

## DECISION

Ref: a competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in professional field 2.1. Philology: Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia (Western European literature), announced by Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in State Gazette, issue 105, 11.12.2020, with a single candidate:

Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova, PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Theory of Literature, Faculty of Slavic Philology (FSIF), Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Kamelia Spassova graduated from the Second English Language High School "Thomas Jefferson" in Sofia, in 2001. She received a Bachelor's degree in Bulgarian philology in 2005 and a Master's degree in 2006 at the FSIF, SU "St. Kliment Ohridski". In 2012 she acquired PhD degree with a dissertation on the topic: "Event and Example in the Order of Discourses on Literature: The Problem of the Exemplary Work." Since 2013, she is Chief Assistant Professor of Ancient and Western European Literature at the Department of Theory of Literature, FSIF, SU "St. Kliment Ohridski".

In the current competition, Kamelia Spassova participates with the monograph *The Modern Mimesis. Self-reflection in literature*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2021, and with twenty independent or co-authored peer-reviewed publications in Bulgarian and English, issued in the last 7 years. Five of them appear in international periodicals, proceedings and collection volumes.

The habilitation thesis takes up and builds on ideas and issues, intrinsic both to the dissertation and most of the subsequent publications. Central role is now assigned to the notion of *mimesis* (this spelling and pronunciation of the word is particularly grounded and maintained in the work), which is interpreted or used as an analytical tool in a wide-ranging literary-historical arc stretching from Plato and Aristotle to Adorno and Derrida, and even beyond them. In the introduction, the author summarizes her conceptual thesis that "mimesis is a self-reflexive category, and defining it as modern only emphasizes its reciprocal nature to fold inward and reflect on itself" (p. 11). Concerning the definition of modern, she uses it "in the sense of

contemporary and reflective, aimed at a historically changing present” (ibid.) Apart from being an essential mark of the aesthetic category, Spassova perceives self-reflexivity as a characteristic inherent in the philological project from its appearance in the Hellenistic libraries in the III-II century BC to the present day. Thus, the researcher assigns to her approach a double task: a) to think theoretically of mimesis “always as a double and self-referential category that opens the field of self-reflection in literature” and b) to make possible the historical study of “figures of self-reflection in different contexts through series of anomalous paradigms, each of which is justified by a different principle” (p. 13). Both the theoretical and the historical vector unfold by means of a conceptual network based on the tension between *analogy* and *anomaly* (from a more covert and updated viewpoint – between the linguistic and the literary fractions of Philological Science). To make this tension productive in the course of tracing comparatively the large-scale aesthetic-theoretical-philosophical paradigms that her writing simultaneously builds and analyzes, Spassova ingeniously bases her method on M. Foucault’s concept of heterotopias, inspired by Borges and theories of possible worlds. Thus accomplished, the pairing of theoretical self-reflexivity and historical dynamics – which on principle is difficult to achieve – becomes, in my opinion, the main driving force of her research and subsequent exposition.

The heterotopic approach finds its full expression in the literary examples, conceived and analyzed at the level of historical paradigms, in the individual chapters of the book. At first glance, the abundant examples seem randomly, even arbitrary, scattered: from the ancient Homer and Hesiod, Virgil and Ovid, Plato, Aristotle and Quintilian, to the modern Joyce, Proust and Kafka, Benjamin, Auerbach and Lukacs, Blanchot, Sartre and Vernant, Jakobson, Bakhtin and Lotman, to name just a few. Along with them, the researcher conceptually traces and records the contributions to the considered problems of several generations of Bulgarian researchers, leading figures among whom are B. Bogdanov, N. Georgiev and R. Kolarov. And last but not least - the exotopic, perhaps even exotic (again only at first glance), compared to the Eurocentric tradition, reception in Japan of the Enlightenment-postmodern idea of the sublime, as well as its adaptation and local upgrading. But, in the global context of World Literature, does Diabolism – the first Bulgarian literature of horror and a variety of literary Expressionism from the first decades of the twentieth century – seem less exotic? All these examples, ascending in the work where more, where less

convincingly to historical paradigms, the author skillfully arranges in a polyphonic dialogue through her “constellation of concepts”: *similarity, figure, example, paradigm, self-reflection*, “as well as the idea of their historical alteration from one context to another” (p. 17).

Regarding the above-mentioned other publications of Kamelia Spassova, my general assessment is certainly positive. I would define them as contributions and approaches to the problems developed in the habilitation thesis. Therefore, quite logically, some of them find a place – with the relevant additions, new arguments and developments – in the monograph *Modern Mimesis: Self-reflection in Literature*.

Inevitably, scientific work, conceived and carried out with such ambition, breadth and scope, will give rise, along with approval, to critical questions and disagreements. If they are justified, they have not only corrective but also heuristic value. Here I will briefly raise one conceptual and one terminological point. As far as I remember, both were noted in the internal discussion of the work. The first concerns the limits of the concept of mimesis: is there anything in the aesthetic activity of man that the concept thus formulated and used in the monograph does not cover? If there is, what is it? If not, does it not become a kind of *panmimesis*, which with its comprehensiveness excludes the possibility of self-reflection? My second point is criticism of the translation of Freud’s term *unheimlich* as “изродно” used in both earlier publications and in the thesis. Despite the validations made by Spassova alone or in co-authorship with Maria Kalinova, for me it remains nothing more than a witty whimsy. The etymological overtone of the noun “изрод” is inevitably present in it, thus evoking misleading intuitions with which the meaning of the psychoanalytic concept hardly has anything in common. The Heidigerian variety of the Bulgarian translation hyphenated as “из-родно” is no more convincing to me, since the word-formation and conceptual neologisms that the German philosopher forges are an example of shaking up traditionally established terminology rather than its sustainable renewal. But insofar as none of the other variants of translation duly cited in the argumentation is problem-free and generally accepted, the question of the Bulgarian equivalent of *unheimlich* remains unsolved.

In conclusion, I would define the monograph *The Modern Mimesis: Self-reflection in literature* as a significant literary achievement, not only within the scope of our native Philological scholarship. The book impresses with its general design, purposefulness, range of topics, depth of argumentation and creative enthusiasm. It is my conviction that it will have many long, careful and slow acts of reading ahead until it reaches “its last reader.” All submitted publications and necessary documents meet the procedural requirements. I declare unhesitatingly that my vote will be in favour of awarding the academic position of Associate Professor of Western European literature to Chief Assistant Dr Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova.



Associate Professor Dr Ognian Kovachev