

# CANDIDATE ASSESSMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Kamelia Svetlinova Spassova,  
PhD, University of Sofia “St. Kl. Ohridski”

member of the Academic jury in the competition for the position of Professor in the professional field 2.1. Philology (Literature of the peoples of Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia – *Western European literature*), announced in State Gazette, issue 24/17.03.2023, with a single candidate: Kalin Rumenov Mikhaylov, PhD, Associate Professor at the Department of Theory of Literature, Faculty of Slavic Philology, University of Sofia “St. Kl. Ohridski”

Kalin Mikhaylov graduated in Bulgarian Philology from the University of Sofia “St. Kl. Ohridski”. Since 2002 he has been an Assistant Professor, from 2001 to 2004 he was promoted to Chief Assistant Professor, and from 2004 to 2009 he attained the rank of Senior Assistant Professor. Since 2009 he has held the title of Associate Professor at the Department of Theory of Literature, Faculty of Literature, University of Sofia “St. Kl. Ohridski”.

The candidate successfully defended his dissertation “Towards a Poetics of the French Novel between the Two World Wars: Patterns of Violence in the Novels of François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos” (2000), which later developed into his first scholarly monograph (2006). A modified version of this seminal work was later published in French under the title *Mauriac et Bernanos. Deux mondes romanesques entre la violence et l'amour* (2011). This places the candidate in the global dialogue between the specialists of Bernanos and Mauriac, while also contributing to the Bulgarian critical reception of the two French authors.

Kalin Mikhaylov is a prominent figure in the public sphere of Bulgaria, owing to his active involvement in several academic and literary organizations such as the Academic Circle of Comparative Literature, the Bulgarian Society “Dostoevsky”, the Association of the Christian Literary Word “Empyreus”, “Christianity and Culture” and “Literaturen Vestnik”. Through these institutional and informal networks, Mikhaylov has endeavoured to bridge the discourses of *Christianity* and *literature*. In this one can observe his vital mission, that he holds in high regard. In his bid for a professorship, the candidate submitted two monographs which reflect his efforts to synthesize these two fields, as evidenced by their titles: “Christianity and Literature. Figures of the (Ig)Noble” (2023) and “Christian Literature – Between Inscription and Distinction” (2013). In

addition to these, the candidate proposes eight articles of his own, which correspond to the profile of the competition and do not repeat material deployed in the monographs.

I intend to conduct an in-depth critical analysis of the recent academic publication “Christianity and Literature. Figures of the (Ig)Noble”, as it exemplifies the author's most mature scholarship and fully encapsulates their principal research interests and academic orientation. My examination will evaluate the work's conceptual framework, theoretical underpinnings, analytic rigor, and substantive contributions to the field. The present work builds upon and systematizes the research contributions made in the candidate's earlier publications, with new conceptual elements and interpretative emphases. These include an in-depth inquiry into the notion of the *figure*, the conceptualization of the *noble personality*, the demarcation of *social* and *vertical realism*, the correlation between the diaristic and the novelistic forms, and the investigation of the transition from Enlightenment rationalist myth to providentialism in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel.

The structure of Kalin Mikhaylov's monograph follows a two-step rhythm, with the first part being devoted to the broad horizon of world literature and the second part to Bulgarian literature. The central theme of the book is the *figure of the noble person*, which serves as a unifying thread that connects a diverse array of European novels in the first chapter, as well as works of Bulgarian fiction ranging from Elin Pelin and Yovkov to Dejan Enev and Yancho Mikhaylov. The introduction and conclusion of the book are masterfully executed, highlighting the full potential of the study and providing the reader with a clear guide to navigate the complex web of fictional characters and motifs that the candidate employs.

Kalin Mikhaylov's methodology bears a resemblance to works such as Auerbach's “Mimesis” (1946) and Tsvetan Stoyanov's “Ideas and Motifs of Alienation in Western Literature” (1973). While Auerbach focuses on the tracing of *Sermo Humilis* as a certain speech register and style of low, humble (realistic) speech, for Mikhaylov the central figure appears to be the *noble person*, which is of the order of the idealistic, the sublime, and the tragic. The connection with Stoyanov is at the thematological level, as both studies effortlessly traverse multiple languages, literatures, and contexts, utilizing a common theme with its multiple motifs to unfold their arguments. For Stoyanov, it is the motif of alienation, while for Mikhaylov, it is the ways of overcoming alienation, isolation, and self-sufficiency through noble gestures, which are not seen as romantic, but rather as a form of vertical realism.

Central to Kalin Mikhaylov's academic work is the conceptualization of the “noble hero” archetype. The designation of “figure” is employed in a spirit consonant with Judeo-Christian thought, wherein it denotes a temporal construct uniting time and eternity. The historical

incarnation of Christ stands as the paradigmatic exemplar of this philosophical ideal. It is important to underscore Mikhaylov's conclusion that "the messianic figure is not solely a temporal figure, but also a figure of eternity that has descended into time" (p.27). This emphasis highlights the figure as a teleological, transcendent, and metaphysical category. Herein the literary historian faces the difficulty of how to "translate" this problematic into the fictional language of prose, where we speak of literary rather than sacred tradition. Ultimately, the question arises of how to interpret literary topoi in a Christian key without relying solely on the figure of the author and their religious identification. This interrogative permeates the overarching conceptual framework of Mikhaylov's research, which endeavours to elucidate not obscure exemplars, but rather the luminous archetypes and symbolic gestures that illuminate the relationship between nobility and Christian spirituality.

