes for their farsightedness to wean themselves from 'the problem region'. In his words, '[b]y simply saying 'no', Slovenia has avoided all regional nonsense and has escaped the Balkan image'. Sensing a 'hidden' agenda on the part of NATO to create what he calls 'a West Balkan NATO', Gallagher concludes that 'NATO clearly considers Croatia to be fully part of this troubled region, which cannot be good news for Croatia's image'. Having argued that 'Croatia and Serbia are not 'like-minded' countries', Gallagher 'reprimands' the Croatian government for its 'naivety':

Why is Croatia anchoring itself to these problem countries? Is Zagreb unaware of the appalling image these countries have in the EU? The British media – often hysterically – is continually running stories about Albanian criminal gangs in the UK. General Sylvester, Head of NATO in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in relation to dealing with terrorism described the BiH border as 'porous' in *TIME* magazine. Such an image means that Croatia will never join NATO and the EU on an individual basis. But it will certainly end up in some 'West Balkan' structure. The EU makes things clear on their website. They wish to 'encourage the countries of the region to behave towards each other and work with each other in a manner comparable to the relationships that now exist between EU Member States'. A West Balkan EU in other words. Croatia will be economically impoverished by the 'West Balkan association. Many investors will take their money to 'safer' countries, not linked to basket case economies such as Serbia. And if there are any conflicts in Serbia or elsewhere, tourism may suffer. Croatia needs to get away from the West Balkan image, not plunge straight into it.

Gallagher is right to warn the Croats about 'the appalling image' all Balkan countries have in the West, but he seems to have a rather narrow view about its origin. While the turbulent 1990s hardly endeared the peoples of Balkans to Westerners, their image as 'uncivilised' had been sealed in the West at least two centuries earlier. From the early nineteenth century onwards, the West knew the Balkans mainly through the works of Western travel writers and accounts of diplomats and military experts posted across the region. There were cases when

Westerners wrote about the Balkans without ever setting foot in the region, thus constructing, what K. E. Fleming calls, 'fictional Balkan worlds'. In the twentieth centuries such 'fictional' Balkan worlds appeared in the works of Georges Remi (known mainly as Hergé), Agatha Christie and, towards the end of the twentieth century, in the novels of J. K. Rowling. If the first two writers used fictional names for their Balkan countries ('Syldavia' and 'Borduria' in Hergé's *Le Sceptre d'Ottokar/King Ottokar's Sceptre: Tintin Visits an Exotic Country* (1939); 'Herzosllovakia' in Christie's *The Secrets Chimneys* (1925)), Rowling has no qualms in using the name of Albania in her *Harry Potter and the Chambers of Secrets* (1998) and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000) as the country where the evil 'Dark Lord' and his dedicated followers find a perfect hideout.<sup>2</sup>

While the West has quite an archive of literary works in which the Balkans and Albania are continuously presented mainly as 'uncivilised', with the exception of the last few decades, over the last three centuries Western scholars have hardly considered the Balkan Peninsula, Albania or any other Balkan country worthy of a lengthy academic study. As K. E. Fleming notes in her 2000 article '*Orientalism, the Balkans, and the Balkan Historiography*', there is no history of 'Balkanism' as an established academic field.

In the same work, Fleming holds that, different from *Orientalism*, the Balkans scholarship has traditionally been produced by a 'free-lance', 'pseudo-academic', 'cottage industry of 'specialists'', who, as in the case of the break up of Yugoslavia, are interested in the subject matter because contemporary conflicts render it 'timely'. I myself have written elsewhere that in the case of Albania, its Western image-makers have often ended up writing about it quite by chance, and not as part of a long thought-out plan to study its people, history and culture.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, such Western 'specialists' on the Balkans and Albania took to travelling abroad either to escape bad publicity at home, as was the case with Lord Byron, or on medical advice, as was the case with Edith Durham. Albania offered to eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century Western travellers like Byron, Durham, Roland Matthews, Karl May, Franz Nopcsa, British military personnel operating in Albania and elsewhere in the Balkans during World War II, and more recently to Tom Winnifrith, Paul Theroux, Robert Carver, and Marianne Graf a chance to encounter the 'exotic', the 'primitive' and the 'uncivilised' at the threshold of Western Europe.

