

OPINION

by Associate Professor **Dr. Darin Voinov Tenev**, University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski”

regarding the Associate Professor habilitation procedure at the University of Sofia
in Area of Higher Education 2.1. Philology (Theory of Literature)
announced in *Darzhaven vestnik*, No. 78/ August 21, 2020

Maria Kalinova Baitosheva is the only candidate in the Associate Professor habilitation procedure in Area of Higher Education 2.1. Philology (Theory of Literature) announced by University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski” in *Darzhaven vestnik*, No. 78/ August, 2020. The candidate has submitted for the procedure 6 scholarly publications, one of which is a monograph, and the other five are scholarly articles. Her submitted publications and her scholarly and educational academic work meet the legal requirements for the position of Associate Professor at University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

Maria Kalinova teaches Theory of literature at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She has participated in numerous conferences, national and international, and in the last five years alone there have been fourteen. She is an editor of *Literaturen vestnik*, a member of the editorial team of literary theory essay collections of the Faculty of Slavic Philology, compiler of two scientific collections; she has participated in various projects and is the author of over fifty publications, independently and in co-authorship, in scientific periodicals and scientific collections. Organizer of the interdisciplinary seminar "Literature and Psychoanalysis", whose popularity among students, teachers and people outside the academy continues to grow. She has prepared various lecture courses independently and in cooperation with others. Fellow of the Centre for Advanced Study, Sofia.

Even on the basis of what has been said so far, I can say that Maria Kalinova meets the formal requirements of the habilitation procedure. I also have personal impressions of her, due to our yearlong collaboration, not only because she leads the seminars on literary theory, where I am a lecturer, but also because we have prepared panels for conferences, seminars, various academic and literary events. I have had the opportunity to follow her participation in scientific forums, to read her articles, to witness her skilful leadership of students and her productive discussions with colleagues.

In her teaching activity, the candidate has shown the ability to present the strict literary theoretical issues in a manner accessible to students and yet without taking away from the complexity of the material taught, she guides the students in the labyrinths of literary theoretical thought, and of specific theories and concepts; but at the same time she has demonstrated in her own courses the ability to familiarize students with interdisciplinary approaches, thinking on the borderline where literary studies, psychoanalysis, the theory of ideology, linguistics cooperate productively. In this regard, her course on disagreement ("Logic of Disagreement in Language and Literature"), part of which I had the chance to attend, was particularly indicative. In this lecture course an innovative re-reading of classical texts by Saussure, Freud, Bakhtin, etc., helped create a new concept of disagreement in literature, combining literary studies, political theory, psychoanalysis, contemporary philosophy, linguistics, and new perspectives on works such as Melville's "Billy Budd" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener".

In the materials provided for the procedure and most visibly in the monograph *Exotopia* Maria Kalinova develops a problematic that has occupied her for nearly ten years and which has been developed here in the form of a conceptual reconstruction of a failed conversation between Bakhtin's ideas and psychoanalysis, in particular the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, with which she accomplishes something that Deyan Deyanov defines as 'maieutics of what didn't happen'. Meeting Bakhtin's and Lacanian conceptions of discourse and the particular setting outside that discourse draws on and suggests, she outlines one of the most curious problematizations of the inside-outside relationship, different from those introduced by deconstruction. This helps her to describe the special place of literature, but also to analyze what is happening with literature today, and thus – what is happening with literary theory, and with the humanities in general.

There are at least four threads that Maria Kalinova's approach follows in their intertwining. First and most important is the conceptual-theoretical thread, focused on the specific refraction constituted by language, which leads to the overcoming of the inside/ outside dichotomy, allowing the emergence of an inner, intimate, immanent exteriority. This calls into question the limits of individual speech, of the individual work, of the human individual – all of them are traversed and constituted by an irreducible otherness. Both culture and subjectivity, in this perspective, are fundamentally external, an exteriority without an interior, and this allows them to be charged with resistance potential, but – at the same time – to be fragile and manipulated. Such a view necessitates a rethinking of concepts such as context and translation, and the book daringly offers it. The context, for example, defined on the basis of Bakhtin's "krugozor", is intersected by other people's views and perspectives and in this sense embodies

