THE BALKAN TRILOGY

OLIVIA MANNING (1908–1980) was born in Portsmouth, England, and spent much of her childhood in Northern Ireland. Her father, Oliver, was a penniless British sailor who rose to become a naval commander, and her mother, Olivia, had a prosperous Anglo-Irish background. Manning trained as a painter at the Portsmouth School of Art, then moved to London and turned to writing. She published her first novel under her own name in 1938 (she had published several potboilers in a local paper under the name Jacob Morrow while a teenager). The next year she married R.D. “Reggie” Smith, and the couple moved to Romania, where Smith was employed by the British Council. During World War II, the couple fled before the Nazi advance, first to Greece and then to Jerusalem, where they lived until the end of the war. Manning wrote several novels during the 1950s, but her first real success as a novelist was The Great Fortune (1960), the first of six books concerning Guy and Harriet Pringle, whose wartime experiences and troubled marriage echoed that of the diffident Manning and her gregarious husband. In the 1980s these novels were collected in two volumes, The Balkan Trilogy and The Levant Trilogy, known collectively as Fortunes of War. In addition to her novels, Manning wrote essays and criticism, history, a screenplay, and a book about Burmese and Siamese cats. She was made Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1976, and died four years later.

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Introduction

“I haven’t any parents,” says Harriet Pringle, heroine and presiding spirit of Olivia Manning’s *Balkan Trilogy*. “At least, none to speak of. They divorced when I was very small. They both remarried and neither found it convenient to have me. My Aunt Penny brought me up. I was a nuisance to her, too, and when I was naughty she used to say: ‘No wonder your mummy and daddy don’t love you.’”

If a project as lengthy and diverse as *The Balkan Trilogy* can be represented by a few lines, these words of Harriet’s are those lines. Indeed, to be able to discover in a small fragment the structure of the whole is one the hallmarks of a work of art, and in this sense the compendiousness of *The Balkan Trilogy* is somewhat deceiving. Harriet’s impoverished heart is the unvarying leitmotif of its thousand-odd densely filled pages; a nondescript twenty-one-year-old English girl’s lack of parental love the central metaphor for war, displacement, cataclysm, and the death of the old world in 1940s Europe.

Nevertheless, it is by virtue of this strange and striking parallel that *The Balkan Trilogy* preserves its freshness and makes its claim to greatness. In these novels we are shown wartime Europe as a world of emotionally stunted men and women, of people starved by the reticence and coldness of their upbringing, of people who have lacked attention and acceptance and love, who have lacked it generationally; a lack so deep in the grain of (English) social institutions and attitudes that only total destruction could
erase it. Indifference, injustice, cruelty, hatred, neglect: in *The Balkan Trilogy* these are the constituents both of personal memory and of social reality, of private unhappiness and of public violence. In Olivia Manning’s analogy, war is the work of unhappy children; but while Harriet embodies the darkness of this perception, she represents too the individual struggle to refute it. Harriet’s determination—against every provocation—to preserve her marriage, to stay rather than to abandon, to keep instead of smashing, is the novel’s other, private war.

Manning claimed to be at her happiest when writing of her own life, and the events of the Balkan and Levant trilogies correspond closely to those of the years (1938–46) she spent in Romania, Greece, Egypt and later Palestine with her husband, the socialist R.D. “Reggie” Smith, who, barred by poor eyesight from military service, worked as a lecturer for the British Council. Guy and Harriet, newlyweds arriving in Romania on the eve of Britain’s declaration of war against Germany, are Olivia and Reggie’s undisguised alter egos; and the narrative, so naturalistic, so full of incident and coincidence, so detailed, so densely populated with minor characters, confirms that Manning did indeed have a genius for writing at first hand. But her autobiographical presence in these novels is strikingly magnetized by the world: she is here not to describe herself but to witness. Her eye and ear are a match for the large canvas of war; her Bucharest of 1939–40 is riven with unease and changing political values, filled with sun-dry foreigners—hacks, hangers-on, diplomats, wanderers, profiteers—uncomfortably exposed by the flash of conflict, and it is brought so brilliantly and meticulously to life that by the end the reader feels she could easily find her own way around its chaotic streets and would recognize half the clientele in the English Bar.

Manning’s “people” are more than literary characters: they have the feeling of real beings who happen to find themselves in the narrative frame, like passersby caught on camera. Indeed, *The
Balkan Trilogy is frequently so faithful to the sense of lived life that it is often difficult to discern the hand that is shaping it. The prolix conversations of men and the pointed conversations of women, the hours Guy likes to spend discussing politics with his British legation cronies, evenings at restaurants that are sometimes interminably boring and sometimes fun, the configuration of a room, a street, a shop front, the slow passage of time and season, most of all the way other people come and go, becoming known or half known, by a process that seems utterly random and yet on which life is dependent at the deepest level for its structure and form: this river of narrative is both the chief beauty and the central mystery of The Balkan Trilogy.

The “truth” of a writer’s experiences is difficult to unravel, but in these novels the striking impassivity of the point of view is the place to look for it. The shaping hand, we realize, is Harriet’s; Harriet’s is the recondite soul we are occupying; Harriet who watches, who pays attention, yet so rarely draws the drama to herself. When, as readers, we crave some evidence of sensibility from this fictional world, some attention, some disinterested gift of love, it is Harriet’s craving we are experiencing. And as we pass from admiration of Guy, lecturer in English literature and incurably sociable socialist, to a profoundly critical disillusion that nonetheless recognizes the impossibility of ever rejecting or abandoning him, we are reliving every twist and turn of Harriet’s lonely journey of marriage.

