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**NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED.  
VLADIMIR BARTOL'S "ALAMUT" AND THE "EAGLE'S NEST" OF  
SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN MODERNISMS**

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**Abstract:**

*"Alamut" (1938) is a novel by Vladimir Bartol (1903-1967) – Slovene author from Trieste. It has been defined as both "marginal literature" and "brilliantly written work". However, only in the 1980s and 1990s Bartol's novel became the most internationally successful and bestselling work of Slovene literature, partly due to its strangely contemporary relevance. And yet there has been surprisingly little comparison between "one of the most original works of Slovene literature" and the modernistic literary creativity of contemporaries of Bartol's generation elsewhere in Southeast Europe – for instance authors such as Bulgarian Boris Shivarchev, Romanians Camil Petrescu, Anton Holban and Mircea Eliade, and even Serbian Miloš Crnjanski. Regrettably, "Alamut" is not translated in Bulgarian or Romanian yet. Apart from the fact that it is a gap which needs to be filled, such a juxtaposing seems to be quite alluring, loquacious and valuable. This study represents an attempt to commence similar comparison and to initiate a broader discussion between both extremities of the Balkans.*

**Keywords:** *comparative literature, modernism, novel, Vladimir Bartol, Alamut*

***Bartol***

In the second section of "The Million", also known as "The Travels of Marco Polo", the renowned Venetian recounts the story of the Old Man of the Mountain who founded The Sect of the Assassins in Persia at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. More than six centuries later, around 1927, it was the Venetian's tale that captivated the Slovene Vladimir Bartol as he was graduating from the Sorbonne in Paris. His fascination grew into obsession, and about ten years later his first novel and eventual magnum opus, "Alamut", came out. This is probably

one of the most enigmatic novels in Southeast European modernism library between the World Wars.<sup>1</sup>

Bartol himself was an enigmatic person with diverse interests. Ethnic Slovene from Trieste (in Austria-Hungary then), he studied in his home town, and later in Ljubljana and Paris. After the Second World War he came back to Trieste where he lived for the next ten years and finally settled down in the Slovene capital. There he devoted himself to academic pursuits and literary career.

His first short stories, published between 1927 and 1928 in literary journals, were issued together a few years later in the “Al Araf” collection. Those who know his works best believe that there is a close connection between “Al Araf” (named after the high wall in the Quran, dividing heaven from hell) and “Alamut” (i.e. “eagle’s nest” in Persian, as they called the Old Man of the Mountain’s stronghold).<sup>2</sup> It is implied by Bartol himself in his notes and can be felt in the main characters of the short stories, who are conceptual predecessors of the leading figure in the novel – Hassan ibn Sabbah. For a long time many of Bartol’s texts remained scattered in the newspapers and journals he collaborated with. It was years after his death that they were published together – with titles creating *the allusion to some abstract balance*, such as the short stories and essays collections “Demon and Eros”, and “Between Idyll and Horror”.

### “Alamut”

After a conversation with friends about Marco Polo’s famous travel notes Bartol decided to write a novel about the Old Man of the Mountain in ten years’ time.<sup>3</sup> For a whole decade he searched, collected and studied various historical sources, philosophical and theosophical texts, the Quran, Niccolò Machiavelli’s “The Prince”, etc. He researched the broad historical background while forming his own plot and structure. Finally he isolated himself in a small town at the foot of the Slovene Alps and finished his book ten years after that conversation in Paris.

“Alamut” remains Vladimir Bartol’s masterpiece and is, like its author, *rara avis* both in the Slovene and Balkan literary context. This is “the most non-Slovene novel in Slovene

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this virtual meeting with Vladimir Bartol, his masterpiece, and everything that followed, to prof. P. Vodopivec, for which I am very grateful to him.

