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**Finding the True Slav in Rebecca West's
*Black Lamb, Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia***

Authors have love affairs. When the affair is with an entire country and all its long and troubled history, the result becomes epic. British author Rebecca West's affair produced the book *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*. Over a thousand pages long, the work provides weighty and ample evidence for the depth of her hatreds and passions on just about every topic one can think of and many that will be new to the reader. The book displays Rebecca West's wide-ranging intellectual capacity as a writer because she has blended her love the Balkans (or the land of the South Slavs)¹ with ideas, observations, and historical information. Her prose, often poetic, makes the book hard to categorize. *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* is multi-genre work: a travelogue, autobiography, reflections on religion, and history book all rolled in one. The book was written in the late 1930s, but based on a compilation of the author's three trips to Yugoslavia, first in a lecture tour for the British Council in 1936, the next with her husband Henry Andrews in 1937, and the third in the early summer of 1938.² Rebecca West's knowledge of literature, art, Balkan history and culture, is compounded by her scathing wit and judgment, all of which would make any newly published author afraid (very afraid) for West to review his work.³ West herself authored many fiction and non-fiction books during the course of her life from 1892

¹ Rebecca West uses the words "Balkan" and "South Slav" interchangeably to designate both the regional place and the people. Scholar Maria Todorova has demonstrated that prior to the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the region was called by various names ("European Turkey," "European Ottoman Empire," "European Levant," and "South-Slavic Peninsula," to name a few), but that "Balkan" became a political term in the twentieth century [Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27].

² Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 163-164. See also the review by Geoff Dyer, "Journey Into History" in *The Guardian* (Aug. 2006) at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/aug/05/featuresreviews.guardianreview2>.

³ On modern fiction, West said in a 1981 interview: "I do think modern novels are boring on the whole. Somebody told me I ought to read a wonderful thing about how a family of children buried Mum in a cellar under concrete and she began to smell. But that's the sole point of the story. Mum just smells. That's all that happens. It is not enough." See <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3249/the-art-of-fiction-no-65-rebecca-west> for West's often pithy and brilliant comments about authors.

– 1983, in addition to penning articles, reviews, and literary criticism. *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* has long been considered her *magnum opus*.⁴

At the time of West's travels, Yugoslavia was a young country, barely twenty years old. Yugoslavia was perceived by Western Europe as a newly formed nation in the backwater or borderlands of Europe, a region that had suffered under the yoke of invasions and empires for centuries.⁵ It was also considered the place where the Great War began in 1914. Official and modern nation formation began when the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was declared on December 1, 1918, and "accepted as a *fait accompli* at the Peace Conference in Paris" in 1919.⁶ In 1929, King Alexander transformed the kingdom from a constitutional monarchy, renamed it Yugoslavia, and established a dictatorship.⁷ Five years later he was dead. Indeed, West uses the 1934 assassination of King Alexander in Marseille as the opening of the book, deciding she must visit the country after hearing of the event on the radio while convalescing from surgery.⁸

Assassinations dominate the text, showing the reader how violence has dominated Balkan history. In the prologue the author takes us through a succession of them, the most notable one being of Archduke Francis Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, a significant date in multiple ways.⁹ The date set the stage for the Great War; for the Archduke himself, June 28th was when he was forced to renounce his children's royal rights in front of the emperor and the whole Austro-Hungarian court; it was St. Vitus' day, a religious holiday; and finally West says that June 28th was the anniversary of the battle of Kosovo in 1389, when the Serbs lost their empire to the Turks.¹⁰ Given the layered and charged associations of the date, West

⁴ Review by Bernadotte Schmidt, published in *The Journal of Modern History* 14, no. 3 (Sept. 1942): 264.

⁵ Rebecca West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* (New York: Penguin, 2007). For the general power of empires, see West 99, 281, 1093. For negative influences of specific empires on the Balkans, see 54, 353 (Austrian); 117 (Venetian); 127 (Venetian and Austrian); 164 (Roman); and 137, 237, 245, and 252-254 (Ottoman).

