

BORGES'S LABYRINTHS, KOSOVO'S ENCLAVES, AND URBAN/CIVIC DESIGNING (I)

# Intimations of Making Sense

**In Handing One Another Along: Literature and Social Reflection, the Pulitzer Prize winning author and Harvard University professor Robert Coles writes that "through stories, we are given the opportunity to search deeper into an understanding of ... this world in which we live every day"**

I believe he is correct; stories (regardless of their fictional content) can stir us to reconsider how we perceive and interact with the world around us. They are also a means to view problems and controversial issues from a fresh perspective, a new pair of spectacles if you will. And they tell us a thing or two about historic recurrence.

## The Power of Stories and Engagement in Kosovo

The importance of these opportunities becomes clearer once we realize the extent to which we are in the grasp of our own parochial reasoning, values, and assumptions. Being over convinced by our own view, we readily recoil from the disagreeable and unpleasant, dismissing factual truths that are unsupportive of our view, and shunning those who espouse claims and arguments not our own. This obscurantism becomes heightened and ever more harmful when our parochialism embodies isms like racism and fatalism, or ethnic nationalism and chauvinism as is the case in Kosovo. There is also the liberal lure of multiculturalism, which in some ways confronts the many other isms that find their way into Kosovar politics. No matter which ism, they all can take on a life of their own, sometimes commandeering the apparatus of the state to do its work for good or for bad.

Wallowing in prejudices and biases was the very thing that the 18th-century Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith was determined to prevent. To take care of this he introduced the so-called impartial spectator (the nonpartisan), a reference to seeing the world through "the eyes of the rest of mankind." He understood the value of broadening the discussion by including other viewpoints based on experiences both far and near. Fast forward to current literature on peacebuilding, which includes using storytelling to reinvigorate dialogue, breakdown stereotypes, and increase opportunities for hospitality and empathy between antagonists, and Smith's impartial spectator comes of age.

Although stories may not have been what

**By Rory J. Conces**  
Department of Philosophy and Religion  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Smith had in mind, they are nonetheless "eyes" that can stall, even prevent, our attempt to hide from disturbing revelations about ourselves, others, or the world. Fictional prose is often the chosen literary device, sometimes with a bit of the fantastic thrown in, allowing the reader a safe "distance" from which to reflect upon instead of turning away from life's unpleasantries.

If we take the newest country in the Balkans as our point of departure, reading Serb and Albanian writers from Kosovo would be obvious sources from which to get new eyes. What better stories than those penned by Serb authors the likes of the novelist Vukasin Filipovic and the short story writer Radosav Stojanovic, or Albanian writers such as the poet and short story writer Eqrem Basha and the novelist and playwright Anton Pashku.

Reading work written by Kosovars, however, is not the only way to get different eyes. When you get right down to it, sometimes authors and their work that are at first glance starkly disconnected from a particular place and time turn out to be remarkably insightful. This holds true for essays as it does novels and plays. A Latin American author, for example, may write an essay about the Asia of yesteryear, which is seemingly unrelated to the Balkan's of today, but upon further examination may be extraordinarily insightful about that region of Europe. It is simply a matter of making the connection between the two more apparent.

## Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths, and Kosovo

So it is with the work of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). Although the following question may appear to be odd, I pose it in all seriousness: What does Jorge Luis Borges offer us in looking at Kosovo? Is there a Borges-Kosovo connection? I believe there is.

Prior to glancing at a short biographical sketch and reading some of his work, including the stories and other writings in his 1960s work *Labyrinths*, I was aware of no connection whatsoever. Although I had read elsewhere that he had at times lived and travelled in Europe, some of his biographers personally assured me that Borges never set foot in Kosovo or any place else in Yugoslavia. Furthermore, neither the sketch nor *Labyrinths* gave me reason to believe there was such a link. Apparently, Jorge Luis Borges was no Rebecca West!



*Reading Serb and Albanian writers from Kosovo would be obvious sources from which to get new eyes*

Yet Borges and Yugoslavia did exist "side by side" in the world. During his adult life Yugoslavia went from being a Kingdom to a Republic, with Josip Broz Tito dominating the political scene of that country during most of the last four decades of Borges's life. And it was not until the very end of those years, with the death of Tito in 1980, that Slobodan Milosevic began his swift climb to power. But, again, there is no evidence that Borges was familiar with Tito or anything Yugoslav.

In fact, Borges was spared from witnessing the calamity that befell Yugoslavia during the 1990s. He created his symbolic and imaginary worlds much earlier, at a time when Kosovo was still a province of Serbia, before Kosovar Albanians had mounted their final attempt at secession. Borges died in June of 1986, while the Kosovo War took place in 1998-99 followed by the "majority-minority" province grabbing its independence ten years later.

So I ask again, what connection, if any, exists between Jorge Luis Borges and Kosovo? In short, it is not Borges, the man, having never set foot in Kosovo; but

Borges, the author, having written about a third century BC Chinese emperor that strangely connects the Argentine to this Balkan country. My reading of Labyrinths led me to recognize an interesting intersection between two worlds: the Middle Kingdom (China) in his essay "The Wall and the Books" and the present-day enclaves that configure the home-worlds (homes proper, workplaces, and schools) of people in Kosovo.

