

Review

by Prof. DSc. Angel Valentinov Angelov

For the candidacy of Assistant Professor PhD Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova

In a competition for the academic position 'Associate Professor' in the professional field 2.1. Philology – Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia (Western European literature),

Published in Government Gazette, no. 105 from 11.12.2020

The presented by Assistant Professor PhD Kamelia Spassova documents meet the national requirements, which allows her to apply for the scientific position 'Associate Professor'.

Kamelia Spassova obtained a master's degree in literary studies in 2006 in the Faculty of Slavic Philology at Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'. In 2012, she defended her doctorate on the topic: 'The Event and the Example in the Order of Discourses on Literature. The Problem of the Exemplary Work'. K. Spassova is an Assistant between 2010 and 2013, and from 2013 until now – Assistant Professor at the Department of Theory of Literature, Faculty of Slavic Philology, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'.

The candidate is the author of many publications – books, studies and articles in which she examines problems in the area of Western literature. She has participated in national and international conferences and seminars, and is also an organizer of national and international forums. She is compiler and editor of scientific collections, one of which is published in Tokyo. K. Spassova has many participations in research projects, as a leader as well. She indicates a sufficient number of citations of her scientific papers. For two years, K. Spassova has been a lecturer in Bulgarian at the Slavic Institute of the University of Cologne. She has won two scientific awards. She is a member of the editorial board of the university journal 'Piron', as well as an editor of 'Literary Newspaper' issues.

For the position of Associate Professor, Assistant Professor PhD Kamelia Spassova applies with the monograph 'Modern mimesis. Self-reflection in literature', 332 p. The basic thesis of the author is, that "the mimesis is a self-reflexive category" and that self-reflection is a major feature of literature (in Europe) since the time of the Homeric poems. As examples, she gives the duplication of the author's figure in the blind singer Demodocus in 'Odyssey', and the forging of the shield of Achilles, which

operates as a poem in the poem. Homer, she concludes, is self-reflexive – he interprets himself. To justify her concept of self-reflection, Spassova uses several basic concepts. One of them is mimesis, which she defines as follows: mimesis refers to something outside the author – to another writing, author or external context; it refers at the same time to himself – to his own writing and his self-description (p. 10-11). The conclusion that mimesis is creative and not reproductive is essential, which I underline, because the presence of creativity is determinant also for the rest of the basic concepts in the book – realism, anomaly, paradigm, starting point. For K. Spassova the characteristic of ‘self-reference’ in terms of mimesis is opposed to “the views of authenticity and direct reference in the literature of the distant and recent past”, to “the new views of the authentic in art”, to the establishment of “naive and natural, native and real” (p. 11). If “authentic in art” means for Spassova insistence on the ‘natural’ rights, which prohibit artists from creating works relating to certain social and ethnic groups when they do not belong to them, she does not specify, nor does she cite examples of concepts defending the “naive and the natural”. Although the author finds it pleasant to aim (p. 11) or to shoot a bow cognitively, the book is not polemical; it establishes a certain position and states preferences, which, I think, has contributed to the quality of the presentation.

Spassova defines her approach as “compiling historical paradigms by anomaly” (p. 13). And indeed it explores self-reflection in different historical environments through “anomalous paradigms, each of which is justified by a different principle” (p. 13). Paradigm is also a basic concept in her habilitation work. “The scattered cases in the ‘Modern mimesis’ collect fragments of historical paradigm of self-reflection in European literature” (p. 17). Two of those cases K. Spassova represents by related story about the library in Alexandria and in Pergamum, in which the activities of librarians embodies opposing relation towards knowledge. Spassova defines the results of this activity as a paradigm of analogy and a paradigm of anomaly.

The second most important topic in the monograph is what the cognitive attitude of the philologist is. Therefore, as an introduction to the section on libraries, she gives a brief reflection on the professional activity of the philologist. He, she believes, “handles heterogeneous orders” (p. 20). K. Spassova convincingly indicates how this ‘handling’ practically works towards the end of the book in a “philological note” to ‘unheimlich’.

The purpose of the first chapter is to establish “the structural and historical differences between paradigms by analogy and paradigms by anomaly”. The conclusion of the author is: “Analogy is based on the common universal law, while anomaly – on historical change. By means of their optics light is shed on the differences between language and speech, grammar and stylistics, pattern and living speech, immutability and variability, proportionality and disproportion” (p. 28).