It is no coincidence that for most of these Albanian 'experts', what is of particular interest is not the 'civilised' Albania, but its backwardness, not the thriving towns and cities like Tirana, Shkodra, Korça and Vlora with a rich and varied civic history but the distant villages, and especially the less developed Northern Albania. Following the example of Durham and Nopcsa at the start of the twentieth century, contemporary travel writers like Carver and Graf pay attention almost exclusively



to this particular region of Albania to tell Western readers about their sensational discovery of a 'backwater of life' which has 'primitive virtues, without many of the meannesses of what is called civilisation. It is uncorrupted by luxury' (Durham 1985: 118). Some of the most preferred themes of these devoted chasers of the exotic are the Albanian *besa*, the Canon of Lek Dukagjin, blood feuds and, of course, the sworn virgins. Such exotic themes are all given priority in the biographies of Albanian personalities penned by Westerners like Gwen Robyns, the author of *Geraldine of the Albanians: The Authorised Biography* (1987), or in the writings of numerous Mother Teresa scholars such as Eileen Egan, Kathryn Spink and Anne Sebba.

The American novelist Paul Theroux once said that writing travel books is 'a pretty harmless activity' (Capen 1995). This is true as far as the authors of this kind of literature and their intended readers are concerned; after all they are all Westerners. When it comes to the countries described in the made-in-and-for-the-West travel books, however, travel-writing becomes anything but a harmless activity. As a result of works written by authors who have visited the country or virtual travellers who describe exotic places without ever setting foot there, as was the case sometimes with the German writer Karl May and more recently with the Spanish novelist Susana Fortes, the author of *El Amante Albanés/The Albanian Lover* (2003), the West possesses now quite an 'exotic archive' on Albania. This 'exotic archive' is largely responsible for the predominantly negative image of the country abroad.

Albania's image as a 'primitive', 'uncivilised' and 'dangerous' but still fun-to-visit place, prevails even nowadays when this corner of the Balkans is no longer an isolated country. It is as a result of this long-established tradition to describe this place only in black and white that to this day the West remains largely ignorant of anything positive going on in Albania in the past as well as in the last fifteen years since the collapse of Communism. Anything reported in the West about Albania, even an international football match, has to be politicised for the sake of highlighting this country's backwardness. In his messy article 'Good grass and gun law', that appeared in *The Observer* on 25 March 2001, for instance, Simon Kuper takes the reader on a journey that has to do more with the 'primitiveness' of the host country, corruption, the donkey carts its people allegedly use as a mode of transportation to travel to Tirana to see international matches, and contract killings but hardly anything specific about Albania's World Cup fixture with England. Referring to a photograph an Albanian football historian had taken of the England team before the kick-off when they played Albania in 1989, Kuper cannot contain his surprise to notice that in the picture 'Bryan Robson, Peter Shilton, John Barnes and Gary Lineker [were] looking as if they had no idea they were visiting Europe's

strangest state'. The England team, it seems, had let Kuper and Britain down by looking normal in an 'abnormal' country, surrounded by 'abnormal' football fans.

This biased, sensationalist and exotic literature on and tabloid-like media coverage of Albania have long become 'the norm' in the West especially in the United Kingdom. The following articles mentioned in this part of the essay have appeared in major British newspapers during the 2001-2005 period. The reason for their selection has been determined purely by the fact that during these years Albania has experienced political stability, law and order have been maintained across the country, and many Albanians have seen an increase in their savings<sup>4</sup> and an improvement in their wellbeing. As a result of more opportunities to work and higher salaries, the Albanians who went on holiday abroad in 2004 spent \$560 million.<sup>5</sup> All indications are that the Albanian government is working hard to follow the advice of the European Union on several issues regarding its monetary policy and the management of the economy. Albania is also playing a positive role in the Balkans to further regional cooperation. More recently, an Albanian minister was the brainchild behind the Balkan Council for the Ministers of Culture which was founded in Copenhagen on 31 March 2005.<sup>6</sup> The Albanian government has initiated several other projects to enhance cultural exchanges and improve trade relations with almost every Balkan country and has responded positively to similar proposals originating from other governments in the region.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of such positive developments, like most of the Balkan countries, Albania hits the headlines in the West, especially in the British media, mostly for negative things. Richard Hillman's conclusion, mentioned earlier, that media has sensationalised issues such as political corruption and instability, narcotics trafficking and immigration problems, overshadowing attempts to promote democracy, trade and development, tourism and regional co-operation, is true not only in the case of Latin America but also for Albania and the Balkans.