### From The Middle Kingdom in "The Wall and the Books" to Kosovo

We find, in "The Wall and the Books," the story of Shih Huang Ti, the one credited with unifying all of China under one powerful leader. It is no wonder that he declared himself to be the First Emperor of China, the progenitor of the first imperial dynasty—the Qin dynasty.

Although instrumental in bringing about many changes in China, Borges highlights two of Shih Huang Ti's most well-known accomplishments. The first was primarily constructive insofar as it amounted to the building of defenses. Nomadic peoples from the Eurasian steppe continuously made incursions into Qin territory, sparking a demand to limit these attacks. As a result, Shih Huang Ti ordered the construction of a wall along the empire's northern frontier. Borges refers to it as "the erection of the almost infinite wall." We now know it as parts of the Great Wall of China. Not surprisingly, the wall also played a role in the collection of duties on goods, as well as the control of immigration and emigration. At the same time, however, Shih Huang Ti ordered the dismantling of other sections of wall along old state borders in order to centralize and solidify his rule.

Shih Huang Ti's second accomplishment was particularly destructive. As Borges puts it, Shih Huang Ti "decreed that all books prior to him be burned" because "his opposition invoked them to praise the emperors of olden times." This amounted to nothing less than the "rigorous abolition of history, that is, of the past." If time began with Shih Huang Ti, then so much the more difficult for his critics to make comparisons to better times without the older books.

Quite intentionally, Shih Huang Ti's book burning brought an end to the Golden Age of Chinese philosophy and its free thought by eliminating the Hundred Schools of

Thought, which included Confucianism. What Shih Huang Ti found so disturbing about Confucian writings, the Great Learning book being a particularly important Confucian text for Chinese politics, was that it provided details on how to govern the state, as well as the qualities that a ruler should possess. Shih Huang Ti found it reprehensible that some would try to define and limit his power as a ruler. So Confucianism was replaced with legalism, which was a philosophy that emphasized strict obedience to order and punishment. It was Shih Huang Ti's way or no way! It was Shih Huang Ti's story or no story!

Interestingly enough, this brief glimpse of Chinese history alludes to a historic recurrence, a repetition of similar events in history. The concern about defenses, political opposition, and circumscribed books connects the Middle Kingdom with Kosovo. More than two thousand years later and several thousand miles to the West, we find the fledgling democracy of Kosovo composed of peoples living behind "walls," some more physical than others, but all clearly demarcated by public objects that carry different nationalist ideas and passions - objects that are evocative, objects like flags and statues, that inform in different ways to members of different ethnic nationalist groups. These objects serve as boundary markers of the ethnic nationalist enclaves within which people live, work, and go to school regardless of whether they are a majority or a minority within the enclave.

Educational systems are a poignant example of how ethnic nationalist identities are perpetuated in the various enclaves. Two schools under one roof can still be found in Kosovo, Daut Bogujevci being one of them outside of Prishtina. Such schools, in which students speak different languages (Albanian and Serbian) and learn different histories from textbooks authorized by different governing bodies in either Prishtina or Belgrade, respectively, serve to abolish the Other's history and to delegitimize the opposition of the Other. It is a form of control. The Albanian language history books portray the Serbs as genocidal, whereas the textbooks in Serbian link the Albanians with the Ottoman's in not so favorable light. Each reflects an opposing partisanship, offering a biased variant of the same message: "The Albanian way or no way!" and "The Serb way or no way!" Oh so reminiscent of ancient China.

**Tomorrow: Borges's Labyrinths, Kosovo's Enclaves, and Urban/Civic Designing (II): Intimations of What Is: Societies and Enclaves**

## "Ballots Cannot Have Kosovo Logo"

Head of the Serbian government Office for Kosovo, Aleksandar Vulin, defies Pristina's announcement to have Kosovo logos on ballots. In an interview for Radio Television of Serbia, he said that Serbia finds it is unacceptable for ballots in local elections in Kosovo to have Kosovo logos and recalled that OSCE should maintain a status of neutral stand at the local elections scheduled for November 3. Either OSCE would be status neutral or the elections would not be held, he said and underscored that Pristina opposes mass turnout of Serbs in the elections because it fears they would take over all the rights they won through the Brussels agreement. The agreement reached by Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic and his Kosovo counterpart Hasim Taci in Brussels on April 19 envisages the constitution of the community of Serb municipalities in Kosovo with certain executive powers. In order to participate in the elections, Serbs do not have to recognize the state of Kosovo and Serbs do not have to become members of the self-declared Republic of Kosovo. The agreement is status neutral and Serbs will accept the November 3 ballots only on such conditions and without any logos of the nonexistent state, Vulin said.

## Agreement on Telecommunications as Soon as Possible

Serbia's Prime Minister Ivica Dacic commented on the talks on telecommunications that it is in the mutual interest to reach the agreement as soon as possible. Dacic told reporters that the deadline for the agreement on telecommunications does not exist, but since that is one of the conditions which will be set before Belgrade and Pristina in the months to come it is good to reach it as soon as possible. "We are working on that, but there is still no agreement since energy and telecommunications are closely connected. We would like Pristina to cede in terms of one thing and we would do that in terms of another. However, they would like Belgrade to cede in all issues," Dacic said.