The literary examples presented in Kalin Mikhaylov's monograph on the *legacy of the noble* in literature cover a broad spectrum across the genre of the European novel from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. The emphasis is on French literature, with authors such as V. Hugo, O. de Balzac, Al. Dumas-father, Jules Verne, and G. Bernanos, constantly compared to M. de Cervantes, F. Dostoevsky, Al. Schmemann, D. Defoe, J. Swift, G. Orwell, W. Scott, F. Rivers, A. Rand, H. Ch. Andersen, A. Manzoni, Tahsin Yücel, Constantin Gheorghiu, Elin Pelin, Y. Yovkov, and others. The monograph takes the reader on a journey from Cervantes' "Don Quixote" to Frederic Begbede's "£9.99". Despite the vast array of French, Russian, English, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Romanian, Czech, and Bulgarian literature explored, the absence of German novelists is distinctive. Would not a perspective on the comparison between the genre of the German educational novel (*Bildungsroman*) and the French novel of providence (*roman de la providence*) be fruitful in view of the closeness and difference in the inner growth and transformation of the characters in these two forms? Furthermore, the German authors such as Thomas Mann ("The Magic Mountain") and Hermann Hesse ("The Glass Bead Game") could offer additional literary-historical subjects for the lineage of writers' diaries overflowing into novels.

In Mikhaylov's work, the noble characters in literature, who resist social temptation and do not bend to the path of "small compromise," provide the basis for the introduction of the concept of *vertical realism*. This notion emphasizes the depth of human experience and the complex inner vicissitudes of characters who manage, through the role of providence, to find a vertical solution (deliverance, salvation) and preserve their moral integrity. Vertical realism acknowledges the existence of a *transcendent guarantor* and is thus distinguished from nineteenth-century critical

realism and twentieth-century cynical realism. One of the book's guiding assumptions is the dominance of moral grounds over linguistic frivolity.

The interpretive approach captures parable schemes that show how, in the same situation, characters can choose the difficult path of noble gesture or the easy path of social enrichment and moral degradation. Exemplary heroes including Don Quixote, Jean Valjean, Captain Nemo, Mushet, and Joe are juxtaposed with ignoble characters like Leicester, Rastignac, and Vautrin. The former exhibit the capacity for moral growth and spiritual development, whereas the latter adhere to a relativistic ethic dictated by their self-interest. Such analyses of specific literary works show a skill for fine philological reading. Through them one can conclude that vertical realism is not specific to a particular context, but it "works" from within the realist novel, opening a dimension of the sacred. It has to do with the possibility of interrupting the fictional time of the novel, marked by the idea of *kairos*, or the breaking of the sacred into the literary work. The *kairotic dimension* leads to the exaltation of the characters, and its absence to a moral fall. The *kairos* breakthrough is shown not in relation to the accidental, but as a concern of Providence that "opens" the human order to the Christian miracle. Thus a *vertical index* is sewn to the aesthetic index of the literary work. The axis of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious are thought in their unity. The faith of the book is in the ennobling character of literature.

The figures of the noble in literature, as presented by Kalin Mikhaylov, assert a *homo verticalis* that is oriented not so much through the socio-historical context as through its existential experience. In his book, "The 'Island' of the Diary," one of the most contributory sections explores the transition from the diary to the novel. Drawing on Bakhtin's insight that the novel, as a young genre in the process of becoming, tends to absorb paraliterary genres, Mikhaylov argues that it is not the low comic-satirical genres that are transformed into the novel that are important, but rather the existential dimension of the diary. The connectivity between living and writing, between *bios* and *graphie*, is central to the diary genre. The moral dimension crystallizes in it. The distinction between *diary-memoir-autobiography* is well established through different types of distance, self-reflection, and retrospection. The author illustrates how the diary flows into the novel and how the diarist can be present in the novel, as well as how a diary can be read as a novel. These trajectories are exemplified through the works of Anne Frank, D. Defoe, V. Hugo, G. Bernanos, H.C. Andersen, and Julien Green. It is evident that a future scholarly work by Kalin Mikhaylov might further develop this hybridization between novel and diary. This exploration would be a valuable contribution to the field as it would provide a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between the two forms.

## **Conclusion**

The documents and materials submitted by Kalin Rumenov Mikhaylov meet all the requirements for this promotion. The applicant has presented publications of exceptional quality. His 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 the candidate are beyond doubt. I give my positive assessment and strongly recommend to the Scientific Jury to promote Kalin Rumenov Mikhaylov to the academic position “Professor” at the University of Sofia in the field 2.1. Philology (Western European literature).

23.07.2023

Kamelia Spassova