⁶ Vesna Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia: A Transnational History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 93.

⁷ Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia*, 260-261.

⁸ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 1-2, 14, and 18.

⁹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, xv. In the introduction, Christopher Hitchens notes that these assassinations put West "in mind successively but not in order of Empress Elizabeth of Austria, the Donatists of the 4th century, King Alexander Obrenović and his wife Queen Draga, and finally Archduke Franz Ferdinand."

¹⁰ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 343. Current scholars use the date June 15th for the Battle of Kosovo; for example, see Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The History of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 21.

describes the Archduke's choice to visit Sarajevo on June 28th as an "act so suicidal that one fumbles the pages of the history books to find if there is not some explanation of his going, if he was not subject to some compulsion."¹¹ Whether the Archduke was suicidal or not, West's analysis of the example illustrates how she creates historical context, entwining the past and her present.

Modern political events figure hugely in *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* because West also spends significant page time discussing the Balkans' individual leaders, their actions, their deaths, and subsequent political ramifications. Most of the eight chapters on Sarajevo mention the assassination of the Archduke in some way. This makes the book *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* seem as if it were authored by someone obsessed with death and war. However, the conclusion makes sense if one considers that the book was published just as the Nazis invaded Yugoslavia in 1941.¹² Britain "stood alone" against Germany prior to the United States entry into war.¹³ The influence of this "new" war, which had yet to supersede the Great War at the time of publication, shows in those themes of death, freedom, slavery, sacrifice, and suffering, all of which are evident in *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, especially in its epilogue.¹⁴

These themes unfortunately only reinforce the stereotype of a region 'prone to violence,' one which West spends time with at the beginning of the book. If one reads the book as a work of history and source of information about Western perceptions of the Balkans, then three basic questions emerge about both book and its author. First, why would West write over a thousand pages on the South Slavs and who was her intended audience? Next, what are the defining characteristics of the Slavs per West? How are those Slavic characteristics applicable to the historical context of the author's own life? Finally, why is it important to read *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* now that Yugoslavia (as West knew it) has ceased to exist?

¹¹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 344.

¹² Copyright date is 1940, but official publication was in 1941 per Penguin Classic edition.

¹³ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 1124. See also review by John Adams *Slavonic and Eastern European Review* 2, no. 1 (March 1943): 265. Adams says: "West brings the story down to April 1941." The US entry into the war was November 7, 1941.

¹⁴ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, xxiii.

The preliminary answers to these questions start in the analysis of West's intention and argument in the book. West writes *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* "convinced of the inevitability of the second Anglo-German war" wanting to "show the past side by side with the present it created."¹⁵

Her argument is that the Southern Slavs, who have suffered throughout the course of their history, have experienced and expressed their suffering uniquely. This suffering creates a Slav character. And the essence of that character is something West hopes Western Europe will embrace, given the likelihood of war in Europe. The first aspect of Slavic suffering is an embedded understanding of how to enjoy life, lessons West thinks that Western Europeans could learn from. She explores this aspect of suffering by using (and abusing) characters of different nationalities, comparing Slavs to Western Europeans, especially to the Germans. Second, suffering is a choice for the Slav, an experience to embraced, born out of full knowledge of pain, death, or what is lacking in this life. This suffering with consciousness creates a "true Slav." For an example, West's definition of a Slav is defined by suffering, seen in the young soldier she observes grieving at fresh grave in a Bosnia cemetery:

This was a Slav, this is what it is to be a Slav. He was offering himself wholly to his sorrow, he was learning the meaning of death and was not refusing any part of the knowledge; for he knew that experience is the cross man must take up and carry. Not for anything would he have chosen to feel one shade less pain; and if it had been joy he was feeling, he would have permitted himself to feel all possible delight.¹⁶

Third, in *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, suffering can be circumstantial, seen as part of Slav pattern of resistance to authority and empires. Finally, the fourth aspect of suffering is in its inevitability and necessity: for West it is better to resist, suffer and possibly die, than submit to tyranny of an oppressor, especially evident in *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon's* epilogue. West's intended audience is Western Europe, based on the ending of her book, or anyone thinking of passively accepting Germany's advances.