In the philological activities, K. Spassova includes everything that belongs to the library activity as well. I wonder however if the history of creation and improvement of libraries may be fully and unconditionally related to philology? I mean the cataloguing of scrolls and books, and the way both libraries are organized. Part of the account about the libraries is not related to the main theme of the book, but in the course of the presentation some other stories appear or parts of concepts from which the author draws theoretical conclusions that are directly related to the main theme of the mimesis. For example: “Quintilian’s argument about the relationship between analogy and example sheds light on one of the leading lines in this book: ‘analogy is not based on the rule (ratio), but on the example (exemplum)’” (p. 39). Or the story of Dionysius Halikarnaski about the farmer who gave his wife to look at beautiful pictures in order to give birth to beautiful children, a story, from which Spassova makes a conclusion about the creative nature of mimesis, which, as already mentioned, is the main thesis of her work (p. 47).

In addition to concepts and literary works, K. Spassova interprets images that support her main thesis of self-reflection, this time in fine arts. The images are provided with almost all the data, which is essential; this requires time and effort. However, there is a lack of data on the dimensions, so that we could imagine to some extent from what distance the images had to be perceived and for what space they were intended to exert their impact – code page, hall size, staircase, etc. The visual is not an entertaining illustration, but a material on which Spassova reflects, especially in the part dedicated to emblems. The enthusiastic story of them is similar to that of libraries. The part ‘Mysterious figures of festina lente: if something goes well, it happens quickly’ is an introduction to the main part, dedicated to the concepts of figure and kairos. Thus, the author establishes a connection between the emblems and her main thesis about mimesis. But this introductory part has value in itself – it tells about emblems and heraldry, about presented in them opposite states of ways in which time is experienced; indirectly they are states of human life. The discussion on

emblems is part of the big topic of the relationship between word and image. I underline her interpretation of 'Hypnerotomachia Poliphili', 1499.

A basic concept in the book is also 'starting point'. K. Spassova discusses its importance and function in the concept of Erich Auerbach about history, and pays much attention to the relation between 'starting point' and 'figure'. Interpreting the two concepts in Auerbach, Spassova assimilates them for her own concept and applies them in her analyses of literary works and historical situations. To 'starting point' and figure are added two more concepts – kairos and chronos; revealing links between them and their correlation in a common field allows her to reach original interpretations of concepts and works, mostly from Antiquity. With reason and ingenuity Spassova correlates 'figure' and 'mimesis', through which she offers her own interpretation of the repeatedly discussed fundamental work of Erich Auerbach 'Mimesis'. The interpretation of 'Mimesis' contributes to the substantiation of Spassova's main idea of the self-reflexivity in literature. Another primary effort of hers is to link mimesis, figure and history, and she offers convincing and numerous examples in support of this relationship. In the same chapter, K. Spassova correlates the figurative interpretation with the concept of realism, focusing on the study 'Figure' and the chapter 'Farinata and Cavalcante' (which she calls an essay?) in 'Mimesis' by E. Auerbach. I think that the 1946 article 'Figurative Texts Illustrating Certain Passages of Dante's *Commedia*' would be also useful here.

I note as a dignity of her work also the analysis of three contemporary Bulgarian philosophical formulations (of B. Mantchev, D. Tenev, Kr. Enchev) of the concept 'figure', which K. Spassova traces in their relation to literature.

Concepts of realism are the main subject of her study in Chapter Four. One of them is directly related to the relationship between power, ideology and humanitarian knowledge in Bulgaria in the 1950s and 1960s – this is the dispute over realism between Todor Pavlov and Isaak Passy. The two positions are not equipollent because Pavlov has more political power than Passy does. In this dispute, two understandings about literature and philosophy in the twentieth century are manifested, declaring themselves Marxist. Spassova interprets the differences in the two concepts as part of a broader debate on realism, in which she sees D. Lukacs, B. Brecht and T. Adorno as participants. In presenting the dispute over realism, conducted in different places, K. Spassova gives the right to those arguments that consider realism or mimesis as secondary, as self-reflexive.

The last chapter examines the relation of the concepts 'mimesis' and 'unheimlich' in their relation to the anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic tendencies in the appearance of those robots that will coexist with man in his everyday world. Spassova traces the arguments of the creators of robots in Japan since the early 1970s to develop robots with different external appearance, which is consistent with their impact on the minds of people. She finds a connection between the problem of robots and the similar one – the automata in literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; she also finds an additional connection with some elements of Freud's psychoanalysis. This chapter is a very good example of how notions can be translated and an understanding achieved between concepts created in different cultures and in different historical contexts.