For the majority of the British journalists covering Albania, its identity and image are set in stone. Albania was and remains 'Europe's poorest and most isolated country' (Dowling 2003: 2). These are some of the titles of the articles about this country that have appeared in recent years in some of Britain's major newspapers such as *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Observer* and *The Guardian*: 'The wild frontier', 'Rocks and hard places', 'Albanian gangs take control of Britain streets', 'Balkan criminals better organised than us: Blunkett', 'Shanty town in Albania built on toxic time bomb', 'Back home: the child of six sold to traffickers', 'Streets of despair', 'Welcome to Tirana, Europe's pollution capital', 'Partisan war at Albania's paradise bay', and 'Secret Europe'. From these titles it is not surprising that British citizens are strongly advised to think twice before taking the decision to visit Albania. The advice, several British reporters are keen to emphasise, comes

mainly from the Foreign Office. This is how Esther Addley opens her article ‘Welcome to camp Tirana’, which appeared in *The Guardian* on 11 March 2003:

Planning to visit Albania? If so the Foreign Office has a few tips. ‘Public security has improved considerably in Albania...but crime and violence still represent a serious problem in some areas’, its website cautions. ‘Drink only bottled water and UHT milk. Medical facilities (including accident and emergency) are very poor. We do not recommend using dental facilities’.

Of particular concerns, it warns, are hepatitis, rabies (due to ‘the large number of stray dogs’) and tick-borne encephalitis’ (‘we advice travellers to keep all areas of the body covered when close to shrubs, and to inspect themselves regularly for ticks’) In fact, it concludes, better safe than sorry: make sure your medical insurance covers evacuation by helicopter, just in case the worst should happen. (7)

The Foreign Office website is also mentioned in several other newspaper articles on Albania. In his piece ‘Wish you were here’, which appeared in *The Guardian* on 11 August 2003, for instance, Tim Dowling notes that the Foreign Office draws attention to ‘the widespread ownership of firearms’, and strongly discourages travel in the north-east of the country’ (2). The information Dowling received about Albania from another source was hardly more encouraging:

The Lonely Planet website warns of ‘armed robberies, assaults, mobster assassinations, bombings and carjackings’, exhorts visitors to ‘avoid all large public gatherings’ and says it is inadvisable to travel outside the main cities, or anywhere at night. This doom-laden paragraph is missing from the latest edition of its printed guide to eastern [sic] Europe, but the book does suggest that ‘corrupt police may attempt to extort money from you’ and the word ‘banditry’ is used in passing. (ibid)

Albania does not fare any better in other travel guide websites. Many of them in fact ignore this country altogether. On 13 July 2003, Andrew Muller wrote in *The Independent on Sunday* that Albania is not mentioned in the current *Rough Guide to Eastern Europe*, and *Fodor’s Central & Eastern Europe* also gives it a swerve. (17). The lack of information on Albania and the scary picture painted by the Home Office and the Lonely Planet websites are unlikely to entice foreigners to visit this country. No wonder many people in the West share Muller’s sentiment that ‘[y]ou’d no sooner go to Albania than you’d jump on the tail of a sleeping leopard, and nor would anybody else’ (ibid).

