

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Nadezhda Stoyanova, Ph.D.,

member of a scientific jury for the evaluation of a habilitation thesis

DRAMATURGY OF LEAVING. Anton Chekhov – Leo Tolstoy – Maxim Gorky

and the End of Nineteenth-Century Russian Drama. The thesis was proposed for a public defense for conferring the scientific degree “Doctor habilitatus” in professional direction 2.1.

Philology (Russian literature – Russian literature of the 19th century)

Prof. Lyudmil Dimitrov’s habilitation thesis *Dramaturgy of Leaving. Anton Chekhov – Leo Tolstoy – Maxim Gorky and the End of Nineteenth-Century Russian Drama* was discussed and proposed for a public defense by the Department of Russian Literature at the Faculty of Slavic Studies, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, at a meeting held on July 4, 2024.

The habilitation thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography with a total volume of 720 computer pages. The candidate has submitted 11 more articles on the topic of the thesis, published in the period 2008–2024 and presenting his long-lasting and purposeful work on the matter.

In the beginning, one of the great merits of the study has to be outlined – the ability to summarize the observations not simply in theses, drawing the profile of the certain cultural-historical time, but also to synthesize them in sustainable metaphors that provide a key for reading both literary plots and compositional characteristics of single texts or text corpora, as well as literary matrices in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, but also of socio-cultural trends unfolding at least until the middle (and even after) of the same turbulent and disturbed century in various European countries. Such is the nature of the metaphor *leaving* from the title of the study. The specificity of the interpretation is that the author frees this metaphor from the utopian prospective or nostalgically retrospective attitudes for the beginning of the century in order to focus on the problem of the “recapitulation” (p. 4) of the previous century. It can be said that it is a literary picture that presents a system with decreasing entropy, a system in which can be observed the processes of scattering, firstly, through the leaving of the characters, and subsequently through the “deconstruction” of space (p. 38) as a fictional reality of the literary work itself, as well as a certain socio-cultural model. The metaphor of *leaving* is studied through

Chekhov's, Tolstoy's and Gorky's intense dialogue and self-reflection in their personal relationship and in their dramaturgy in a period of 10 years before the end of the "Golden Age" of Russian literature – from 1895 to 1904. However, the main focus is four of Chekhov's plays – "The Seagull", "Uncle Vanya", "Three Sisters" and "The Cherry Orchard".

The habilitation thesis methodology is complex, and it includes poetic, semiotic and hermeneutic concepts (p. 6). The literary-historical study is exemplary with the depth, comprehensiveness and the lines elaborated. Despite the expectations, the thesis is not based on a chronological sequence, but rather on the internal diversity and unexpected connections, which characterize each border period and its literary reflection. In the first and second chapters, the thesis begins as a classic study with a positivist punctuality towards the literary fact. The research is based on documentary evidence, autobiographical notes, diaries, memoirs, letters, etc. The reader can notice the erudite interpretation of the material by the skillfully crossed levels of the literary works, genre boundaries, discourses, lines between fiction and non-fiction. Therefore, a complete, multi-layered and very modern research plot is accomplished, and it presents not only the literary but also the socio-cultural picture of the late 19th century. What is more, it can be noticed that inductive principle is often used and this way, through particular facts, figures and images, some interpretations elaborate and grow into complete research miniatures (see, e.g., p. 598, etc.)

The first and second chapters of the monographic study – entitled "The Path to the Other" and "Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky: Who is Who for the Other Two?" – deal with the main aspects in the work of the authors, trace the personal and independent formation of each of them, before their meeting, pay attention to the complexity of their creative contacts (never growing into overly friendly ones, as the Prof. Lyudmil Dimitrov mentions – p. 114). However, the aim of the study is not to examine the biographies of the three writers or to reconstruct their personal stories. The research work is based on the aim to comprehend the ability of their individual creative consciousness, formed in its specific literary context, to reveal through the genre, the composition, the discourse of the work its literary self-reflection and thus to present not only the personal, but also the generational and cultural-historical metamorphoses of the end of the century. Chekhov's figure and role stands out – the one who avoided Tolstoy's influence, but attracted Tolstoy in his turn, and subsequently Gorky to his own ideas.

The third chapter is the last and widest one – "The Permeable Surface of Chekhov's Dramaturgy" – and it is focused on the tense dialogue between the plays by the three authors.

