

REVIEW

by **Prof. Dr. Svetlana Stoycheva**, NATFA "Kr. Sarafov",
on the documents and works provided by **Chief Assist. Dr. Galina Nikolova Avramova**,
participant in a competition for the academic position "Associate Professor" at Sofia
University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in professional field 2. 1. Philology (North American
literature – English), announced in the State Gazette No. 96/17.11.2023

The documents and scientific works provided by the only participant in the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" habilitation competition for the needs of the Faculty of Classical and New Philology, Department of English and American Studies meet the scientometric requirements under the law on the development of academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and its implementing regulations.

Galina Avramova's professional biography builds the image of a well-rounded scholar with serious interests in the history of North American literature and the teaching of English, fully matching the requirements of the competition. Her research work (articles, studies and participations in scientific projects and national and international conferences, including as an organizer) shows a serious development after acquiring the scientific degree "Doctor" and her appointment to the academic position of Chief Assistant. Her teaching practice includes lecture courses and seminars, some of which are: Canada – culture, society, politics; Multiculturalism in Canadian literature; Popular literature in North America in the late 20th century and early 21st century; practical English. It is also worth noting the fact that since 2003 she has been the editor-in-chief and founder of Vox Litterarum, a magazine for culture, communication and criticism.

In the current competition, chief assistant Galina Avramova participates with habilitation and 11 separate publications – articles and studies. They all highlight her enduring scientific interests: the crisis points of modernity; the dynamics of national/ethnic and global/world culture and identity; cultural legacies of postcolonialism; multiculturalism and ignored small communities in Canada; manifestations of contemporary racism; the immigrant cultural voice; intertextuality in the postmodern narrative; the palimpsest as a toolkit of postmodern narrative models; the translation of foreign literature as a cultural transfer and the challenges facing the translator of a literature still little known to the Bulgarian reader, such as Canadian literature; historiographical metafiction and literary-feminist issues.

The subject of a more detailed discussion in my review will be the habilitation work of the candidate, published under the thematic title *Images of War. American and Canadian novels about the Second World War* (UNWE, 2023). It cannot be denied that the topic of work sounds in unison both with the reality in which we live (near and more distant wars) and with the growing feeling, that the seemingly "local" wars are actually invisibly global, and the moods of society acquire eschatological overtones, without being the typical projection of any local affairs (the concept of the never-ending war can also be found on the pages of Avramova's monograph, derived from the novels "The Naked and the Dead" and "The English Patient").

The title points to the different reflection of World War II in literature, but also to the search for its universal image. I cannot help noting the spectacular beginning of the text with the recall of the shield of Achilles, representing the human cosmos, in which peacetime and wartime life are seemingly shared, but only at first glance: according to the quoted Pierre-Vidal Naquet, war is still more normal for the Greeks. The finding was rightly generalized to mankind in general, and the Iliad turned out, in addition to the first European literary epic, the first literary image of war in European literature. On this universal canvas, so to speak, are five significant 20th-century novels from American and Canadian literatures, reflecting from completely different perspectives, through completely different narrative techniques, and in a completely different aesthetic code, World War II: Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961); Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* (1969), William Wharton's *Midnight Retreat* (1982), Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992).

The choice of the specific novels is justified in the first place by their indisputable artistic value. The different time distance of their authors from the reflected events suggests a potential difference in their perception. In addition, the choice is also consistent with the fact that all novels are translated into Bulgarian, i.e. included in circulation in native culture, and at the same time have a world reception.

Obviously, it is not the differentiation, but the synthesis of the views of the five novelists that emerges as the greater challenge for the author. Its intention is to seek it through the universals: in the "total crisis" of man in times of war, giving as if "equal chances" for the study of the human psyche in depth; in the situational and forced transformation of the individual person into the "mass-man" and his positioning in a completely alien environment; in the discredited category "heroic". Universal are also the problems of identity, "perceived in all their complexity" as "fundamental to all the works considered" (we cannot help noticing Galina Avramova's favorite research issues), as well as

the problem of the Other, which may also be the mimicry of the Self: here the thought of Benjamin, who committed suicide during the Second World War, is recalled: "To be happy is to feel no fear when you meet yourself." (p. 41). As for the artistic space in novels, it is summed up for all five novels as "spaces of coercion"; areas inhabited by exiles; different parts of the world where people are "scattered" violently. All five books assess in the same way the "false gift" of war, perhaps most eloquently described as follows: "In every war there is a Trojan horse introduced, and men are ready to believe in it and become its victims." (p. 37).