points of view that are subjective and in which something remains inaccessible, making the context incomplete, non-whole, and, at the same time, opening it to other contexts. The individual subjects in a context make this context multiple, always refracted, always settling on the edge of a dialogic angle. However, the absence and the elusive object of the gaze, precisely insofar as they are subjective, are related to the way in which the subject is constituted through language – which means that an invisible linguistic dimension can be found in the visual perspective. Behind each context there is an "invisible montage of discourses" that are themselves invisible (Exotopia, p. 56). This particular perspectivization of the context, which is at the same time its subjectivization, is a theoretical gesture that sheds light on what is common to the subject, the text and the context, and demonstrates how a work can be both a text and a context. Understood in this way, the context turns out to be incommensurable both with other contexts and with itself, hence probably the peculiar, so to speak, intransitive use of the word "incommensurability" in the book. "Incommensurability" is often used without specifying the incommensurability of what (incommensurability of context, fiction, literary theory) and in this seemingly deliberate fold created in language, Kalinova's discourse shows what it says – the immanent exteriority as internal refraction and opening, as insertion of in-between-ness and lack so that no subject and no work coincides with itself, no context is sufficient and fully accessible or visible.

The same theoretical thread leads to a rethinking of the concepts of the obvious (and therefore of the "obvious context"), ideologeme (understood as both consolidating and jolting the self-evident), author and autotextuality.

In the perspective of the first thread, names like those of Bakhtin, Lacan, Laplanche are just a tool, partners in a conversation, which helps the candidate to articulate her concept. But the second thread that runs through the book is the thread of making them confront each other, and it has its own merits. Thinking in dialogue with Bakhtin and psychoanalysis, Maria Kalinova makes them meet each other and stages what I called above with Deyanov's expression "the maieutics of what didn't happen", showing the theoretical similarities and proximity between incommensurably different theories and thus tells us something about the history of the humanities in the twentieth century, whose promises are not only in what is written, but also in the spaces between the texts written by different authors. By placing her own research in an in-between space, Kalinova turns her articles and books into a witness to the in-between-ness she speaks of.

With regards to this second thread, I wonder whether it would not be pertinent in the reconstruction of the encounters that didn't happen to pay more attention to the internal

development of the thought of the individual authors, which had its course and changed over time. I think it would be extremely interesting to contextualize, for example, theoretical positions taken by Lacan from specific periods of his work (say the "ex-sistence" of the 1956 "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", the extimity of the 1960, etc.), if such contextualization is based on Maria Kalinova's own redefinition of "context", showing how these positions already expect the late Lacan just to the extent to which his thought deviates from the earlier meaning of these concepts.

The third thread that *Exotopia* and the articles weave is focused on the history of literary theory in the East and the West, with an emphasis on what has happened and is still happening in Bulgarian theory. Miroslav Yanakiev, Georgi Gerdjikov, Nikola Georgiev, Radosvet Kolarov, Miglena Nikolchina, Galin Tihanov are just some of the names that appear in this thread. Undoubtedly, the history of the theory in Bulgaria is yet to be written, but what the candidate has done is an important step in this direction. References in footnotes are often a delicate way to point to this thread, when developing it in the main text would upset the balance and shift the emphasis.

Precisely because I find in her work such a thread, I think it would have been even better if the candidate had done more to contextualize her own work on Bakhtin in the Bulgarian academia. The history of Bakhtin's reception in Bulgaria is certainly not central to Maria Kalinova's theoretical project, but it would have helped to highlight her own place, and aside from the purely historical aspect, what researchers like Atanas Buchkov have done is not unrelated to her conception.

The fourth thread is the thread of actuality. All articles submitted for the procedure, all chapters of the book, but also the vast majority of the candidate's publications in and outside the field of literary theory, which were not submitted for this procedure, address current issues and problems. They do this more or less explicitly, most obviously in places like the second chapter of the book, where the current situation of literature and theory is discussed, a situation where while a market logic replaces critical thinking with expert opinions and literature survives only as an entertainment industry, the possibility of exotopy, of that immanent distance through which we remain open to the other and to incommensurability, is slowly being destroyed. Even when this thread is not brought to the fore, it is present in the very choice of topics and questions. I will give but an example with the choice of the subject of disagreement and denial.

Maria Kalinova's work makes promises that it keeps. And the stake of these promises is both the future of literary theory and the connection of theory to the greater questions of the human being and the world today.

In conclusion I want to say on the basis of the above that I believe that the scholarly and teaching activity of Maria Kalinova Baitosheva is of a very high academic level and meets all the requirements for a habilitation. I will vote in her favor in the Habilitation jury.

Assoc. prof., Dr. Darin Voynov Tenev

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Sofia