She argues against the stereotype of the Balkans as violent, brutal place populated by savage, backwards people. Reading West's work today is important because *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* shows

¹⁵ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 1089.

¹⁶ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 379.

how stereotypes of the Balkans persist in present day literature, art, and journalism.¹⁷ West illustrates how the South Slavs suffered from that negative image based on Western European perceptions as the nation-state of Yugoslavia was born. Beginning the process in the prologue, West tells stories of how the word “*Balkan!*” was hurled as insults in France.¹⁸ Through those brief stories, we understand that to be Balkan is to be savage and/or violent. West confesses what little she knew about the south-eastern part of Europe before her journey to Yugoslavia in the often-quoted line: “Violence was, indeed, all I knew of the Balkans: all I knew of the South Slavs.”

And yet Rebecca West finds beauty, joy, and delight in the Slav character, especially in their culture (e.g. dress and costumes). Thus West spends considerable scholarly and literary effort to deconstruct the word “*Balkan!*” in her book. For example, she twists the idea of the violent Slav by giving nobility to Yugoslav King Alexander and his death. After she watches the film of his actual assassination, West declares her judgment on the King “...who was certainly *Balkan, Balkan*, but who met violence with an imaginative realization which is its very opposite, which absorbs it into the experience it aims at destroying.”¹⁹ That ‘imaginative realization’ is a bit of a puzzle; it could mean that West believed King Alexander accepted his death because he saw it as inevitable, and thus gained wisdom; by meeting violence and embracing it, the King defined one of the major ways in which Slavic suffering is unique when compared to non-Balkan persons.²⁰ West also asks her reader how the South Slavs can be so violent when they were “hated first by the Austrians who worshipped imperial form and then by the fascists who worship violence in totalitarian form.”²¹ In these questions, we see West define the Balkan peoples in relation to other non-Slav groups, making the Austrians and fascists the ones who are savage. Note also how author changes the verbal tense from “worshipped” for the Austrians – who

¹⁷ See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 21. West calls “‘Balkan’ a term of abuse, meaning a *rastaquouère* type of barbarian.”

¹⁹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 21. See also 14-20, West describes the film showing the assassination and her reaction to seeing it.

²⁰ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 19. West says that King Alexander “had not been surprised at his own murder” and that he “derived wisdom through the pores of his race.”

²¹ *Ibid.*

governed Bosnia-Herzegovina and parts of Croatia in the late 19th century – to the present “worship” when West discusses the fascists, on their rise to power as she was writing.

With the starting point of trying to overturn a Balkan stereotype, over the course of many pages, West takes her reader on a literal and figurative journey through Yugoslavia, searching for the Balkan or South Slav character. She travels through the regions of Yugoslavia in 1930s, first to Croatia, followed by Dalmatia, Herzegovina, Bosnia, Serbia, Old Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro, with expeditions as side trips along the way. The book is a composite of three separate journeys, not only a travelogue but West’s philosophical and intellectual exploration of Slavic character. The Slav remains elusive, fluid, and difficult to define, given how the author considers the Southern Slav peoples (e.g., Serbs, Croats, Macedonians, and Bosnian Moslems) as sometimes distinct from each other may and sometimes not. Maybe West intended it to be so. The blurring of national, ethnic, and religious boundaries is, in part, due to the fluidity of Balkan identities. West articulates the complexity: “A Serbian is a subject of the kingdom of Serbia, and might be a Croat, just as a Croatian-born inhabitant of the old Austrian province of Croatia might be a Serb.”²² The ‘true Slav’ then is of any Balkan ethnicity.