Cases are not rare when British reporters writing about Albania rely entirely on and accept uncritically the little available information on travel to this country. They are also keen to refer in their articles, often inconsequentially, to some Albanian 'primitive' and 'bizarre' customs and traditions they have picked up from browsing hastily the 'exotic archive' on Albania we mentioned earlier. Cases are not rare when British reporters write about Albania without consulting any scholarly book on the country's history. Indeed, many of them have no education background on Albania or the Balkans. The British journalists who cover this region as a rule are commissioned at random for an occasional article, have never studied at any university in the Balkans, speak none of the Balkan languages and what is more important often write about the region without ever going there in person. This reminds me of the former British Minister for Europe Keith Vaz, who was also responsible for the Balkans. Shortly after the fall of Milosevic, I attended a meeting with Mr Vaz in Birmingham where I asked him why the British government was so eager to hail as a huge success the 'half-baked' Serbian revolution of October 2000, considering that Vojislav Kostunica's stance on the Serbian nationalism was hardly any different from that of his predecessor. To this the Minister replied: 'The Balkans, you know, is a very difficult region'. When Mr Vaz was forced to resign in late 2001 for his alleged involvement in what is known as the 'passport controversy', it emerged that throughout the four years as a minister responsible for the Balkans, he had never visited the region.

Like everywhere in the world, even in Britain a politician cannot help being a jack of all trades and master of none. It is unfortunate, however, that the British journalists who bring the world to the British public often think that they can offer a realistic and impartial picture of a country like Albania by relying exclusively on outdated information coming from government departments, travel guides and sensationalist and biased travel writers. This kind of distance reporting as was the case with Esther Addley's badly written piece 'Welcome to camp Tirana' is largely responsible for the perennial pauper-image reserved for Albania in the British media.

Albania's image in the UK has hardly benefited much, however, also from British journalists who are 'brave' enough to take the challenge to visit this 'dangerous' place. The reputation of Albania as an 'unsafe' country often reaches a manic level in the UK. 'When I told my friends – educated, enlightened, citizens of the world – I was going to visit Albania', Andrew Muller wrote in *The Independent on Sunday* on 13 July 2003, 'their initial responses were instructive: 'Wasn't Baghdad dangerous enough'; 'Could I please have your flat?'; 'Bring me back a, erm...cabbage?'' (17). The dispatches most British journalists send from Tirana or other parts of Albania often perpetuate the bad image this country and its people already have in Britain. Tim Dowling is right when he concludes that most

information he consulted prior to his visit to Albania in August 2003 ‘seems designed to instil fear’ (2003: 2), but his piece on his ‘holiday’ there was hardly any more objective or friendlier.

The article ‘Wish you were here’ betrays Dowling’s poor knowledge of the country quite often. ‘In Albania,’ he claims with authority of someone who knows what he is talking about, ‘they worship Norman Wisdom as a cultural icon’ (ibid). The myth about Wisdom’s iconic status among the Albanians is mentioned almost by anyone writing on Albania since the actor visited the country after the end of Communism.<sup>8</sup> In Albania, every foreigner who is anybody, is given a red-carpet reception, even non-entities. As in the West, however, even in Albania celebrities, including those hailing from the West, are often forgotten as soon as they leave the country, or when another famous face pops up. The celebrity culture operates in Albania much in the same way as in the UK. The Albanians, the quick-witted Dowling also notes, ‘shake their heads for yes and nod for no’. The journalist, who obviously has quite an eye for spotting such sophisticated mannerisms which are very difficult to notice with the naked eye, could prove irreplaceable if, or rather when the ‘green men’ decide to pay a visit to our planet. The remark which I like most in Dowling’s learned article, though, is the one testifying to his expertise as a linguist *par excellence*. The Albanians, the Chomsky of British journalism claims, ‘speak two languages, Tosk and Gheg’ (ibid). Only this piece of information alone would give the impression to a Western reader that what we are dealing with here are not two dialects, which, in spite of their differences, are essentially the same, but with two different languages deriving from two completely different language family trees.

