

R E V I E W

by Prof. Milena Kirova, DSc

on “The nomadic subject in Matvey Valev’s works: nature and machine”

Dissertation for obtaining the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the professional field 2.1. Philology (Bulgarian Literature – Bulgarian Literature from the Liberation to the Second World War)

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Martin Kolev was a regular PhD candidate with the Department of Bulgarian Literature of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" between 20th July 2020 and 20th June 2023. After an internal defense at the Department, held on 13th June 2023, he was permitted to hold a public thesis defense. During the years of his doctoral studies, he published ten articles on the subject of his dissertation (two of which are still under print) and for the period 2021–2023 he took part in eight (one of which international, and seven national) conferences. The number in both cases not only satisfies, but far exceeds the requirements for the defense procedure.

The dissertation summary (46 pages including the bibliography) gives a detailed and fully adequate idea of the objectives, specifics, and results of the dissertation research. The work itself has a total volume of 200 pages. It is structured into six main chapters, framed by an Introduction and a Conclusion; the bibliography of the used literature shows a contemporary selection (more than two hundred titles listed), as well as a thorough preparation in the process of research work. The documentation for the procedure is in full working order.

Martin Kolev's dissertation work fits into a research field that has been developing very actively from the 90s of the 20th century until nowadays. Mihail Nedelchev defines it as a "reconstruction" of the Bulgarian cultural tradition, and Martin Kolev outlines it as a practice that allows authors marginalized for some reason to be historically rehabilitated, to be returned to history. While never having been included in the literary Canon or in any educational program, Valev is not actually as forgotten as anyone unfamiliar with his reception might think. The republication of his works began as early as 1957 and continued until the end of the 1980s; later,

at the turn of the new century, in only five years (between 2017 and 2022), five of his books were published.

The literary-historical reception of Matvey Valev is also not insignificant, including the period before 1989: in three decades, starting with 1945, a dozen articles were published about him, and in 1982 – a whole book. I am listing these facts in detail in order to place more accurately and appropriately the efforts made by Martin Kolev. Precisely because of the studies published so far, a large part of which are aimed at this writer's attractive biographical presence, the dissertation thesis is focused entirely on his literary work.

The PhD candidate chose to begin with the critical reception of Matvey Valev, presenting all previous efforts in the research field. In general, the dissertation is very well-informed, comprehensively organized, and accurate in regard to other colleagues' research on the subject, with clearly stated goals and objectives.

Methodologically, it is based on the philosophy and phenomenology of wandering as developed in Western culture. Against the background of multiple mentioned approaches, Martin Kolev has focused on the "nomadology" of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, from their most famous book, "A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia". On that foundation is built a wider vault of complementary ideas from English and especially French philosophy (notably Bergson, Ricoeur and Foucault). This is all presented in detail in Chapter One, which is a theoretical overview of the chosen thematic field (nomadism).

The second chapter of the dissertation is named "World and Home": Variations of the Topic of Wandering in Bulgarian Literature until Second World War". As a matter of fact, that was the title of a project for a magazine Matvey Valev had in 1935, though it remained unpublished. Martin Kolev defines three models of wandering (respectively, three forms of the "wanderer") in Bulgarian literature until the Second World War: the "uprooted man", or "Wandering Jew"; the traveler/traveling model, and the nomad/nomadic model. This chapter is not as long as the material would suggest, yet it offers a summary and succeeds in listing and ordering the variety of manifestations of literary wandering, supporting it with relevant authors' quotes.

The third chapter deals with the critical reception of the nomadic subject. In addition to the usual overview of the field, the author articulates his own, alternative view, which resists the impulse to read the characters in M. Valev's works as autobiographical projections of the author. Kolev's reading is interested not just in the differences between home and world, here and beyond, but rather in the possibility of shifting these boundaries, of blurring their clear outlines, when it comes to Valev's writing.

From here on, the dissertation moves towards the opposition nature–culture. The fourth chapter discusses the characteristic hypostases of nature in Valev's works: the wild nature, the obedient nature (even the "castrated nature")... After nature's turn, comes culture's. This is, of course, a huge topic, but the author focuses on what he calls "the ultimate manifestation of culture in the form of a machine" (p. 113) and outlines various types of technology manifestations.

The last chapter reflects on the "sex and gender dimensions of the text-Valev". The topic is very interesting and scarcely developed in Bulgarian literary studies. The last, sixth chapter is called "Road and Story. Nomadic Subject's Narrative Identity". The thematic focus is again very well found and presupposed by rich possibilities in theoretical and methodological terms; however, the text itself fits into the modest length of sixteen pages and awaits its full-blooded development in the future works of M. Kolev. The chapter ends with a series of well-done generalizations of the specificity of the text-Valev and the identity of its typical character-narrator.

Finally, I would like to say something about the way M. Kolev writes, as it is not a common practice. I refer to his ability to combine the beautiful writing of an established novelist with the clear and meaningful expression of a literary historian.

In conclusion, I confirm the high evaluation that M. Kolev's dissertation thesis deserves. It is well-organized, concise, conceptually thought out, and clearly written. In my opinion, it has all the merits necessary for its author to acquire the educational and scientific degree "Doctor".

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