Emphasis is placed upon the cyclical compositional structure of “Seagull”, “Uncle Vanya”, “Three Sisters” and “The Cherry Orchard”, in order to see the specific way in which this cycle – through various “slots”: thematic, compositional, character, figurative – integrate / incorporate in the plays “The Living Corpse” by Tolstoy and “The Lower Depths” by Gorky. In Chekhov’s dramas, the “meta-poetic” is sought (see p. 272), which, however, goes beyond the limits of the autotextual references through the comparison with the other two works and the reflexive attitudes of their authors towards Chekhov’s innovations. This way the meta-literary function of the plays turns out to be unifying for the entire study and its large literary and cultural-historical plot; a plot reaching its highest point in the meta-literary potential of “The Cherry Orchard”, in which, as Prof. Lyudmil Dimitrov argues, Chekhov parodied the Tolstoy’s and Gorky’s remarks on his works (see p. 384). The clash of worldview and literary concepts in Tolstoy’s play can be noticed in his insistence on the moral and religious causes of art, and in Gorky’s play and gestures – in the “cited situations” (p. 466) and later in his simpler social criticisms. However, all these reactions undoubtedly refer to the ideas of the uneventful apocalypticism and cultural recapitulation, that had already been set in Chekhov’s plays. Some of the most interesting pages of the monograph are devoted to the authors’ play with the others by turning them into prototype characters. These characters are not biographical figures, but cultural figures, representing the consciously embedded meta-literary ideas of the plays. Thus, through the work on the literary details and on their contextual potential, the theses unfold progressively and build a comprehensive scholar work that has conceptual and contextual potential to become a basis of subsequent studies both in the field of Russian studies and, I dare say, in the field of Bulgarian studies.

In this aspect, I would like to outline a few topics. First, I will refer again to the problem of *leaving* set in the title. Prof. Lyudmil Dimitrov argues that this issue is not unknown, although it has not been fully studied in Russian literary studies until now (p. 32). For Bulgarian literary studies, however, this is a completely unstudied topic, which has the potential to shed light and make us rethink the decadent, but also existentialist concepts in Bulgarian literature – in drama and in other genres of the 1940s, and after that – in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s with the specific of their literary interpretation.

Secondly, I would like to highlight the issue of the *intellectual* as significant for the Bulgarian context and for the contemporary debates on Bulgarian cultural history. Prof. Lyudmil Dimitrov’s presents a typology of the figure of the intellectual, which in the same specifics –

due to clear historical and social circumstances – we cannot find in Bulgaria. However, only apparently this type of complex relationships, having such wide-ranging literary results, could hardly be recognized in Bulgarian literature. In fact, the dynamics of influences and collisions in the dramaturgical dialogues names and summarizes the crisis of the intellectual, which developed first in Russia at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and after that in Western Europe and Bulgaria. The emphasis on the exchange of identities was the foundation on which the intellectual history of that century in Bulgaria after 1912–1914 and especially in the years after 1944 was built.

And finally, the monograph focuses on the innovations of the Moscow Art Theater at the beginning of the century and their ambiguous perception by the Russian cultural public. Therefore, I will remind you that when the Moscow Art Theater toured Bulgaria in 1920–1921, the Russian stage interpretations also became a subject of a serious discussion, which provoked some of the most tickling reactions and resulted in key for the debate on interwar Bulgarian modernism articles and essays by Geo Milev, Alexander Balabanov, Chavdar Mutafov and others. I would say that Prof. Dimitrov's research lays the foundation for this important Bulgarian debate in a broader European context.

The abstract is 73 pages, including a list of contributions and publications on the topic. It presents accurately and fully the observations and conclusions of the habilitation thesis. Thirteen contributions are listed, and they present correctly the main research merits of the study. The monography, the abstract and publications on the subject attached meet all the requirements of the Law on Academic Staff Development in the Republic of Bulgaria.

In conclusion, Professor Dr. Ludmil Dimitrov's habilitation thesis *Dramaturgy of Leaving (Anton Chekhov - Leo Tolstoy - Maxim Gorky and the end of 19th century Russian drama)* is a major in its ideas and literary-historical accomplishments work. Not only a literary dialogue between three great dramatists is presented, but rather through this dialogue – with its the detailed interpretation – one can see the meeting of various cultural, literary and social factors that draw the picture of Russian dramaturgy at end of the century, but also of the world dramaturgy in the following century, and to a large extent also of intellectual thought and its collisions in the next hundred years. The monograph is a contribution to both Russian studies and Bulgarian studies, as it outlines research fields, places thematic emphasis and presents conceptual models that enable us to see Bulgarian culture from a different angle, as well as the dialogue of Bulgarian culture with Russian and world culture. The mentioned qualities of the

research work *Dramaturgy of Leaving (Anton Chekhov - Leo Tolstoy - Maxim Gorky and the end of 19th century Russian drama)* give me reason with full conviction to vote positively for conferring the scientific degree “Doctor habilitatus” in professional direction 2.1. Philology (Russian literature – Russian literature of the 19th century) on Professor Dr. Lyudmil Ivanov Dimitrov.

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27/09/2024

Sofia