Dowling is a typical sensationalist Western journalist who goes abroad not to write about real people with real problems, real achievements and real aspirations but only to record potholes, concrete pillboxes, rubble, broken glass, twisted iron, and especially people ‘walking cows as if they were dogs’ (ibid). Either because he was not so confident in his ability as a writer to capture the seamy side of Albania with absolute accuracy and authenticity, or because he felt that words are never enough to convince the British reader what an appalling place this corner of the Balkans is, he used the expertise of *The Guardian* photographer Dan Chung to document his historic visit. The article is accompanied by three pictures. In the first one, Dowling sits smirking somewhere in the coastal town of Durrës in front of a concrete pillbox, a cow and lots of scattered rubbish. The poster-size picture takes the whole front-page of *The Guardian* and has a caption which reads: ‘My holiday in Albania’. The second picture, this time in black and white, shows Dowling at the entrance of another concrete pillbox. In the last picture, which occupies more than half of the third page, Dowling sits quite smug at the edge of the beach showing mainly debris, mossy stones and of course more rubbish. This

time the caption reads: ‘Plenty of space by the water: ‘The beach in Durrës is composed almost entirely of hard-packed dust, concrete rubble, broken glass and twisted iron’’ (ibid: 3).

Any British reader who might have considered going for a bit of sun and sea in Albania would have certainly been put off by Dowling’s article and the pictures, especially the last one. But then who wouldn’t. For the unsuspecting British reader, the buildings shown in the background in the third shot seem to make no sense considering that they appear to have no seafront worth passing by let alone sunbathing or swimming.

Like other holiday spots in Albania, Durrës too has suffered as a result of a boom in construction work, often carried out without permission, and pollution. The sorry picture Dowling and his photographer paint of Durrës, however, is hardly representative of this beautiful seaside resort famous for its golden sandy beaches that stretch for miles on end. It appears *The Guardian* duo did not go to Albania to discover it for themselves, but to hunt around for images that would fit perfectly with what they had heard about this country before arriving there. In their journalistic mission to document only dirt in non-Western countries, reporters like Dowling often find zealous helpers among the locals who either because of their naivety, their pathological inferiority complex for any two-legged foreign creature, their legitimate frustration with corruption often going on unchecked, or on purpose tell Western journalists what they want to hear.

The Dowling-type journalism hardly makes for imaginative reporting. An intellectual textual analysis of articles of this nature is impossible because there can be no deconstruction approach to be maintained, certainly not in a Derridaen sense. Applying Derrida’s deconstructionist approach to an intentionally derogatory and sensationalist newspaper text reveals some interesting, surprising and disheartening results. The literary text, any text, no matter who pens it, when it is written or published can be plural in meaning and interpretation. The newspaper text, on the other hand, often seems stubbornly one-dimensional. The tone, the lexicon, the pictures accompanying it make for a pattern the Western readers are used to for over half a century. As far as the British print media is concerned, Albania has always been and still is a ‘backward’, ‘poor’, ‘enigmatic’, country, just as the Balkans remains a ‘powder keg’, the local economies ‘dysfunctional’, regional leaders ‘political infants’ and ‘corrupt’, and the whole peninsula a Pandora’s box from where all evil things come to the West, especially to Britain: drugs, human trafficking, money laundering, prostitution, contract killers and the list goes on.

The newspaper ‘text’ says it all, thus leaving almost nothing to the reader to interpret for themselves. The contemporary British journalist it appears is ‘dead’.

The demise of this particular author is different from the death of the author as perceived by Roland Barthes, however. Likewise, the journalist-author appears to be dead not only because the smearing article as a 'genre' predates him. Some reporters in the West seem to have a ghoulish existence because their output is neither new nor stimulating. The journalist, to borrow Barthes cryptical line of argument, 'does not write' the 'text'. The newspaper 'text' does not need the 'author' or an 'author'. It already exists without him/her, and the 'author' is incapable of adding any new meaning to it.

Contrary to Barthes' belief, the death of the author-journalist does not presuppose the birth of the independent reader (1990: 148). The reader is left with no option to interpret the text in a new and imaginative way for himself. The newspaper-text and newspaper-photo only reinforce what the reader has been fed with for years, decades and even centuries regarding the identity and standing of Albania. The reader is not longer served by a real journalist but by a phantom-writer that is incapable of breaking the mould and whose mission seems to be to keep on churning out scaremongering stories about 'footnote' countries like Albania.

