Vladimir Bošković[*]

Unveiling the Male Empires: Jelena Dimitrijević in Thessaloniki[1]

When she decided, on that July day in 1908, to change her original destination and instead of Western Europe, to travel to Thessaloniki –after reading in a newspaper that Turkish women "unveiled themselves"– Jelena Dimitrijević did not know that she would bring an epistolary travel account from that journey, and that it would become a rare and curious testimony of times.[2]

The center of that strange Young Turk Revolution, progressive and anachronistic at the same time, Thessaloniki at the beginning of the last century comprised an apotheosis of the Ottoman state ideology, with its multiethnic population: Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Levantines, Vlachs, Sephardic Jews, a community of "converts" (Islamized Jews, *Dönme* or *Mu'min*, "the faithful ones"), various peoples, many of which had disappeared in the wastelands of history, gathered around the great harbor on the shores of the Thermaic Gulf. That vanished world, which was recently adequately described by Mark Mazower in his book *Salonica: City of Ghosts*,[3] received one night Mrs. Jelena Dimitrijević, the spouse of a Serbian military officer, a renowned writer, an ardent patriot, a devoted feminist who spoke six languages, and whose poems dedicated to beautiful Mus-

[*] Princeton University, Stanley J. Seeger '52 Center for Hellenic Studies.

1. A version of this article first appeared in the bilingual edition Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Soluna/Επιστολές από τη Θεσσαλονίκη*, trans. Vladimir Bošković (Loznica: Karpos, 2008).

2. Cf. also Natalija Tomić, "Dve vrste Pisama iz Soluna: Feministično istraživačko novinarstvo Jelene J. Dimitrijević naspram nepouzdanog izveštavanja Branislava Nušića," *Novi izraz* 55-56 (2012): 154-69.

3. Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950* (London: HarperCollins, 2004).

lim women already in her youth had brought her the nickname "Serbian Sappho." Through her acquaintances with some of the most notable members of the Young Turk Committee of Unity and Progress (including the family of Ismail Enver, one of the leaders of the Revolution), through her familiarity with Turkish women, many of whom she knew from her days in the city of Niš while it was still part of the Ottoman Empire, but also through her personal culture, she was soon received in the best houses of Thessaloniki –Turkish, Jewish, and Greek– and described her impressions from this six-week journey in ten letters, all addressed to her French friend Louise St. Jaksic, professor at the Higher School for Girls in Belgrade.

The liberation of the city in the First Balkan War in 1912, on the feast day of the Christian patron saint of the city, Saint Dimitrios, started a series of major changes the city would endure in the decades to follow. The great fire of 1917 destroyed most of the buildings in the central urban areas. After the Asia Minor disaster of 1922, following the Lausanne Treaty, a mandatory population exchange took place between Greece and the newly founded Turkish Republic. This had major consequences for Thessaloniki, whose Muslim (and Mu'min) population disappeared at that time. Soon thereafter the new government toppled dozens of minarets whose silhouettes Jelena observed from the Upper Town and which provided the city with "that unmistakably Eastern look which modern Athens lacks and modern Belgrade has lost."[4] The last hit to Thessaloniki as Jelena knew it came during the Second World War, when the large Jewish community, one of the largest in Europe, almost completely vanished in Auschwitz. The followers of Sabbatai Zevi (or Shabbetai Tzvi, 1626-1676), a Jewish mystic and self-proclaimed messiah who eventually called on his supporters to convert to Islam –those are the *Donme* which Jelena described with so much curiosity and compassion– would leave the city, but they would also, like most other refugees from Rumelia in the Republic of Turkey, offer an important support to the reforms of Kemal Atatürk, who himself was born in Thessaloniki.

4. Bozidar Jezernik, *Wild Europe: The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers* (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 216.