What Guy represents in The Balkan Trilogy is the concept of society as the only possible force for good, and as such he is pitted against the emotional individualism represented by Harriet. Guy would give his last penny to a beggar, his last ounce of strength to a stranger in the street; Harriet, on the other hand, wants exclusivity, attention, possession. “He gave her an illusion of security—for it was, she was coming to believe, an illusion. He was one of those harbours that prove to be too shallow: there was no
getting into it. For him, personal relationships were incidental. His fulfilment came from the outside world.” This conflict, of course, is not just Guy and Harriet’s: it is the dialectic of the twentieth century, the essence of the struggle to create a new social order. What is interesting is that Guy’s dedication to “the world,” and his concomitant refusal to give Harriet the attention she craves, makes her feel “safe,” for it returns her to the original sensation of being unloved. She is constantly being told that Guy is a “great man,” a “saint,” and in this way we come to understand that it is not only Harriet who feels safe with Guy, who experiences emotional need as a form of shame. Other people—a great number of them—feel it too. What Guy (Guy as socialism) represents for them is a kind of extruded subjectivity, whereby “need” is separated from “self,” and Manning cleverly gives us the reason why such a representation appears virtuous. For Harriet, and those like her, it entails a new discipline of self-renunciation that eerily re-echoes the old; it offers security, or perhaps “an illusion of security.”

It is in Harriet’s relationship with Clarence, a British legation officer in Bucharest and fellow lost soul, that these ideas are explored. When Clarence tries to tell her about his unhappy childhood, Harriet experiences violent feelings of resistance. “Don’t think about it: don’t talk about it,” she silently abjures him. “She knew [Clarence] was one who, given a chance, would shut her off into a private world.” And she has sufficient self-knowledge to understand that in this way he is exactly like her. “What was it they both wanted? Exclusive attention, no doubt: the attention each had missed in childhood. Perversely, she did not want it now it was offered. She was drawn to Guy… and the open world about him.” Later, in an extraordinary scene, Harriet participates in the “de-bagging” (a public-school prank whereby a person’s trousers are forcibly removed) of Clarence at the Pringles’ flat, with Guy and Guy’s boorish friend David. David, a bully, identi-
fies Clarence as a victim and Harriet finds herself “caught into the same impulse to ill-treat Clarence in some way.” After Clarence has left, Harriet wonders:

“What is the matter with us? Why did we do that?”

“It was a joke,” said Guy, though he did not sound sure of what he said.

“Really, we behaved like children,” Harriet said and it occurred to her that they were not, in fact, grown-up enough for the life they were living.

As this vast narrative progresses it becomes clear that what these people lack, what stunts them and renders them no more than oversized children, is the transformative experience of love. It is here that Manning’s subtle control of her characters is most skillfully demonstrated, for this lack can be detected everywhere in these densely peopled novels. The disloyalty of Guy’s colleagues Lush and Dubedat, the moral cowardice of petty officials like Dobson, Sophie Oresanu’s attention-seeking, the emotionally stilted kindness of Inchcape or Alan Frewen, most of all the hermetic childlike selfishness of Harriet’s bête noir (and Manning’s masterpiece) Yakimov: again and again Manning elicits from her reader not scorn but pity for this handicapped race, encourages us to see them as more damaged than monstrous. Manning was a talented painter who once thought she would pursue a career as an artist, and it is often her physical portraits of her characters that convey most powerfully their loneliness. In this world of repressed emotion it is the body that speaks, that sculpts itself into pitiful and sometimes grotesque forms.

Professor Pinkrose was a rounded man, narrow-shouldered and broad-hipped, thickening down from the crown of his hat to the edge of his greatcoat. His nose, blunt and greyish,
poked out between collar and hat-brim. His eyes, grey as rain-water, moved about, alert and suspicious, like the eyes of a chameleon.

Late in the narrative, when Harriet’s experience of transformative love finally and briefly comes, she feels it as a demolishing of that formal loneliness, of bodily isolation.

Their [Harriet’s and Charles Warden’s] sense of likeness astonished them. It resembled magic. They felt themselves held in a spellbound condition which they feared to injure. Although she could not pin down any overt point of resemblance, Harriet at times imagined he was the person most like her in the world, her mirror image.

Modern readers of the Balkan Trilogy will certainly marvel at it as a technical accomplishment, as a good read, and perhaps even as a meticulous historical document; but its value as a complete chronicle of an important period in the emotional evolution of Western society is likely to strike today’s audience most of all. The relationship between institutional representation and personal experience has been reconfigured in our era; the self is ascendant, the concept of duty remote. But we, too, are part of the eternal flux. The personal and the political, peace and war, the individual and the communal, the need and the obligation, the self and its society: all are in motion, just as they always have been. And if readers conclude that ours at least is a more liberated world than Guy and Harriet’s, a more expressive and tolerant world, perhaps even a more loving world, they will also have gained a greater sense of how it came to be so, and of the value of that love, so desperately sought, so bitterly fought for.

—Rachel Cusk
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