

## Opinion

by Prof. Todor Hristov, PhD, on the competition for the position of a professor in vocational field 2.1. Philology (Literature of the nations of Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia - Literature of Western Europe) announced in State Gazette no. 87, 19.10.2021

### 1. Data on the candidate's scientific output and activity

Assoc. Prof. Kalin Mihailov, PhD, is the only candidate in the announced competition for professorship. The candidate has submitted the required documents, and covers the national output requirements. The materials presented for the competition include 3 monographs and 8 articles on the problems of Christian lyrics, on the relationship between religion and literature in the work of classical Bulgarian writers, on the poetics of the diary, on Dostoevsky's work and its reception. The complete bibliography of Kalin Mihailov's academic publications includes 5 monographs and 63 articles, including a book on the novelistic legacy of Georges Bernanos published by a prestigious French publishing house. All submitted publications represent the candidate's original research and constitute a significant contribution to comparative literature, history of literature, and anthropology of religion.

### 2. Evaluation of the publications presented for the competition

The monograph presented for the competition examines literary figures of the noble and the ignoble act. The ignoble act is presented as an inverted reflection of the noble (28). For the purposes of this opinion, I will simplify Kalin Mihailov's understanding of the noble act, reducing it to an act of humble service to the other (34). Such a service is possible due to a series of negative conditions: the noble actor must not place himself above or below the other, he must rather elevate the other to himself (34); he must realize that lying always leads to violence, and even if it costs "almost nothing", it ultimately destroys everything (63); the noble person should not succumb to the self-delusion that once she or he is on a path leading to destruction, she or he can always take a step back (59); at the same time, the noble actor must not give in to the deceptive self-assurance that he is self-sufficient, as if a sovereign of his own life (74; precisely the critique of this liberal concept of sovereignty is one of the most important contributions of the study); at the same time, the humble refusal to dominate oneself or the other, from which nobility derives, can be recognized by three tests: the attitude towards women (51), to the family (137) and towards the sufferers at the brink of suicide (52). When these negative conditions are not present, the actor who claims to serve the other would be nothing more than a servant or a cunning master (see e.g. p. 43). The humble

service of the other, however, also implies a positive condition, a passing on or a tradition (39): the noble gesture is a gift that transforms the receiver and makes her or him capable of passing the gift of nobility on to another; precisely because it is a gift, nobility is never merely a personal trait, nor a private property, it crosses the individual lives like a line of flight. When the mentioned positive and negative conditions are fulfilled, serving the other dissolves those heavens from within, which Kalin Mihailov tried to capture with the concept of transcendent beauty.

To be able to recognize the noble act in literary narratives, one has to read literature as life. Social sciences have long ago accepted that life makes sense insofar as it takes the form of a narrative. However, Kalin Mihailov chooses a different approach. Firstly, he leaves out of the account the form of the narratives; even when he describes formal relations, as in the analysis of Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (76-84), the relations are incomprehensible without the analysis of the plot. Secondly, the analysis is not locked on the thematics of the stories, it rather starts from it as a starting point to study the life of the narratives and of the authors themselves (see, for example, the chapter on Elin Pelin and Yovkov and the article on Emilian Stanev). Here, therefore, narratives are not the form of life, but rather life is the substance of narrative forms. I believe that this unusual relationship between narratives and life can be well described by the concept of figure as it functions in the study (see pp. 24-26). Kalin Mihailov perceives figures as faciality. But it can be a disembodied face, as in the case of literary characters. The face can live and die together with a single body, like the figures of the authors. A face can turn out to be a mask, a face for the others hiding another, real face distorted by fear and passion (like the figures of dystopian dictators). Faciality can consist in a face full of eyes as in the figure of the witness. Furthermore, a face can function as an archetype formed by the superimposition of a series of faces as it is the case with "the figure of the noble person in general". Therefore, the figure is more than a fictional or real face, it is a face in the process of an open process of becoming. It is this process that Kalin Mihailov tries to capture in describing the special time of the figure defined by the distance between two kairotic moments that form its teleology, folding it back onto itself through their mutual reflection (27-28). It seems to me that this specific use of the concept of figure can be summarized thus: nobility is a figure, a living figure, the figure of life retaining its transcendent beauty.

