

REVIEW

Of the application of Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova for the academic position of 'Associate Professor' at the University of Sofia "St. Kl. Ohridski" in professional field 2.1 Philology (History of Literature)

By Professor Miglena Nikolchina, PhD

Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova is the author of numerous publications in scientific journals and book collections and of three monographs, one of which is in co-authorship. 20 of the articles and book chapters have been submitted for the present promotion, as well as the monograph *Modern Mimesis: Self-reflexivity in Literature* (Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2021).

Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova is Senior Assistant Professor at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", where she was previously Assistant Professor and part-time lecturer. In 2012 she defended a PhD degree at SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" with a thesis on *Event and Example in Literary Discourses: The Problem of the Exemplary Work*. She is a member of the Faculty of Slavic Philology Council and an editor at the cultural weekly *Literaturen Vestnik*.

Kamelia Spassova teaches courses at the SU "Sv. Kliment Ohridski" and PU "Paisii Hilendarski". She was guest-professor at the Slavistic Institute in Cologne University. Her productivity in both teaching and research is immense: she has been part of multiple research projects on University, national and European levels. She has taken part in numerous scientific forums and conferences; she has edited a significant number of artistic and academic publications and has been publishing in the cultural press on a regular basis. Her activities include a series of interdisciplinary seminars leading to an outstanding publication record, including the monograph co-authored with Vasil Vidinsky and Maria Kalinova *Chaos and Disorder. The Contingent of Language, Literature and Philosophy*, (Sofia, 2018).

The energy, dedication, and creativity which Spassova invests in her work is remarkable. She exerts a charismatic impact on students: it is difficult to overestimate her role in inspiring generations of philologists. Among her numerous publications in recent years, a number have been in significant international journals. In what follows I will focus on Spassova's habilitation work, the monography *Modern Mimesis: Self-reflexivity in Literature*. This book to a large extent incorporates Spassova's post-doctoral publications, systematizing and integrating their results. In many ways it is a continuation of her earlier work and of her first book *Event and Example*, deepening and making more visible her earlier theoretical preoccupations. I emphasize this connection, since one of Spassova's present achievements is the powerful justification that the present book provides for various aspects of her earlier work which would sometimes provoke objections due to perceived heterogeneities, anachronisms, and farfetched juxtapositions. In *Modern Mimesis* these features have demonstrated their relevance largely as a result of the range and depth with which they have been deployed.

The scope of the book is impressive: it takes us from the libraries of Alexandria to contemporary debates involving artificial intelligence and transhumanism. A review would inevitably have to limit itself to only certain aspects of this unfolding which, in fact, works as a sequence of paradigmatic re-coding of the study's central concern as stated in the title: modern mimesis as self-reflexivity, where 'modern' is to be understood as a typological rather than a temporal category:

"I call 'modern' the self-reflexive position, in which the mimetic is reflexive, mediated, and detached: it is not pertaining to a certain historical period, but typological." (p. 67)

This typological invariant, however, turns out to be a series generating new codes and irreducible differences. It produces a colorful, dynamic, delicious, lavishly diverse cosmos, a cosmos created through speaking with words about words (to paraphrase from memory an early poem by Albena Hranova) – through constantly giving an account of how it gives an account. Mimetic in its procedure redoubling what has been said and protean in so far as there is always yet another thing that someone has said, Spassova's study is self-reflexive and reduplicating like the object it scrutinizes. And it is thus it generates a world, in which ships sail in so far as they carry loads of manuscripts; imperial passions find expression in the gift of libraries rather than territories; civilizational and political cataclysms manifest themselves as the relocation from one reading room to another (for example, Auerbach's exile in Istanbul which gives him access to the library of the Dominican monastery "San Pietro") and from one material carrier (for example, papyrus) to another (parchment). Along this trajectory, Kamelia Spassova unfolds her discussion from Homer to her Bulgarian contemporaries, from the ancient scholia to modern Japan, from Odysseus to the robot. This movement is not subjected to a chronological or spatial ordering: it follows the logic defined by Spassova as re-conceptualization, and creates conceptual nodes, set up by means of horizontal and vertical, temporal and spatial auto-reflexive reduplications. Like the crab's pincers redoubling the butterfly's wings in the delightful section dealing with the motto *festina lente* (or the dolphin woven around the anchor), this approach might very well be deduced from a theoretician like Luce Irigaray. But I won't follow this thread here.

One of the many landmarks that Spassova has provided for navigating the currents in her book (which is, in a sense, a book of landmarks) states that,

"Quintilian's argument for the relationship between analogy and example sheds light on one of the guiding principles in this book: analogy does not 'fall from the sky', it does not step on a rule (*ratio*), but on an example (*exemplum*).“ (p. 39)

However, the example itself seems always to step on an example. Before there is an example, there is ... an example. In other words, when Spassova discusses Dante and the self-reflexive nature of his heroine Francesca, she does so through Auerbach; when she tackles Hoffmann's "The Sandman," "The Sandman" has already passed through the prism of Freud and Jentsch. With dual coding, which will acquire its theoretical articulation through Spassova's discussion of Lotman, but which works as the methodology of modern mimesis from the very beginning of the book, materiality – even the problematic materiality of a literary work – is incessantly annihilated in order to be produced precisely and only as code. This comprises one of the unproblematized connections of Spassova's study with the contemporary context of increasing virtualization; however, this connection is happily inhabiting the reading rooms of the grammarians, scholiasts, and rhetoricians of antiquity.

In sum, the manifesto of a return to philology, which Spassova's book proposes, which inverts Nietzsche's inversion from philology to philosophy and works as an inversion of philosophical queries into philological metempsychosis, goes beyond the constituting of literary history as "*literary history in paradigms*" (p.50). Spassova's approach certainly does this, too. Literary history is proffered in paradigms; the very contents of *Modern Mimesis* illustrates this paradigmatic ordering of the syntagmatic unfolding of history. Each chapter – if we resort to another of Spassova's pairings - is both *chronos* and *kairos*, a temporal sequence and an epiphanic exit from time. Ultimately, Spassova's study exemplifies the excess which goes beyond the database and the algorithmization of the humanities in the face of and through the very availability of the algorithm as tool. The wide arc from the library of

Alexandria to the mimetic valley of robotics turns out to be subtended by the unpredictable extravaganza of novelty born out of "anomalies and anomalies, transforming every attempt at ordering into an endless series of re-ordering" (56).

In the series of re-ordering, Kamelia Spassova has included an important episode in the history of Bulgarian aesthetic thought, involving the clash over the "theory of reflection" between Todor Pavlov and Isaac Pasi. Significant in terms of its theoretical and political stakes, this episode also marks the breakthrough that *Modern Mimesis* has accomplished in a zone heavily ideologized during the time of socialism, and consequently heavily tabooed. This is one of the points where the study not only suggests a series of re-orderings, but also opens up future series in which the specific Bulgarian case is the gateway to new re-conceptualizations.

Conclusion

The documents and materials submitted by Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova meet all the requirements for this promotion. The applicant has presented publications of exceptional quality. Her work contributes significantly to the field of literary studies and has received considerable response in the work of other scholars. The scientific and teaching qualifications of Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova are beyond doubt. I give my positive assessment and strongly recommend to the Scientific Jury to promote Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova to the academic position "Associate Professor" at the University of Sofia in the field 2.1. Philology (History of Literature).

12. 04. 2021 г.

Reviewer:

Professor Miglena Nikolchina, PhD