The Letters from Thessaloniki are interesting perhaps mostly because they carry one of the last, and female, voices of the vanishing Ottoman world, and also because they depict the brighter side of the Young Turk movement, which in the following years would degenerate into something very different from the ideals which galvanized its supporters on the streets of Thessaloniki in 1908.[5] The letters also fill out one of the peculiar voids of the cultural geography of Serbia, for which this city virtually does not exist, apart from the memory of the military retreat in the First World War. All attempts to provide it with a place on the imaginary map of the Serbian literary world had limited range: the one that reached the furthest was by Ksenija Maricki Gadjanski, Ivan Gadjanski, and Elli Skopetea, who in 1998 published an anthology of the *Poetry of Thessaloniki* in which they represented the results of the city's unusual literary flourishing in the twentieth century. Still, the old Thessaloniki, one of the few places in Europe that never lost its urban character and remained a *city* ever since it was founded by the Macedonian king Cassander in 315 BC –whose early Christian communities were praised by the apostle Paul; where the Roman Emperor Galerius had built his palace; and the twelfth century episcope Eustathius wrote his essays on the colors of the sea; the same streets treaded upon and described with endearing naïveté by the Belgrade monk Jerotej Racanin in 1704[6]– still exists somewhere and waits to be discovered. Thanks to her unique sensibility, Jelena Dimitrijević was able to feel and record the ancient city, an entire forgotten world, in its last resplendent days.

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Jelena Dimitrijević, born in 1862 in the town of Kruševac, wrote poems, narrative fiction, and travel accounts; and all of her books,

5. See Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

6. *A Journey to the City of Jerusalem by Jerotej, a Hieromonk from Rača, in the Year from Creation 7212, and from Christ's Birth 1704, on the 7th of the Month July* (in Serbian), reprint of the first edition by Osip Bodyansky from 1861 (published by the Moscow Academy of Sciences), in the article: Borivoje Marinković, "Odlomci traganja za Račanima i tradicijom o Jeroteju Račaninu," *Godišnjak Filozofskog fakulteta u Novom Sadu* 12/1 (1969): 301-48.

apart from the novel *New Women* (inspired by her experiences in Thessaloniki: new, i.e., young, as in Young Turks, *Jön Türkler* from French *Jeunes*) were published in private editions. One portion of her poetry was collected under the title *Jelena's Poems* in 1894 (for a long time she would sign her poems with her first name only, which gave rise to fantastic theories about her identity in the press and the literary salons of the time) and *Une Vision* in 1936; the rest, which she wrote up until the end of her life, remained scattered in the magazines and almanacs of the time. There are still a number of unpublished poems and texts within her manuscript archive, currently held at the National Library in Belgrade.

Explaining her change of mind at the beginning of *The Letters from Thessaloniki*, Jelena wrote: "I have two loves, one for the east, and another one for the west." As she was affluent, those loves did not remain unfulfilled, she traveled extensively in both the east and the west, always with a pen in her hand. She interviewed New York bank magnates, an Indian maharaja, and the Egyptian feminist Huda Sha'arawi amongst others. She traveled all of her life, with passion – to Turkey, Austria, Spain, Greece, France, Italy, England, Egypt, India, Japan, and the United States. Apart from her poems, many of which obsess over her female acquaintances, testimonies to these journeys are *Letters from Niš Regarding Harems* (1897), *Letters from Thessaloniki* (1908), *The American Girl* (1918), *Letters from India* (1928), *Letters from Egypt* (1929), *The New World or One Year in America* (1934). While her husband was alive, they traveled together; after his death, she traveled alone. She crossed the Atlantic on her own and she spent a year in America alone. In her sixties, she set off on a journey around the world. She published a book from that journey too – *Seven Seas and Three Oceans: Traveling around the World* (1940).

As travelogues are traditionally considered a "lesser" form of literature, it is understandable that Jelena's fiction fared better in literary history. Her stories: *The Vision of Djul-Marika* (1901), *Fati Sultan, Safi Hanum, Mejrem Hanum* (1901), and the novel *The New Women* (1912) were allowed into the mainstream of the male canon of Serbian literature, especially the first and the last among them; the

latter was awarded a prestigious literary prize by the influential literary society Matica Srpska. In the year 1928 a Russian translation was published in Moscow and her stories were translated into German, Bulgarian, and Polish. A good number of these texts, mostly published in literary magazines, are extremely hard to find and deserve a modern reprint.