The introductory chapter draws on a wealth of theoretical material (dozens of sources are cited) in order to outline as comprehensively as possible the problematic field of the war phenomenon. In the last part of this chapter, War – a Universal Theme of Literature, Laura Ashe and Ian Patterson's thesis on literature is cited as more capable of answering the "riddle" war than historiography (p. 27) and Steven Pinker notes the importance of literature, along with cinema and journalism, in shaping the image of war – to the point where the First World War is called a "literary war" (of course, this could also apply to World War II). Through examples from the five selected novels, Galina Avramova proves that literature can indeed be seen as an "institution for the production of knowledge" (quoting Michel Foucault) for war. Whether the reception of Remarque's novel is sufficient to substantiate the statement that "Dramatic messages cause true catharsis in readers insofar as they operate through the emotional effects of fear and compassion." (p. 29) We may ask ourselves whether Aristotle's catharsis is at all comparable to the profoundly influential images of war. Isn't that like comparing an ancient Greek tragedy to a horror?

If in the introduction we find the author's approaches to the topic, the specific observations on the selected novels unfold in the next four chapters.

It begins with the problematization of the state of the human in a crisis situation (chapter one, "The Slaughterhouse" – the war as a crisis event). It has long been proven that especially if the crisis situation is called "war", the limits of the human are strongly relativized. The five novels give different examples of transcending human and mental endurance, of "unused resources for resistance and survival" (p. 42); for a return to some atavistic and inherently cruel nature of man. In fact, other types of borders, especially national and local ones, which also define the opposition as "own-foreign," most often ignite wars. But the human body is also borderline. The wounded body of war victims is directly related to the loss of identity (in the next chapter of habilitation work, one of the parts is devoted specifically to the problem identity). When it comes to the Canadian novel, the

theme sounds particularly strong because of its association with the "famous Canadian question of identity" – according to the author "having a key status in Canadian literature and culture" (p. 51), to which Ontaji's novel "The English Patient" belongs. In this chapter is also the commentary on the dehumanization or machinization of people: "Fighting is the organization of thousands of man-machines..." (p. 56). War-carnage grinds bodies, but also souls (think about looting in the "Crushed Souls" section).

It is noteworthy that the literature reflecting the war is of the kind that asks the most and most dramatic questions (the monograph follows the same pattern of construction). The most dramatic question is undoubtedly "Why?" aimed at understanding the mad march (the metaphor belongs to the author) to death. In fact, a serious attempt has been made to systematize the images of death, presenting the most shocking grotesque and macabrian images of war. War changes the overall worldview of man, returning him to the original questions: "And who is my neighbor?", "And who is my enemy?", etc. All of these, of course, lead to the big question of self-knowledge (the part "Experience in self-realization").

Art is included here as an alternative to war. However, it is also threatened with destruction as part of its destructive regime. An interesting example of the antagonism between war and literature is given with "Catch-22" (the "password" T.S. Eliot, which none of the officers can adequately decipher).

Chapter three, The Army – Pathos, Hypocrisy, the Absurd, examines the interlocutory images of the army, its hierarchical structure called "the successful machine for the production of power and submission" (p. 91), "the absurd itself", focused on the title "Catch-22". The "hero" of war is also shown as one of the most hypocritical and false images of war – one of its "situationally rigged" (p. 99) images (the most vivid grotesque image is considered Billy Pilgrim, the character of Kurt Vonnegut).

I find very important the part "Language and Communication" of chapter three, dealing with the transformations of language in times of war – along with the loss of the meaningfulness of life, language also loses its meaningfulness and communicativeness, becoming an instrument of aggression and violence, of commands and orders, of control and manipulation.

In chapter four, called "Alternatives to Peaceful Life," the image of peaceful life is first considered as an alternative to the ugly face of war: overexposed beautiful and coveted, housed in the world of soldiers' memories, dreams and dreams. The other image of peaceful life, however, is its opposite, associated with "the dark side of bad memories of mental trauma, of betrayals and disappointments" (p. 118). As an object of dream and desire, the

image of the woman is not missed, although in the male notions according to Bourdieu, reminded by the author, it is an object of "domination and consumption". The characteristics of the female characters in these novels turn out to be much more diverse and complicated.

Chapter Five, which seeks images of war escapes, is called Ways of Salvation and Consolation. Desertion and captivity as a peculiar form of escape, fraternizing with the enemy, madness, simulations, alcohol are considered here; utopian dreams, reading, writing, singing; of course, and love as one of the strongest forms of existential salvation (here Unamuno would be especially relevant).

The last chapter, entitled "Consequences", is devoted to the images of war after its end, which do not always correspond to the truth and often find themselves ideologically censored or subjectively experienced: "When the real war ends, the war of images, of narratives, of interpretations begins." (p. 140). According to the author, here is the biggest clash between humanism and militarism.

American and Canadian novels about the Second World War were written with the deep conviction that the moralistic and damning pathos of literary works could contribute "to a deeper understanding of the human experience of aggression and suffering, of mercy and hope" (p. 144)

Conclusion: The intertextual network on the topic of war by Galina Nikolova Avramova is an interesting attempt to present its universal nature and its impact on man and the human through specific works. The cross-examples from the five books create a real problem field in which the current wars can also be considered.

With conviction in the contributory nature of her work, I propose to the honorable jury her election to the academic position of "Associate Professor".

14.03.2024

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