West presents a general “type” of Balkan or Slav character where suffering is a key component. Suffering does indeed seem as if it were a safe-bet for describing the condition of the South Slavs because of the several centuries of invasion and/or occupation by Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, French, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires. What makes *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* so interesting is not only West’s treatment of Balkan history, but her juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated topics. Consider, for example, how she combines the Manichaeism heresy, Medieval Western European history, the Balkan sculptor Radovan, a church in Dalmatian town Trogir, Trogir’s history, and Dostoevsky²³ to link the theme of lightness/darkness to Napoleon’s soul when discussing his brief occupation of the Dalmatian coast.²⁴ Those thematic dichotomies punctuate West’s work: suffering/enjoyment, life/death, love/hate,

²² West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 13.

²³ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 170-175.

²⁴ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 184.

peace/war. She also argues (in an oblique way) throughout the text that death should have a meaning, although it frequently does not.

West has mixed things to say about all kinds of peoples, but her comments on the Germans and Jews are especially interesting, given their compositional context on the eve of the Second World War. She uses German characters in particular to show how ill suited they are to accept suffering and simultaneously be able to enjoy what is agreeable, which is the exact opposite of the Slavs. Her primary guide is the Serbian Jew or Jewish Serb named Constantine, whom West frequently places in opposition to his wife Gerda (such a name!). Constantine is a poet and a Yugoslav government official, talks incessantly, loves discussion, and above all, loves Yugoslavia and what it represents.²⁵ He is one of the first characters we meet, becoming a constant presence throughout *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, up until the latter fifth of the book. We see and enjoy the beauty of Yugoslavia through his eyes, but filtered through the author's Western European point-of-view.

Constantine describes his wife Gerda as a "German...who worships Goethe."²⁶ This Germanic quality and her literary worship will not render good things. She is a character easy to hate because she is disagreeable in every way. Readers first meet Gerda in person when West and her husband are in Serbia, halfway into *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, and after Gerda's brief interactions at a train station and disapproval of a book that West is reading,²⁷ West wants us to dislike Gerda. The author builds upon that impression throughout the book, making Gerda pig-headed and selfish.²⁸ In short, she is always awful. Gerda decides to accompany them to Macedonia, the "most-Slav part of Yugoslavia, which is not only non-German but non-Occidental."²⁹ This then could be considered the 'real' Yugoslavia, and West declares her love, "Macedonia was the most beautiful place that I had ever seen in my life, and now we

²⁵ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 41-42.

²⁶ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 44.

²⁷ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 457-459. The book is *The Healing Ritual* by Patience Kemp, which was "a study of folk-medicine of the Balkan Slavs."

²⁸ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 464. See also 488 where Gerda in a good humor, but West does not portray this as a positive thing. See also 623, 656, 660, 661 for selection of Gerda's unpleasant and disagreeable behavior.

²⁹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 624.

were to be accompanied by this disagreeable woman, who lifted neither of us.”³⁰ Constantine does nothing to prevent his wife from coming.³¹ The contrasts among Constantine’s ineffectual attitude and willingness to suffer for love of his wife, the promised beauty of the ‘real’ Slav region to be visited, and Gerda’s ugliness and inability to see or find beauty in the country, all make Gerda the opposite of her husband, who is a Slav.³² Gerda spoils everyone’s enjoyment of Macedonia. She hates the Slavs and insists on the superiority of the Germanic races.³³ Gerda – along with the fascists and imperialists in this narrative – is so despicable as to be a villain of the story, but alas, she does not even have agency or potency. She grates on the nerves of the reader, blind to her environment, complacent in her prejudices, and thus is a character not even complex enough to fascinate, mysterious only in the fact that she is married to a Serbian Jew. Was she that awful? Hard to say, but certainly one wonders because Constantine and Gerda are aliases to mask real people.³⁴