In her time, Jelena stands as an "exceptionally interesting combination of sincere nationalism and sincere cosmopolitism,"[7] and later criticism often did not know what to make of her. During her life she was esteemed as a writer: she published in the most prestigious magazines, she was a member of various literary and charitable societies, and she was respected by literary critics such as Pavle Popović, who was a personal friend. After her death, however, and especially after her "second death" –a brief and strictly negative review by Jovan Skerlić in his influential *History of Modern Serbian Literature*– her texts, despite sporadic inclusion in anthologies and literary lexicons, sunk into oblivion. Some of her poems, nevertheless, acquired a life of their own; for instance, her poem "O Fiery Sun" (*Sunce jarko*) from the cycle *To Sevdija from Sevdija* (*Sevdiji of Sevdije*, chosen for the etymological connection to the Turkish word for "love") was given an "urban melody" and was sung, with affection, by the Serbian soldiers of the First World War, and it has remained popular in the Niš area to this day.[8]

Jelena's name reappeared in the Serbian literary scene only in the 1980s, perhaps partially thanks to a reprint of the work of another early Serbian feminist, Isidora Sekulić, who wrote an intriguing review of Jelena's American travels. In 1986, *The Letters from Niš Regarding Harems* was published and followed by an essay by Slobodanka Peković, who is to receive the highest credit for this edition. This book is the best received of all Jelena's texts, and it has been

7. Slobodanka Peković, "Romani i putopisi u stvaralačkom postupku Jelene Dimitrijević," in *Jelena Dimitrijević – Život i delo. Zbornik referata s naučnog skupa*. Niš, 28. i 29. oktobar 2004 (Niš: Centar za naučna istraživanja SANU i Univerzitet u Nišu, 2006), 56.

8. More on that in Đorđe Perić, "Osvrt na popularnost pesama Jelene Dimitrijević 'Sunce jarko' i 'Baba Krasa'," in *Jelena Dimitrijević – Život i delo,* 155-82 (see below).

republished several times since. Because of this, her name is often linked to the city of Niš, although she spent most of her life in Belgrade, from 1897 until her death in 1945.

Her remaining texts remained inaccessible to wider audiences, despite the fact that her literary figure, with modern theoretical currents, became more and more interesting. So Svetlana Slapsak published several excerpts from her travels with commentary, in the magazine *ProFemina* (1998), as well as several excellent studies, the most important of which is *Harems, Nomads: Jelena Dimitrijević*.[9] Jelena's texts make up an important part of recent studies of Serbian literature, both in Serbia and abroad: the eminent British scholar of Serbian literature, Celia Hawkesworth, published a study on Jelena in 1999.[10] She also gave Jelena a prominent place in her book on Serbian and Bosnian female writers.[11] The University of Niš organized a symposium on Jelena in 2004.[12] That Jelena's figure is becoming more and more attractive to the general readership can be seen in the fact that Ivana Kosanović recently published a fictional biography of Jelena,[13] and there is an increasing number of re-editions and studies of her work.[14]

The East, in the way that it was constructed and popularized through contemporary French and English literature, was the strongest thematic axis of Jelena's writing. Experienced as an ambivalent blend of sensuality, exoticism and debauchery, this world was both intoxicating and repulsive or, to quote the Greek historian Elli

9. *ProFemina* 15-16 (Fall 1998), reprint in *Žene, slike, izmišljaji*, ed. Branka Arsić (Beograd: Centar za ženske studije, 2000), 49-73.

10. Celia Hawkesworth, "A Serbian Woman in a Turkish Harem: The Work of Jelena Dimitrijević (1862-1945)," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 77/1 (1999): 56-73.

11. Celia Hawkesworth, *Voices in the Shadows: Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000).

12. See fn. 7.

13. Ivana Kosanović, *Moja draga Jelena* (Niš: Zograf 2007).

14. Ana Stjelja, "Elementi tradicionalnog i modernog u delu Jelene Dimitrijević", unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Belgrade, 2012.

Skopetea, it was "an admixture of parody and saccharinity."[15] Jelena described this world with the cognizance and familiarity of a person who felt that she herself, to some extent, also belonged to it. Although one can sense the strong influence of her French readings (Chateaubriand, Loti, or Gautier) in those texts, it is a feeling which is contrasted by her own personal experience from the harems of Niš, Constantinople, and Salonica. These influences are made even more interesting because they stem from a time when the national ideologies of the young Balkan states, in the process of modernization and Europeanization, were at the height of their efforts to exorcize every cultural link to the age usually described as "the Turkish yoke" and to decisively suppress it into the past.[16]