The study portrays rather than analyzes the figure of nobility. To that end, Kalin Mihailov has modified the usual approach of comparative literary studies. The author indeed compares literary works, but they are freed or at least detached from the regime of representation characteristic of comparative analysis. Rather than representing poetics, traditions, cultures, the texts are overlaid as figures of the same, superimposed on each other in the common space of the nobility (like the individual faces in the sociological uses of

photography in the late 19th century). Consequently, the comparison of different works focuses on similarities, letting the differences sink into the background of the analysis. These similarities are the basis on which Kalin Mihailov has developed his concept of nobility. In fact, the specificity of this mode of comparative analysis can be illustrated by the discussion of the relationship between diary, autobiography and novel. Although Kalin Mihailov points out the differences between the genres, the differences soon sink into the background of a general plan of immanence in which the diary reveals an essentially novelistic basis despite the syncopated rhythm of daily entries, the novel turns out to be an expression of subjectivity whose pure, crystalline image is the diary, and the autobiographical pact turns out to be woven into both genres as a responsibility for the veracity of what is said, even if it is not necessarily true (97). At the same time, insofar as the diary is thought of as an inner island, the outlines of all three genres are projected on the specific discursive genre formed under the influence of "Robinson Crusoe". If we summarize, the genres flow into each other, reflect each other, disperse in their mutual reflections. Because of this, however, the generic comparison outlines nobility not simply as a narrative structure or theme, but as an architekton in the depth of which shines the transcendent beauty of biblical images. Therefore, the nobility that Kalin Mihailov explores seems not just a fact of life but rather alive. After all, doesn't life do the same with faces, doesn't it bring our faces together until they overlap, doesn't it disperse us out in a play of infinitely receding reflections?

### 3. Comments and questions

Kalin Mihailov's approach is associated with certain risks. Perhaps the most significant risk is that it both asks and masks the question of truth. Truth is an unavoidable question because without it the comparative analysis of images would seem like a game that already presupposes what nobility is. To be more than a play on images, nobility must have the value of truth, and not only truth in the context the works analyzed, but also truth for life. On the other hand, a study in the field of comparative literature tells the truth mostly about literature. Kalin Mihailov has tried to sublimate this contradiction with his concept of vertical realism (52): unlike modern realism, defined as ironically-cynical (54), vertical realism reveals something more than the impotence of a hero lost in his life; unlike nineteenth-century realism, it is organized not around description and detail but around turning points in which one character is transformed by another; at the same time, this transformation does not reveal an aestheticized, heroized power elicited from the body as in socialist realism, but rather makes visible the heaven inside (54). I hope Kalin Mihailov's future research will clarify whether vertical realism should be conceived of only as poetics, or also as a form of veridiction.

A final question: the noble act transforms both its subject and its object. The analyzes in the book show that this transformation has a particular temporality, that it happens abruptly and at once (as a turning point in the words of Kalin Mihailov, see p. 36). Then does not transformation share the formal features of peripeteia? If so, if the transition to nobility is somehow similar to the transition between happiness and unhappiness. Then is not nobility a mode of employment? In the case of literary figures of nobility, does life imitate literature or vice versa?

#### 4. Conclusion

Taking into account the academic and teaching performance of the candidate, the wealth of publications upholding literature as a moral and spiritual value as well as the outstanding contributions of the candidate not only as a researcher but also as a teacher in the field of comparative literature, I am voting without any hesitation "for" awarding him the academic position of PROFESSOR in the direction 2.1 Philology (Literature of the nations of Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia - literature of Western Europe) to Assoc. Prof. Kalin Mihailov, PhD.

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