Contrast Constantine’s wife with a person Rebecca West calls simply “the Bulbul,” whose name is “the Persian word for nightingale,” a Jewess in Sarajevo, whom West describes as “not a Western woman.”³⁵ West exoticizes the Bulbul, calling her a “Persian miniature” with a nightingale voice who was “continuously anxious to give pleasure to her friends” but is seemingly unaware of her own radiance, a “brightness (which) was like a hard transparent veil varnished on her, wholly protective.”³⁶ Whereas Gerda was ponderous and horrible, the Bulbul is light, delicate, and gives pleasure to others. This comparison illustrates how West perceives the variations in the relationship between suffering and pleasure; we learn from this Jewish woman that the ability to *give* pleasure is as equally important as being able to find enjoyment in life. For the author, the Bulbul’s radiance is a protective veil and her own unawareness of pleasure for herself. (The veil becomes an important an important symbol for West,

³⁰ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 623.

³¹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, for an example of Constantine’s character changed by his wife, see 708.

³² West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 457-459, 464, 488, 656, 660, 661, to cite some of the more notable instances when Gerda behaves horribly.

³³ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, for general examples of Teutonic hatred of Slavs, see 5, 44, and 575-576.

³⁴ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, xxvi. Hutchins asserts in the introduction that Constantine’s and Gerda’s true names were Stanislas and Elsa Vinaver.

³⁵ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 323.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

especially when describing women throughout *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, to be described later.) That radiance makes the Bulbul a contradiction to emulate: “Though she (the Bulbul) lived for pleasure and the dissemination of it, she shone with a chastity as absolute as that radiated by any woman who detested pleasure. She had accepted a mystery.”³⁷ Gerda claims to enjoy things, but produces suffering for all; the Bulbul in her loyalty to others appears to detest pleasure but is agreeable to everyone. Here, then, is part of the Slav character: living for pleasure West portrays as something of a mystery, a difficult quality, and one that the Bulbul embodies.

West defines Slavs by contrast, but her portrayal of Jews is not always positive. For example, she condemns an elderly Jewess landlady, with a chestnut wig and cringing manner, in a hotel in Bosnia: “She was cruelty. She was filth.”³⁸ The example demonstrates the force of West’s opinions and impressions. As she might review a novel with some brutality, so too does Rebecca West judge the characters she meets or creates, unkindly, and with a harshness that is sometimes unnerving. The landlady self-identifies as German, calling the Vojvodina (a region predominately populated by Serbs) ‘Hungary’ and declaring that German is her native language.³⁹ Perhaps this is why she is ‘filth’ because she refuses to accept the good aspects of the Balkans. The point here is not to show that West portrays Germans in *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* as bad, even though it appears that those negative features of Germanic culture are essential to West’s goal. Rather, the point is to analyze how West uses the German characters to define *what* the Slavs are or what they are not. The landlady has spent fifty-two years in the Balkans,⁴⁰ but her wish-I-were-German character serves as a contrast to what West perceives as positive Slavic attributes.

For West, history has been unkind to the Balkan peoples and she gives suffering a longstanding historical context which we see in how she describes the Christians in the late Roman empire, who expressed their misery in the language of the church because they “very sensibly realized that the Western

³⁷ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 324.

³⁸ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 437-438.

³⁹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 437.

⁴⁰ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 438. West assumes that the woman came to the region as a prostitute to service officers when she was a young girl.

Roman Empire was going to die and so were they.”⁴¹ Suffering requires an expression by any means, in any language. When suffering becomes a conscious choice, West links it to an individual with a specific cause. For example, West uses Gregoviević, a man who had worked his “whole life to free Croatia from Hungarian rule,” who says of their vacation/visit to the sanatorium in Croatia, “It would be very pleasant to live this way.”⁴² West reflects upon his reaction: “This was the first time I had heard him say anything indicating that he had ever conceived living any life other than his own, which had been dedicated to pain and danger and austerity.”⁴³ Gregoviević’s suffering is not only his own choice, but in opposition to empire, for a cause. Gregoviević also practices another aspect of suffering: he painfully aware of what he does not have, believing that the Hungarians had the best of everything.⁴⁴ Thus the multiple aspects of suffering can operate simultaneously in a character, just as they are woven throughout *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*.