This kind of one-sided, stale and doom-and-gloom reporting is bound to harm the Albanian economy, especially the prospects of tourism, just as it gives the wrong impression to ordinary people, investors and businessmen in the West that Albania has made no improvements whatsoever since the fall of Communism and that it is incapable of having a viable tourism industry. The Albanian government has always been aware of the country's atrocious image in the West, but it is only recently that it seems to have realised that they should do something and fast to rectify the situation. On 23 February 2005, for instance, the Albanian daily *Biznesi* reported that the Albanian government has asked the McKinsey & Company to contribute in improving the country's image in order to attract more foreign investment. According to Ulrich Frincke, McKinsey's Regional Director for the South East European countries, the cooperation between his management consulting firm and Albania is expected to bring the country more than US\$ 300 million a year.

The Albanian government's decision to seek advice from such a leading global strategic management consulting firm was met with derision by the reporter Robert Shrimley. His article 'Tirana saw us', which appeared in the *Financial Times* on 3 March 2005, is rather long but I have quoted it in its entirety because I believe it reiterates some of the issues about biased, and in this case hostile, coverage that Albania often receives in the British press:

The Albanian government has asked McKinsey to develop a strategy to improve the country's image and attractiveness to foreign investors.

To: Albanian cabinet

From: McKinsey, Zagreb Office

Subject: Image refurbishment

Further to our discussions last month we present our preliminary thoughts on upgrading Albania's image to overseas investors.

You are already aware that structural changes are needed. Image makeovers rarely succeed if they are not underpinned by a genuine rethink. The bribery of tax and licensing officials may very well be a proud tradition in your country but it does rather cut against the reform and modernisation drive. You may be aware of the old German joke urging businessmen to 'fly to Albania; your car's already there'. Charming as this is, it is probably not the image you want to project. A requirement for all Mercedes to display a valid receipt in the window would work wonders.

Once these measures are in place however, some cosmetic changes would go a long way towards signalling the birth of a new and modern Albania.

For a start we recommend you consider a name change. Albania is so last century – it seems to date back to the year Zog. Something that suggests a more technologically advanced, even cool, nation. After consultations with branding experts, we recommend aPod. This conjures up a far more buzzing image, especially if U2 could be prevailed on to write your new national anthem.

Finally we find nothing spurs on investors quite so much as a peaceful revolution, preferably one with a colour or material in it. The publicity value of one, if you could organise it, would be immense. Orange, rose, velvet and cedar have already gone but salmon pink is nice and has happy associations with business. Thanks to the widespread global ignorance of Albanian politics, there is probably no need even to oust the existing administration as long as it all takes place so suddenly as to sweep you into power before any foreign press can make it to Tirana. A new communications supremo would also help. Alastair Campbell will be available from May. He's a little brutal by Albanian standards but the great thing is his proven track record of securing such good



coverage for reforms that it can be years before people realise they do not quite live up to expectations.

Asked if he would care to comment on the motives that made him write such a piece,<sup>9</sup> Shrimmsley's response was: 'My article was primarily a bit of fun towards the end of a column based on the decision to invite McKinsey in.'<sup>10</sup> Shrimmsley sees nothing wrong in the constant degradation that countries like Albania receive in the British press, because, as he puts it, '[i]n my experience countries bear their own responsibilities for the treatment they receive in the press'. Shrimmsley certainly has a point. It would be absurd to see countries like Albania, indeed any country that receives constant bad coverage in the press simply as a 'martyred' party. The West has traditionally bad-mouthed and will continue to bad-mouth any country that is unable to protect its image. No one is denying that there is no corruption in Albania, that a lot needs to be done so that locals and foreigners should feel safe across the country, that infrastructure has a long way to go to match the western standard, that quality health service should be equally available to every citizen. Paul Brown is right to call Albania 'Europe's pollution capital' in his article which appeared in *The Guardian* on 27 March 2004.

