

R E V I E W

of the dissertation manuscript submitted for defense for awarding the academic title
of “Doctor of Philological Sciences” (Dr. Habil.)
Professional area 2.1. Philology (Theory of literature)
by Prof. AMELIA VESELINOVA LICHEVA, PhD

Topic: „СВЕТОВЕН ЛИ Е НОБЕЛ” (HOW WORLDLY IS NOBEL)

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The manuscript dissertation presented by prof. Amelia Licheva, PhD is an ambitious and wide-ranging scholarly undertaking which is a result of long years of research; its overarching goal is to construct and conceive of an idea of world literature which is different from those in circulation thus far and more attune to the current socio-political and cultural situation. The author approaches her task by critically analyzing several inter-related concepts, namely: world literature, literary canon, comparative literature and translation, each of them in their multifaceted range of meanings. It is pertinent to note from the onset an idiosyncratic feature of this work which bears the spirit of its author. To anyone familiar with the development of Amelia Licheva as a lecturer, scholar, literary critic, creative writer and publicist, the current text will appear as an expressive self-portrait. The work clearly reveals both her durable research interests in theory of literature and in comparative literature, more specifically in the topics of world literature and world literary prizes, among which the Nobel Prize merits primary focus, and her awe-inspiring ability to provide stable and confident orientation in the complex terrain of current literary processes that may baffle the majority of other researchers. In parallel, her work is revealing of the author’s enviable interpretative competence which skillfully blends professional reflection with a fine artistic sense of the literary text. This impressive repertoire of professional experience has been mobilized for the analysis of world literature the way it shapes in the present, an analysis which is aimed at crystallizing stable beacons for its systematic rationalization.

The dissertation is laid out in three core parts, a conclusion and an appendix. The first part, which is dedicated to metacritical concerns related to the idea of world literature is constructed following the logic of gradually widening contextual frames – presented first in the unavoidable perspective of historical diachronic, the concept “world literature” is rendered primarily through its links to current political and cultural tendencies. The next contextualizing procedures involve placing the concept within methodological searches and critical practices of comparative literature and post-colonial studies, as well as its reconceptualization with a view to the big literary prizes and awards that merit the designation of “world prizes”.

Logically, the second part, which focuses on the Nobel Prize for literature, is not only central to the structure of the work but is present throughout as a topic in development in the outline and fleshing out of the arguments in the other content cores of the text. As I have mentioned already, the problem is posited in the first part, the last chapter of which is entitled „Световната литература и наградите“ (World literature and prizes), where the Nobel prize merits special attention. The topic is renewed in the third part with the portrait of the current state of world literature which is offered here. It ends with the chapter „Световни нобелисти“ (World Nobelists), and then again in the appendix offered at the end there is a carefully laid out, systematically traced, factually backed in-depth analysis of separate cases, which offers an investigation into the unquenched Bulgarian longing for the prestigious prize. The part dedicated exclusively to the Nobel prize builds its argument through focusing on the criteria for the nomination and awarding of the prize, seen through their reformulations at different stages since the inception of the prize till the present day, through the contents of the Nobel speeches (especially with regard to the idea of world literature) and finally through the media and the market as factors of paramount influence, determining in various ways the life path of the prize.

The third part entitled „Днешната световна литература – светове, послания, прогнози“ (World literature today – worlds, messages, prospects) offers a personally constructed panorama of the current state of literature as revealed through the most representative achievements of the novel. The convincing argumentation of this genre choice, supplemented by the methodological stipulations governing the selection of authors

and works, serves as the basis for identifying leading tendencies manifested as key thematic emphases in the works under review, which in turn are explained as deriving from the dominant in the present theme of trauma both on the individual-personal plain and in its social/public aspects. Thereafter the focus shifts towards the figure of the author so as to present an image of world literature through the perspective of the “big players” in it – the mass world authors and the Nobel Prize laureates.

In its structural and conceptual entirety the work is a testimony to the impressive professionalism that has been demonstrated in these different and yet akin and closely related research fields – literary theory, comparative literature, history of literature and literary criticism. The end result is an unusually stimulating and productive overcoming of disciplinary boundaries. While comparative literature has a tendency to veer between two incompatible tendencies – on one hand, metatheoretical visions due to which comparative departments are the usual academic refuge for literary theorists and, on the other, the pragmatics of particular comparativist cases which does not presuppose categorical institutional identity, the dissertation of Amelia Licheva draws together these two tendencies in a convincing way. As a result from this strategic cooperation there arises the possibility for this vision of world literature which corresponds to the current political and cultural condition. In the work, the language has been liberated from the dictate of its translatological conceptual duality between an original and a translation so as to articulate in a functional way its potential to build worlds, while literature itself is identified as the high discourse which is current, reliably communicative, and open to the diversity of contemporary existence.

Besides the impressively rich contents and impressive expertise the work of Amelia Licheva is revealing of another important merit – when reading it one is provoked to become aware of new issues and possible paths of cross-fertilization and connection. Among the range of questions that occurred to me personally I would mention two which, if posed, could lead to radical consequences. One of them is generated by the widely-known stipulation that the legitimacy of the Nobel Prize as a world literary prize has been an object of constant contestation and by the symptomatic observation articulated in the dissertation in terms of the “arbitrariness of prizes” (p.115). Seen in its direct link to the

periodically erupting scandals surrounding a greater or a lesser or frankly second-rate literary prize, the skepticism with regard to literary competitions appears as a problem for the solution of which the analysis of the criteria for nomination and awarding or of the members and the competence of the respective jury boards is absolutely insufficient and unproductive. I am inclined to think that the very idea of competitiveness in the sphere of culture, within the context of modernity the fundamental characteristic of which is anti-traditionalism, acquires wildly problematic dimensions. Because competition/competitiveness is a cultural universal but a historically particularized one; it is born in the realm of traditionalist culture and valid only within its boundaries. This is the reason why in the present day and age every competition the results of which can be measured against objective and precise parameters is being contested. Taking into account this situation will test our widely shared habitual inclination of thinking and regulating cultural life in a competitive and contest-based mode but perhaps a dose of overcoming our inertia is a good thing.