Suffering can also be circumstantial, dictated by events. On occasion, it is manifested in the physical characteristics of the Slavs, which then becomes collective and applicable to them as defining characteristic of an entire group of people. For example:

Here, out in the country, the islanders spoke Serbo-Croat; half an hour from the city gates we found peasants who knew only a few words of Italian. These are true, gaunt Slavs, wholly without facility, with that Slav look of being intuitionally aware of the opposite of the state in which they found themselves at the moment, and therefore being more painfully affected by it if it were disagreeable. The poor have at the back of their sunken eyes a shining picture of wealth, the sick know what it is to be sound, and as the unhappy weep the scent of happiness dilates their nostrils. This unfamiliar way of bearing misery gave them a certain unity in our eyes...⁴⁵

Suffering makes Slavs gaunt, making the reader think of the chronically hungry, although West does not give a reason for her observations. This characteristic of suffering is a particular and peculiar kind, one experienced by “true Slavs” who are aware of what they lack: “the shining picture of wealth,” health, and the “scent of happiness.” That scent of happiness is elusive at best, a whiff of a Western European lifestyle that is perhaps unattainable, like what Gregoriević believes the Hungarians have. From West’s

⁴¹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 9.

⁴² West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 75.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 133.

prose the reader sees that knowledge of what one does not have is part of suffering, and this gives the Slav a certain truth or nobility. However, this “unfamiliar way of bearing misery,” one that requires full consciousness, seems a bit of stretch. West’s description of these “true Slavs” is an idealization, which creates a non-crossable distance between the Slav and the author. Her point of view requires the Slavs to have an intuitive sense of their own condition as being disagreeable, bearing their misery with an understanding of an opposite state. If these gaunt Slavs are “true,” then what happens if they do not bear their misery with such awareness or dignity? This perspective of the Slavs is a stereotype in its own right.

However hard West tries to deconstruct the 1930s stereotype of the Balkans or South Slavs as violent, in her search for the true “Slav essence or soul,”⁴⁶ *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* builds another one, the Slav as other and alien, not part of Europe. Consider West’s treatment of costumes in Bosnia:

At the next table sat a Moslem woman wearing a silk overall striped in lilac and purple and dull blue...her stillness was more than the habit of a Western woman, yet the uncovering of her mouth and chin had shown her completely un-Oriental, as luminously fair as any Scandinavian... We noted then, and were to note it again and again as we went about the city...the costumes which we regard as the distinguishing badge of an Oriental race, proof positive that the European frontier had been crossed, are worn by people far less Oriental in aspect than, say, the Latins, and this makes Sarajevo look like a fancy dress ball.⁴⁷

West knows she has expectations of Yugoslavia; she believes that she will be entering foreign territory where the European frontier had been crossed. West sees the Moslem woman in her colorful dress as wearing a costume, which makes the woman perhaps unnaturally still, in the way that Western women are not. And West still cannot help but be astonished that the Moslem woman is “as luminously fair” as a Swede or Dane. Because West looks for the Slav character through the lens of Balkan history as an outsider, she cannot escape the perception of the Balkans as other, alien, Oriental. The clothing proves foreignness. West has the expectation of racial differences, based on the Balkan’s proximity to and occupation by the Ottoman Empire. Yet her description of this Bosnian Muslem woman reinforces the existing negative stereotype. Reading between the lines “luminously fair as any Scandinavian” and “distinguishing badge,” the reader experiences West’s racial categorization. And the analogy of Sarajevo

⁴⁶ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, for examples of “true Slav,” the “Slav soul,” or “real Slav city,” see 83, 202, 262, 268, and 240.