Albania, however, has made considerable achievements since its belated independence in 1912, especially since the end of the Communist rule fifteen years ago. Trivialising the efforts of a small ancient nation to join the family of developed nations, to feel part of the civilized world is not just 'a bit of fun'; it is fun in a bad taste that has contributed significantly in the prevailing 'heart of darkness' image Albania has in the West. A couple of years earlier another British journalist Charles Rae was frustrated with '[a] few humourless killjoys' who 'did not see the funny side of *The Sun*'s Mr Men spoof' (7), which the tabloid ran on 21 January 2003. 'We invented seven characters in the style of kids' favourites Mr Men and Little Misses,' the self-appointed Mr Comedienne Rae explains, 'to reflect life in modern Britain'. Two of these 'favourites' are foreigners: Mr Asylum Seeker and Mr Albanian Gangster. This is how *The Sun* portrays the latter:

#### Mr Albanian Gangster

Mr Albania Gangster didn't like it in Albania so now he lives in Britain. He hangs out with Mr Drug Dealer and Mr Asylum Seeker. He often likes to do the same things as them. But Mr Albanian Gangster has a kind side – he invited all of his friends' sisters to stay. He even gave them a job. He put all his friends' sisters in a house together and then invited lots of men to come and see them so they would never get lonely. The men had such a good time they even paid Mr Albanian Gangster to visit the

house. Unfortunately the poor girls saw none of the money. Mr Albanian Gangster pocketed the lot.

Reporters like Rae and Shrimpsley conveniently ignore that their kind of 'harmless' mediatic 'fun' has been going on for far too long, and is largely responsible for the constant demonisation of some peoples, a demonisation which in capitalistic terms translates as loss of revenues from possible investors who are unwilling to take unnecessary risks in countries which are always portrayed as incorrigible. 'Let's do some word associations,' Andrew Mueller invites the readers of *The Independent on Sunday* at the start of his article 'Tirana's true colours', one of the rare pieces in the British press where there is no intention to denigrate the Albanians:

I say 'Albanian', you say...Gangster? Asylum-seeker? Prostitute? There are viruses breeding in African rivers which have better public image than Albania. Indeed, in London schoolyards, the adjective 'Albanian' has passed into vernacular, descriptive of anything shoddy, unfashionable or criminal. (2003: 17)

The Albanian nation and the majority of decent law-abiding Albanian citizens abroad have a lot to thank their criminal expatriates for this unjust collective punishment and humiliation in the West. Some irresponsible individuals, though, should not be seen as representatives of the whole Albanian nation, any nation. Not all Western citizens behave themselves in their own countries or when they travel or live abroad. Yet when some British football hooligans, for instance, wreak havoc overseas, no British journalist sees them as epitomes of the whole British nation. When it comes to some Albanian gangsters, however, Britain's 'hilarious' reporters are eager to resort to sensationalisation and tabloidisation of any scrap of evidence, genuine or fabricated, to brand all Albanians as criminals. This kind of reporting is intended not so much to inform and entertain the unsuspecting British readers, who are more sophisticated than some reporters give them credit, but to boost the papers' circulation.

It appears that as in the past, even nowadays there are writers and journalists in the West who seem to believe that civilisation is a virtue, a privilege, a God-given right and the destiny only of a select group of nations. As for countries like Albania, its neighbours and numerous small and large undeveloped nations around the world, all they can do is vegetate, admire from a distance the achievements of the 'civilised' few, never hoping to be one of them. Western literature on Albania of the last two centuries abounds in cases when the writers cannot even bear to contemplate the idea that such a 'primitive' country could ever be civilized. The civilization of Albania, they think, would be a loss to civilization itself because without a 'rough', 'uncouth' and 'untamed' country like Albania, there would be no other chance for Westerners to know what being 'uncivilised' means. One of

the reasons why Edith Durham was so taken by Albania was because there she felt transported in an alien yet magic world of living myths and legend, about which her European education had taught her next to nothing. Durham believed that Albania was something of an exotic oasis at the heart of Europe which she felt was better left unspoilt. In her *High Albania* which appeared in 1909 Durham the humanist and champion of the rights of small nations is at times subdued by Durham the selfish tourist who seems to believe that other nationalities, especially a country like Albania, exist primarily for her own recreation and entertainment. She was far from pleased to hear that the farmers in one of Albania's most fertile regions were in favour of building a railway. She could not comprehend 'why people ever think they would like to be civilised' (1985: 175).