Nevena Ivanović is correct when she claims in her study that Jelena is a special example of the female resistance against the dominant national/nationalistic discourse.[17] Jelena's journey begins from paradigmatic stance of the "white woman, colonizer" who sets off to liberate the "oriental" women. According to Ivanović, Jelena eventually lost her ideological center and constructed an alternative national program, separating herself from her own national culture in the process. In opposition I argue that Jelena's ideological centering was very much unlike the late twentieth century European nationalism. One should not forget that, in Jelena's sociocultural context, the cultural topography had different semantics than it does today. I posit that Jelena's patriotism was based on the social dimension of the national revolutions, where the emphasis was on *liberation* and where the centering was social and cultural instead of ethnic. The impetus of this ideology was the replacement of the feudal system with a state of law and civil liberties. Jelena often stressed that her

15. In a book of research about cultural stereotypes in the times of the Young Turk Revolution: Elli Skopetea, *Η Δύση της Ανατολής: Εικόνες από το τέλος της Οθωμανικής Αυτοκρατορίας* (Athens: Gnosi, 1992). Late Thessaloniki professor Elli Skopetea dedicated a significant portion of her scholarly work to these questions.

16. See, among others, Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

17. Nevena Ivanović, "Zaposedanje drugog i manipulacija 'ženskim pismom'," *R.E.Č.* 59/5 (2000): 214-16.

mother was a "Turkish slave." Her search through the narrow streets of the Upper Town of Thessaloniki under Young Turks had exactly the same goal as her pushing through the snow of Manhattan: she was looking for free women. As the semantic web of Serbian literature changed together with its social-historical contexts, so did Jelena's program become obsolete and inapplicable in a new, *different* national(ist) culture. In other words, it was not Jelena who excluded herself from her national culture, but the national culture which changed its ideological orientation and from a liberating force became carrier of a new oppression. Jelena's free, cosmopolitan spirit had no more place in it.

Jelena committed several mistakes for which the Serbian history of literature could never forgive her. First, she was a woman. Second, and even worse, she was a feminist. Finally (likely the worst offense of all) she portrayed the world of the Muslim harem with sympathy and familiarity, depriving it of its traditional fictional and exotic elements, and ruining the male fantasy.

The sexuality in Jelena's writings also opens some interesting questions. Her contemporaries called her "our Sappho,"[18] and said about her: "It is a woman who loves women, but she loves them like we do."[19] Not only are her first-person poems dedicated to the beauty and light complexion of Turkish and American women, but the sole center of her attentions are always and without exception women. In America she met women in the famous "Boston marriages," and homoerotic motifs are explicitly present in the novel *The New Women*. She would ask openly about Muslim women in Thessaloniki: "Have they all known the Greek Sappho, these beautiful, sensitive women full of soul?" The obsessive description of the harem, her preoccupation with the concept of the "unveiling" of Muslim women, as well as her careful recording of every bare body part opens the possibility

18. Slobodanka Peković, "Pogovor," in Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Niša o haremima* (Beograd: Dečje novine, 1986), v-vi. Referring to Vlastoje Aleksijević, *Naša žena u književnom stvaranju* (Novi Sad: 1941), 20. Aleksijević's text itself is republished in the *ProFemina* (1995).

19. Harru, "…," *Videlo*, 13/47 (1892), reference in Peković, "Pogovor," I.

for the interpretation of her writing as an exercise in male voyeuristic pleasure.[20] Some critics argue that the authors describing harems were "defined by their masculinity, their social class, and their European culture."[21] A look at some of the photos from Jelena's youth indeed provoke thoughts about the role of gender masquerade in her writing, particularly as a way to resolve the conflict of desire. Characteristically, the novel *American Girl* was entirely written in the first person masculine. Other scholars, however, accuse the first for the projection of culture and sex. They claim that women writers and ethnographers "tamed the exotic" or, put slightly differently, "these women normalized and humanized the harem."[22] Eventually, Jelena was pushed into the margins of male literary history in the process aptly referred to by feminist critics as "the conspiracy of not reading."[23] Fortunately, that conspiracy proved unsuccessful in Jelena's case.

20. Suzanne Rodin Pucci, "The Discrete Charms of the Exotic," in *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, eds. George Rousseau and Roy Porter (Manchester-New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 150.

21. Joanna de Groot, "Sex and Race," in *Sexuality and Subordination*, eds. Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (London: Routledge, 1989), 104.

22. Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East 1718-1918* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 62.

23. Neda Božinović, *Žensko pitanje u Srbiji u XIX i XX veku* (Beograd: Devedeset četvrta i Žene u crnom, 1996), 92.