⁴⁷ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 297.

looking like a “fancy dress ball” makes the entire city appear as carnival. Imagery such as this illustrates the beauty of the country, its customs, and costumes, but at the same time even using the word “costume” reinforces pageant like quality of West’s observations and the distance between the author and her subject.

In Mostar, a town in Herzegovina famous for its bridge, West declares that, “the really Adventurous part of our journey began” because the people adhered to their faiths more intensely but “in all other ways were highly individualistic.”⁴⁸ The subtext for the reader is that adventure comes with distance, in her journey away from the familiar, through a country of mixed by races (per West), religions, and ethnicities. West launches into a long description of the appearance of people in the region, where they have their own “fantasy of costume” with less variation for men who wore, “the stiff braided jacket (which) has a look of ceremony about it.”⁴⁹ The women, however, “presented us with unaccountable variations,” especially the costume of a man’s coat which the woman “slips...over her, drawing the shoulders above her head, so that the stiff collar falls forward and projects in front of her like a visor, and she can hide her face if she clutches the edges together...”⁵⁰ This is one among many Balkan veils. As readers, we encounter the veil as West does in her travels, by experiencing its alien quality from the point of view of a Western European woman, but noting the difference in the creative application of making a veil out of a coat. In the Balkans, the Muslim women do not need the “heavy horse-hair veil worn in the real East.”⁵¹ West creates a visual image of that ‘coat dress,’ with its gold thread, as peculiar to the Balkans. In Rebecca West’s analysis of the customs of dress in Mostar, we see the Balkans as a borderland of Europe; the costumes show how the Slavs are an amalgamation. One wonders where the real Slavs are, if not expressed in dress. The creative way clothing is transformed from Eastern traditions in the veiling of women may lead West to conclude, in the absence of any practical value in the costume,

⁴⁸ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 289.

⁴⁹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 290.

⁵⁰ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 290-291.

⁵¹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 290.

that “perhaps it survives chiefly by its poetic value, by its symbolic references to the sex it clothes.”⁵² The veil is poetic, and in reading *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, it certainly appears so.

Clothing then becomes symbolic, a means for the author to analyze the differences between men and women. Costume, per West, has the “power of a dream or a work of art that has several interpretations.”⁵³ West gives us hers. The man’s coat on the woman is at first playful, but then the dark visor “gives the woman a beak of a bird,” and finally West concludes the meaning of dress is not directly related to sexual matters but rather the “veil perpetuates and renews a moment when man, being in league with death, like all creature that must die...hates woman more than himself.”⁵⁴ Here again mortality is inescapable in *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*. All this from the analysis of a dress! Going beyond the ‘veil’ of her lyrical language, sharp mind, and acute sense of visual imagery, a reader can find symbolism linked to themes in practically every paragraph.

For West, an article of clothing can become art, or function as a symbol in which we can read history, beauty, and enjoyment. Consider, for example, when her husband “...bought me the most beautiful garment I have ever possessed, a ceremonial robe of Persian brocade about a hundred and fifty years old, with little gold trees growing on a background faintly purple as a wine stain.”⁵⁵ West does many things at once with this description. She expresses admiration for the Persian culture by obtaining such a thing of beauty. The “purple as wine stain” makes the reader think of the exotic East and empires, tinged with decadence and maybe even some ideas of decay in the description. Even how the garment was purchased becomes a story about Mr. Hassanovitch, antique dealer and man who witnessed the assassination of Ferdinand.⁵⁶ How tightly West weaves clothing as a symbol of art and culture into the ongoing political narrative of Balkan history, is punctuated – nicely – by fleeting portrayals of individuals. In West’s typical way, we start with an article of clothing, but the story of obtaining the article becomes just as important to her narrative, if not more so, than the object itself. The coat

⁵² West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 291.

⁵³ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 290.

⁵⁴ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 292.