<sup>2</sup> P. Vodopivec, About Slovene Problems and Misunderstandings with Vladimir Bartol’s Alamut, In: *Slovene Studies*, 2012, Vol. 34, Issue 1/2, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> V. Bartol, *Alamut*. Ljubljana, Sanje, 2010, p. 422.

literature”.<sup>4</sup> Because it contained nothing that could be identified as Slovene, apart from the language, literary circles started talking about Bartol as “an error in the Slovene genetic code”.<sup>5</sup> Even though audience welcomed the publication of “*Alamut*”, most literary critics were much more reserved and divided in their reviews. Until his death in 1967 Vladimir Bartol lived with the sorrow that his novel “remained misunderstood and unexplained”.<sup>6</sup>

“*Alamut*” is a readable, well thought-out and chronologically structured novel which, by a simple prose style and third person narrator, sets its intense plot in an exotic time and place. On the surface, the book brings together the characteristics of both historical and adventure novels. The plot unfolds in the northern mountainous parts of Persia (contemporary Iran) at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In short, it revolves around the tensions between the Persian-speaking native Shiite Muslim inhabitants and their Seljuk Sunni masters. It tells about an influential local military commander and heresiarch Hassan ibn Sabbah, whom Marco Polo called the Old Man of the Mountain. During the last decade of the 11<sup>th</sup> century he aspired to unite Shiite Muslim sects by the Ismaili doctrine as well as to free Iran from Seljuk rule.

Ibn Sabbah is both charismatic and demonic. He pronounces himself “mahdi” or messiah and settles in the fortress of Alamut in the Alborz Mountain where Zoroaster’s dualistic sermon still echoes. He creates and sets in motion a terrifying mechanism which produces suicide warriors. They are religious young men, his followers, who have become highly disciplined men and “Fedayeen”, i.e. “martyrs” or “men, accepting death”, who blindly follow the Prophet’s commandments, and especially the Sayyiduna’s (i.e. “Our master”) which is how they call Ibn Sabbah among themselves. Combining the narcosis from hashish use and the carefully prepared décor of the harem, Ibn Sabbah surrounds his chosen ones with the dense illusion that they have indeed reached the paradise, promised by the Prophet to those who dare become martyrs. This illusion quickly turns into obsession for the “false paradise”. Once achieving fanatic faith and winning the loyalty of the “Fedayeen”, Ibn Sabbah can easily send anyone of them on a suicide mission to any known place which will end with an attempt on the life of a political adversary and thus expansion of his own power and influence. But the question why he does all this cannot be answered unequivocally. Isolated in his tower on the top of the Eagle’s Nest, he eliminates many of his enemies, but along with them he destroys or fatally distances some of the most important people around

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<sup>4</sup> Vodopivec, *About Slovene Problems*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> M. Biggins, *Against Ideologies: Vladimir Bartol And Alamut*. In: V. Bartol, *Alamut*, Ljubljana, Sanje, 2012, p. 429.

<sup>6</sup> Bartol, *Alamut*, 2010, p. 421. See also Vodopivec, *About Slovene Problems*, p. 3.

him, and in this way he obliterates himself alone. It is here that Bartol's adventure novel becomes something else.

### *The Eagle's Nest*

Against the backdrop of the predominant social realism in Slovene literature at the time, Bartol's novel stands out with its psychological and philosophical elements. In describing distant historical events and individuals, in moulding destinies of diverse eccentric characters and exotic landscapes, he, in fact, develops eternal topics in a modern manner, such as life and death, knowledge and love, will and power, self-knowledge and even the absurd, which makes him a precursor of existentialist literature.

According to Bartol himself, the book is also a vivid representation of his own time of terrible dictatorships and their protagonists between the two World Wars. The writer reminisced that from one moment on, while he was developing his characters, they started speaking with their own voices and it was then that "the fluids" of current events seeped into the novel. "I stole the fluid from dictators and I suddenly found myself *an equilibrist on a rope* (emphasis added), walking from the past into the present and from the present into the future and back..."<sup>7</sup>

The book that Bartol wrote under the circumstances was his escape from mass political movements, charismatic leaders and manipulative ideologies, who seized power in Europe exactly at that historical moment, it was his "ivory tower", but also his "eagle's nest", i.e. his contemplation and "a profound meditation on them".