I would like to emphasize in particular the semantic analysis in the 'philological note' (author's definition), 'Translation Concerns about unheimlich' placed as a link between IV and V chapters. The note shows in practice what is the essence of a careful and complex attitude towards meanings and shades of meaning in the use of language, in this case – in the translation of a difficult term. However, one thing is the terminological use, another is the use of 'unheimlich' in the living language, where it has acquired a meaning similar to the meaning of 'great' or 'terrible' in the Bulgarian language. We can say 'terribly happy'. And also: "Ich habe mich unheimlich gefreut". I think it is preferable, when translating, to keep the connection between the term and the uses in living language. Translating 'unheimlich' with 'degenerate' is far from a similar connection.

It would have been useful for the book, but also for the readers, if the author made a conclusion or conclusions at the end. Conclusions suitable to be divided into a separate section are found, but scattered, in the text. "The self-reflexive position, in which the mimetic is reflexive, mediated and distant, I call modern – it is not inherent in a certain historical period, but is typological" (p. 67).

Clarifications

K. Spassova claims that "the definition of modern only emphasizes its [of the mimesis] reversible nature to bend inwards and reflect on itself". And the use of the type of imagery as a "reversible nature that folds inward" is found elsewhere in the book and does not contribute to the understanding of the author's idea. The creation of words and combinations such as "preizobretyavane, preizmislyane, zapretyavat,

nadskachane na tvorba, izot podobni sluchai, izot samata tekstura” or an excess of terminologization – “likeness is a microstructure, which establishes a complex” also makes it difficult to understand. Attribution is preferred. Attribution – the verbal noun deriving from the verb (attribuo) and not from the participle (attributus); this is because of philology.

Page 223: “Passy opposes the work of Tsvetkov ‘Through the History of the Aesthetic Thought in Bulgaria. Essays’” The author’s last name is Tsenkov, and not Tsvetkov. The book, published in 1964, is an evidence of how Todor Pavlov’s theory of art works when applied to historical material by a student of his.

Page 82: “Auerbach points out as mature philologists E. R. Curtius, E. Panofsky, Leo Spitzer.” It is not about Panofsky, but about Karl Vossler, older by a generation than Curtius, Spitzer and Auerbach.

Whether the comparison between the concepts of Auerbach and Panofsky is specific only for the two of them or it can be applied to the whole generation of German humanity scholars to which they belong?

In Spassova’s conception of mimesis, the effect of reality, social and natural, is underestimated, while the characteristic ‘self-reflection’ is reinforced.

I think that the close scientific context of the Passy – Pavlov dispute are the discussions about realism, about socialist realism, and about the cognitive nature of art, which took place in the Soviet Union and in Bulgaria after 1956. Reflection is a basic concept in these discussions, but the question is what is meant by reflection. These discussions are also about what mimesis is.

Isaac Passy, in K. Spassova’s opinion, maintains a conscious policy to introduce and to translate in Bulgarian Freud, Bergson and Nietzsche, which is another point of confrontation with T. Pavlov (p. 217). Is it really possible to assign this statement to the early 1960s?

The candidate has studied a significant in volume and genre-diverse material to substantiate the idea of self-reflection of literature. This material covers works on philosophy, rhetoric, history of literature and art. Her interest is focused primarily on Greek and Roman Antiquity, among the works of this era she moves with confidence. Literary and pictorial works from the Late Western European Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance are added to the antique ones. Internal connections are drawn between the separate parts, which unite the content of the otherwise rather different

concepts, literary and pictorial works, which she discusses. As a result of her interpretations, K. Spassova reaches original conclusions. In many cases the author puts in brackets the concept in the original language, incl. in Japanese; it is an effort that must also be appreciated as part of the desired philology of world literature.

K. Spassova was driven by a noticeable curiosity, which added new concepts and works to a perhaps more foreseeable original idea. Subsequently, the addition was conceived as “a sharp break and a radical change in the historical scene” (p. 18). The advantage is that the approach is tested on various material, while the disadvantage is the inevitable sketching of part of the topics, because the interruption and change of the scene might be a reluctance to deepen only in the material of one era or in just a few concepts.

The report on the contributions corresponds to the contributions in the habilitation work. To the ones indicated by the candidate I add: the presence of self-reflection in the images she interprets.

The possible disagreements, I could have, cannot however be an obstacle to judge that the scientific work “Modern Mimesis. Self-reflection in Literature” is an achievement for the Bulgarian humanities.

With full conviction, I will vote Assistant Professor PhD Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova to occupy the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field 2.1. Philology – Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia (Western European Literature).

20.03.2021

Angel Valentinov Angelov