⁵⁵ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 324.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

symbolizes the history of the Sarajevo, a city which continues to experience division between Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

Rebecca West may have had multiple purposes in writing the book as an author, but *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* reads as if it were her glorification of a people. In her words there is a tinge of idealization, of making that people (e.g., the Slav) into an “Other” and therefore not real. This impression comes from analyzing particular examples as well as reviewing the grand statements and pithy zingers that liberally pepper West’s prose. This is not a book to be read quickly. *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* is a book “vaster than empires and more slow”⁵⁷ in its ideas, which are so tightly bound to each other that as a reader one must slowly and carefully deconstruct West’s prose in order to find how and why West is building the book that she does. For just as surely as she is a lyrical writer, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* is a constructed book, crafted out of centuries of Balkan history through the lens of her experience. The journey of the book is, in fact, into the Western intellectual mind perceiving and redefining the Balkan borderlands in relation to Europe.

West writes for herself and her fellow Western Europeans. In the epilogue of *Black, Lamb, Grey Falcon*, she argues against the lack of European action that she sees when Germany invades Yugoslavia. In her view, the British nation failed at first to fight, and was “to have its throat cut as if it were a black lamb in the arms of a pagan priest,” just as she witnessed the sacrifice of a lamb on St. George’s Eve, near Skoplje, Macedonia.⁵⁸ The sacrifice of the lamb is abhorrent to West philosophically, but writing this book, she links it to Britain’s refusal to fight the Germans initially.⁵⁹ West wants her country, a former Great Power, to choose the possibility of death, as the Slavs in the Balkans have done. She sees the options as stark, and this is where the historical context of a female writer in the late 1930s who published her *magnum opus* at the start of the Second World War becomes poignant and real. In spite of her

⁵⁷ From the poem, “His Coy Mistress,” by Andrew Marvell, 1621–1678: “I would/Love you ten years before the Flood,/And you should, if you please, refuse/Till the conversion of the Jews./My vegetable love should grow/Vaster than empires, and more slow...”

⁵⁸ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, for the sacrifice itself, see 823- 824; for her reaction to it, see 825-831.

⁵⁹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 1125. West, describing the connection calls Neville Chamberlain “the instrument of our suicidal impetus.”

destruction and then reconstruction of the stereotype of the Slavs, West has hit upon a fundamental problem: how does a person or country strive for goodness, delight, and that which is agreeable, when at times one is confronted with a choice that requires suffering or even death? Her answer was to write *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* because she demonstrates that as a writer, she can take delight in beauty, even during the war.

The Slavs, with their ability to suffer but still find enjoyment in life, to experience suffering consciously, to make the choice to suffer in response to oppression, and finally, to be aware of the inevitability of suffering, all provide West with a model for Western Europe to follow. Identifying what is admirable about the Slavs and their suffering allows the reader little glimmers of her own character, in spite of her claim in the epilogue that she “had never used my writing to make a continuous disclosure of my own personality to others, but to discover for my own edification what I knew about various subjects which I found to be important to me...”⁶⁰ West may not want to disclose her personality in her writing but she does so simply by expressing her point of view:

So I resolved to put on paper what a typical Englishwoman felt and thought in the late nineteen-thirties when, already convinced of the inevitability of the second Anglo-German war, she had been able to follow the dark waters of that event back to its source...I was obliged to write a long and complicated history, and to swell that with an account of myself and the people who went with me on my travels...And while I grappled with the mass of my material during several years, it imposed certain ideas on me...I became doubtful of empires.⁶¹

The aim of showing the past alongside the present echoes her introduction/prologue which is another indication that this book, for all its ‘vaster than empire and more slow’ rich density, is a carefully constructed and crafted work from a mind that absorbs, retains, and relates details together in an almost frightening way. She has reason, in her study of the Balkans and the Slav character, to become doubtful of empire, perhaps including her own. *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, for all its immensity, is a strangely intimate look at the formidable mind of its author in her search for the true Slav.

⁶⁰ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 1084.

⁶¹ West, *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*, 1089.