Unfortunately Vladimir Bartol, as well as his novel "Alamut", remains completely unfamiliar name for Bulgarian readers. It was only in the late 80s that "Alamut" was translated in some of the world languages and shortly became the most successful bestseller abroad in Slovene literature. Eventually the novel has become part of global contemporary pop culture. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons is September 11 attacks and everything associated with them from then on. For many contemporary Western readers "Alamut" is a metaphor for the Islamic terrorist threat. Metaphor which, after Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin, after all Eastern European regimes and their protagonists, which fell spectacularly apart in the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resonates anew in Osama bin Laden and Al Qaida, and then probably in the recently proclaimed for caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the so called Islamic state. Indeed, in the book Ibn Sabbah utters a prophecy, ominous from the distance of

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<sup>7</sup> Vodopivec, About Slovene Problems, p. 8.

time: “But the time will come when even princes on the far side of the world will live in fear of our power. And then we’ll collect tribute from all the emperors, kings and potentates beyond the seas”.<sup>8</sup> Reflections on this and possible conclusions on our own time is a real challenge, but this will be another story.

### ***Orient Express***

Vladimir Bartol scholars are clear about his literary influences, but parallels between the Slovene’s works and those of his contemporaries from other parts of Southeastern Europe are surprisingly scarce.<sup>9</sup> The reasons behind such gaps in comparative analyses are probably many, but one of the main ones is certainly the weird fate of “*Alamut*” which was recognized as a masterpiece almost forty years after its publication – which is closer to our times now than to its own. Considerable part of the blame probably belongs also to the odd communication between modern Southeast European literatures where the neighbor is rarely perceived as a role model, while, in the words of the Bulgarian comparatist Roumiana L. Stancheva, “information is exchanged in an atmosphere bordering on indifference”.<sup>10</sup> This partially accounts for the “triangular route”, that Stancheva is also speaking about, usually taken by each Southeast European literature to reach its neighbors – a route whose second angle points to and passes through a west European capital, preferred by the respective Balkan intellectual (and political) elite. Figuratively speaking, the way from the Balkans to the Balkans goes through any “Modern Parnassus”, just like some Orient Express round trip ticket. Therefore, Balkan modernisms – all Balkan isotopes of the modernism – staring from their Eastern “eagle’s nest” at some Western “ivory tower”, frequently miss their closest other and to some degree, themselves.

### ***Laboratory of the Self***

The brief overview barely brings Bartol and his “*Alamut*” closer to other modernist prose writers from diverse corners of Southeast Europe and their works. Let’s take for example representative novelists, such as the Bulgarian Boris Shivachev, Romanians Camil Petrescu, Anton Holban, Mircea Eliade, as well as the Vojvodina Serb Miloš Crnjanski, together with their respective and most representative novels – “*The Inventor*”, “*The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War*”, “*Ioana*”, “*Maitreyi*”, and “*The Journal of Čarnojević*”.

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<sup>8</sup> Bartol, *Alamut*, 2012, p. 419.

<sup>9</sup> See Vodopivec, *About Slovene Problems*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Р. Станчева, *Среца в прочита. Сравнително литературознание и балканистика*. Издателство „Балкани“, София, 2011, с. 79.

With some of these authors Bartol shares the fact that they are “French graduates”, with others he shares the exotic subject matter of the novel; with yet others – real or imaginary exile. What brings all these closer though is the fact that, generally speaking, they all possess distinct traits of modernist fiction.

“Alamut” is a story of a medieval Ibn Sabbah, putting into motion his terrible mechanism of destruction. But then there is the other story – about a modern Ibn Sabbah, Bartol’s contemporary and his alter ego, who, as every modern person and self-conscious author, stands alone, naked, helpless and scared before the existential void of nothingness, experimenting with a fictional world, in a desperate attempt to fill it. After all, “Alamut” is a modern and modernist Balkan novel – a real story about the modern individual, modeling himself a personal laboratory of the Self. Even sucked into the maelstrom of events, be it Bartol’s Ibn Sabbah, besieged both by an enemy army of thousands from the outside, and by his fanatic garrison from eunuchs and Fedayeen on the inside, lost in the desert of his own Al Araf; or Shivachev’s Juan, sunk in the meaningless subsistence of the Buenos Aires masses and later lost in Patagonia; or Petrescu’s Ștefan Gheorghidiu, drafted and sent at the frontline, lost in the multitudes and chaos, in between past and present; or Holban’s Sandu, surrounded by the small, but even more boring community at the Kavarna port, lost somewhere at “the end of the world”; or Eliade’s Allan, disgusted with everyone else, except Maitreyi, and even with Maitreyi, losing his self for he has lost her; or Crnjanski’s Petar Rajic, idiotically smiling at the commotion of relatives and fellow citizens, lost in his own home... Even then he models himself a personal and genuine “laboratory of the Self”.