The Edith Durhams of today, be they travel writers, muck-rakers like Simon Kuper, Tim Downing and Jocasta Gardner, or unbiased reporters like *The Guardian* environmental correspondent Paul Brown and Andrew Mueller, are aware that Albania's integration in the family of European nations is no longer a whim or an ambition that would never come true. This is the reason why in most articles on this Balkan country that have surfaced in the British press in the last five years, you are often urged to hurry up and visit the place now rather than later. Should you delay any further going to Albania you have no one to blame but yourself. Even Tim Dowling turns into a prophet at the very end of his journey-to-hell article. 'If you want to see Albania,' Lucky Tim eggs on the unsuspecting *Guardian* readers, 'see it now. It won't be like this for long' (2003: 3). More recently the call to visit Albania in the British press was repeated by Duncan Campbell. In his article 'Secret Europe', which also appeared in *The Guardian* on 19 March 2005, Campbell's 'advice for anyone who has harboured any curiosity about Albania has to be – go now before it becomes like everywhere else'.

Until the moment arrives when Albania becomes 'like everywhere else' [read like the West] it seems unlikely that many British journalists would be keen to write anything positive about this European country or the Balkans other than to keep alive for as long as possible their exotic image. Winston Churchill once remarked that the Balkans produced more history than they could digest. This is perhaps true. It is also true, however, that the Western media, especially the British press, appears to find it rather daunting to break free from a long established tradition of employing a discourse that often betrays nuances of the Orwellian Newspeak when depicting the 'other', including the European 'other'. Edward Said maintains that identity is a process of continuous development and it must never remain static. The identity of countries and nations also is fluid but unless this is reflected in the media coverage the outcome will be not just misinformation but even worse, disinformation. By acting as moral agents, Western journalists can render their own inestimable contribution in making Europe whole.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the denigration of Ancient Egypt from Rome see Gëzim Alpion. 2002. 'Foreigner Complex'. In Gëzim Alpion, *Foreign Complex: Essays and Fiction About Egypt*, Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham CPS, pp. 1-21.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on J. K. Rowling's references to Albania as a country harbouring the evil 'Dark Lord' and his followers see Gëzim Alpion. 2002. 'Images of Albania and Albanians in English Literature from Edith Durham's *High Albania* to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*', *BESA Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Spring, pp. 30-34.

<sup>3</sup> See Gëzim Alpion. 2002. 'Images of Albania and Albanians in English Literature from Edith Durham's *High Albania* to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*', *BESA Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Spring, pp. 30-34; Gëzim Alpion. 2002. 'Baron Franz Nopcsa and His Ambition for the Albanian Throne', *BESA Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Summer, pp. 25-32; Gëzim Alpion. 2003. 'Oh! not Calcutta'. *The Guardian*. 6 September, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Julian Llupo. 2005. 'Shqiptarët kursyen 49 miliardë lekë për 2004-n'. *Shekulli*, 4 April.

<sup>5</sup> Blerina Hoxha. 2005. 'Turizmi, shqiptarët prishën 560 milionë \$ jashtë'. *Korrieri*, 22 March; Korkuti, Aida. 2005. 'Shqiptarët, 560 milionë dollarë jashtë vendit në 2004'. *Shekulli*, 22 March.

<sup>6</sup> A. Mile. 2005. 'Evropa Juglindore, nje këshill ministrash për kulturën'. *Shekulli*, 2 April.

<sup>7</sup> *Korrieri*. 2005. 'Projekte që shkrijnë kufijtë'. 6 April.

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Williamson. 2001. Interview with Gëzim Alpion. 'Fallen hero: how the clown prince of Albania got right up the nose of his greatest fans.' *Sunday Mercury*. 9 September, pp. 45, 46.

<sup>9</sup> The author wrote to Robert Shrimmsley on 6 April 2005 asking him if he would care to comment on the motives that made him write the *Financial Times* article.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Shrimmsley's email to the author of 8 March 2005.

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