The second question which just like the first one does not call for address and even less so for a resolution in the dissertation under discussion shaped as a result from the pertinently included attempt in the work to assess Bulgarian participation in the process of constructing the image of world literature with the help of the analytical reading of texts written mainly by Boyan Nichev, Tsvetan Stoyanov and Nikola Georgiev. The author has rightly selected scholarly endeavors which are representative for Bulgarian literary studies from the second half of the previous century and the beginning of the 21st century since they were undertaken in relative synchronicity with the core theoretical corpus studied and analyzed by her. In this respect and following this logic the choice not to include Ivan Shishmanov stands to reason, while at the same time he is the person with undoubtedly the biggest contribution in constructing the Bulgarian view of world literature and simultaneously the largest in scale and categorical Bulgarian presence in the field of comparative literary studies. Hence the big question is really why comparative literary studies in Bulgaria have continuously failed to respond adequately to such an explosive and mighty beginning that generated an incredible wealth of ideas. But these are topics for other dissertations.

Additionally, in terms of offering further food for thought and opening a different perspective, I would like to enter into a dialogue with some of the thesis statements in the dissertation such as, for example, deeming paradoxical the fact that irrespective of the genesis and inscription of world literature in the German context it (world literature) is much more important to the Anglophone thought (p. 7). I would rather view this phenomenon as logical since it elucidates a key difference between separate western cultures in their attitude to literature. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht convincingly explained, in countries where in the transition to modernity the decisive changes in social structures appeared as a result of revolutions or reforms based on universal human values literature is expected to propagate these values in the widest possible horizon of texts, without any specific national or historical limitations. At the opposite end, the leading tendency with countries which are constructed as reactions to national defeats and oppression is to use literature as a means by which a glorious national past is to be invented – as compensation for the lack of dignified present and as an impulse for national revival. Due to which such countries have a more pronounced interest towards texts from the national tradition that are capable of maintaining the sense of historical greatness. This is the situation in Germany but also, even if along more moderate lines, in France (after the defeat in the French-Prussian war) and in Italy, hence the topic of Weltliteratur cannot find fertile enough soil there. Unlike Britain and the US whose 19th century did not witness similar traumatic events and where the study of literature is not oriented towards a limited horizon of canonical texts but towards more general humanistic values; in those contexts the designation “world literature” is an essential and pertinent beacon.

I also regard as productive for further discussions the presumption of the turning point of September 11 as an age defining moment the way the historical vision of the dissertation is constructed. Without doubt, the events of this day shape it as one of those fateful defining moments after which the world suddenly becomes different. At the same time, its chronological positioning in the first year of the new millennium additionally valorizes its significance as a crucial boundary. Irrespective of this, however, it seems to me that it is worth testing other possibilities for identifying the transition between the centuries. Because, if terrorism can really be accepted as a certain identification marker for that which

is our contemporary, then we might wish to remind ourselves of the symptomatic accumulation of terrorist acts in the period between 1993 and 1995, the most memorable of which are the first explosion of the World Trade Center, the poison gas attack in Tokyo underground, Oklahoma city bombing and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Something else occurs to me as a good point for further discussions – the awareness that the powerful globalization processes which interact with the current world literature as it is conceived now and which are legitimately recruited as one of the conceptual fundamentals of the study are not without precedent and if the world had been global at least twice before, at least in one of the cases we have grounds to claim that there was also world literature then. To me personally, the opening of such scope for discussion is one of the most certain markers of the scholarly soundness of any research work.

I view the work on the whole in positive terms and my sporadic misgivings are mostly in relation to certain features of the text that are due to the evident resistance of the author to genre coercion and the genre conventions a dissertation should as a rule follow. This inclination, it seems to me, is posited with the very title which is more appropriate for a book, especially with a view to the familiarity that the deployed appellation Nobel presupposes (in Bulgarian). And even if we accept that such a title is appropriate for a dissertation because of the rhetorical effect contained in the question posed, one also sees as a deviation from normative expectations the lack of introduction the purpose of which is to articulate clearly the subject, aims and research tasks of the work. I would regard as insufficient the rather overgeneralized statements about the criteria which were followed so as to arrive at the selection of texts that are discussed in the third part. Without explanation and while there is a firmly stated intention of discussing novels only the commentary includes Stefan Hertmans' play "Antigone in Molenbeek". There is also a degree of disregard to academic conventions evident in the rather sparse "extended summary" presented for the procedure as it is customarily expected to articulate in a convincing manner the intentions and aspirations of the work as well as to state clearly the conclusions reached and the self-evaluation of the areas of contribution of the study. Such a decision entails a degree of risk which the author has decided to take, most probably in the firm conviction that the merits of the offered for review text have generated enough positive

leeway which can neutralize possible misgivings along such lines. And yet, to me, this remains a point of bafflement.

Irrespective of some of the noted above imperfections that can probably be found in any work that seeks such complex and multifaceted analyses, these cannot diminish its enviable scholarly achievements, and the dissertation of Amelia Licheva is first and foremost a convincing, significant and solid work. Therefore, I reiterate my overall positive evaluation of the work under review and gladly, with professional satisfaction, suggest to the esteemed board that prof. Amelia Licheva, PhD, be awarded the academic scholarly degree “doctor of philological sciences” (Dr. Habil.), professional area 2.1. Philology (Theory of literature).

30 April 2019

Prof. Dr. Habil. Kleo Protochristova