### *Nothing is true, everything is permitted*

Bartol borrowed the supreme motto of the Ismaili sect from Nietzsche. Ibn Sabbah preaches: “Nothing is true, everything is permitted”.<sup>11</sup> Then nothing stands between him and the endless experiment over knowledge, life and death. This is his hubris against the existing reality. Bartol’s hero is on the verge of uttering true mantra of the modern man, true maxim of the hero of nihilism, existentialism, or absurd: *There is no God. There is death. Everything is permitted. I am innocent.*<sup>12</sup> The main characters in these Balkan novels, mentioned above, are all hypostases of the same modern man. All in all, the central character in these novels feels simultaneously the pressing need to find oneself and the desperate repulsion from discovering

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<sup>11</sup> See Bartol, *Alamut*, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See Ж. П. Сартр. Обяснение на „Чужденецът“ – Ип: А. Камю, *Чужденецът*. Издателство „Фама“, София, 1995, с. 105.

oneself. He resolutely hesitates and confidently sways as *an equilibrist on a rope* who attempts to strike balance between these two, without ever reaching them. He reaches toward his own self-determination while at the same time he turns away from it, balancing above the abyss of “that which is”, stalling at the gate of expectation, until he is swallowed by the inevitable abyss of “that which is not”. The discontinuous being would always seek continuity.<sup>13</sup> Such is the creative destiny of a whole “Lost generation”. Balkan literatures make no exception.

Bartol himself, as his alter ego in this case, Ibn Sabbah, seems obsessed by the idea of *balance* coded in one symbol that haunts them both – Al Araf. Al Araf, as described in the seventh surah of the Quran, is the high fortress wall which divided heaven from hell. There stay those who have an equal number of virtues and sins until Allah wishes to make a decision about them. When Ibn Sabbah talks about Al Araf, this symbol of equilibrium sounds like the synonym for knowledge and starts to resemble a meaning of the existence: „It’s said that that wall is the destination of those who have fought for a higher purpose against the will of their parents, and fallen with sword in hand. They can’t go to paradise, and they don’t deserve hell. It’s their lot to look in both directions. To know! Yes, al-Araf is a symbol for those who have their eyes open and who have the courage to act in accordance with their knowledge. Look. When you believed, you were in heaven. Now that you’ve come to see and deny, you’ve descended into hell. But on Araf there’s no place for either joy or disillusionment. Al-Araf is the balance of good and evil, and the path that leads to it is long and steep. Few have the opportunity to see it. Even fewer dare to tread it, because you’re alone on Araf. It’s what separates you from other people. To endure up here, you have to steel your heart. Do I make sense now?“<sup>14</sup> And “nothing is true” and “everything is permitted” because, rephrasing Proust, there is no paradise except the false one.<sup>15</sup>

The main characters in these modernist Balkan novels are all hypostases of the same modern man. All in all, he is an equilibrist, who seeks balance, perched on his “eagle’s nest”, on the verge of the knowledge, on the edge of oneself.

Oddly, but one of the leading inspirations of Bartol for his “Alamut”, the renowned Venetian Marco Polo along with his famous book “The Million” remain somewhere between fact and phantasy, truth and mystery, i.e. between “that which is” and “that which is not”.

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<sup>13</sup> See Ж. Багай, *Еротизмът*. ИК „Критика и хуманизъм“, София, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Bartol, *Alamut*, 2012, p. 381.

<sup>15</sup> See М. Пруст, *Възврънатото време*. ИК „Панорама“, София, 2012.