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## Does Macedonian Literature Belong More to a Balkan, a Slavic, or an European Space?

To answer the *Fourth question* of the guidelines – about the possibility of considering Macedonian literature as belonging more to a “Balkan”, a “Slavic” or an “European” space – I will begin by some considerations about the Balkans – probably the most controversial part of the European continent. That is the soil in which you can, even today, find artifacts from various historical periods and different civilizations. That is why it is said that the Balkans have too much history, too much memory – much more than it can bear... At the same time, it is a mixture of many different, but also similar nations, nationalities and ethnic groups speaking different languages and creating very close, but specific cultures. In Balkan towns you can visit churches, cathedrals, mosques and synagogues on the same street; you can hear the same melody in almost every modern Balkan state, you can recognize the same characteristics in the mentality of different Balkan peoples. Through their contacts with other Mediterranean cultures, the Balkan cultures penetrated the European texture, giving it a wide spectrum of specific cultural values.

Therefore, on the first level, the polyvalent, inter-cultural and complex zone of the Balkans gets its European dimension through the prism of its Mediterranean context. Being the root of the modern European civilization, a crossroads of western and eastern influences, the crossing-point of various religions, philosophies and understanding of the world, the transcontinental Mediterranean cultural zone is a model of an inter-cultural compendium, which preserves the European cultural memory, participates in the current cultural European movements and creates its contemporary profile.

In rethinking the European context, it would be hard to ignore a very specific angle of perception – in our case, the perspective of Macedonian culture. It is firmly embodied in the Balkan palimpsest as a so-called “small culture” (according to the number of language speakers, about 2 or 3 million in the world). However, as Kafka has written in his diary, “the memory of the small nation is not smaller than that of the great one”. Macedonian culture can be discussed in very different contexts: the ancient Hellenic, the ancient Macedonian and Alexandrian civilizations, the West/Latin and the East/Byzantine Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the ex-Yugoslav community (as a modern state from 1945 in the Yugoslav Federation) and since 1991, as an independ-

ent state. It is at the same time a Balkan, Slavic and South Slavic, Mediterranean and European culture, in which you can recognize in practice the real meaning of intercultural crossings.

How can such a “small” culture, really a culture of one “tribe” (metaphorically speaking) contribute to the great world cultural movements? It is not so difficult for painters, filmmakers, musicians etc., but for writers and intellectuals, who express themselves through language, it is a very complicated question deeply rooted in their individuality. We would like to mention just two examples of Macedonian intellectuals, who, due to their extraordinary literary achievements, could be “honorary members” of the hypothetical “international fraternity of men of letters in Europe” imagined by Eliot. These are the writers Blaže Koneski and Goran Stefanovski.

Koneski was obsessed with Macedonian, his native language, both as a poet and a scholar and linguist. The last words he wrote before his death in 1993 sound like an intimate confession, but also as a kind of last will and testament for the Macedonian culture. He said: “In poetry, the same as in love, everything has been said, although it has to be said again and again... It can seem as an exaggeration when this necessity appears even in a small culture, in the language of a small nation. What does it mean?... Somebody who knows better than all of us what the world order should be, obviously decided that small nations and languages should also exist beside the great nations and languages”. Although he was a polyglot, Koneski has never written poetry in another language. His poems have been translated into many languages and thus have become part of the common poetry treasure of the world. Very often in his verses Koneski turns back to the same question. In the poem entitled *Macedonian Poets* he wrote: “What fate! / To have an opinion that you do / the most useless thing in the world”. But the idea of writing poetry in any other language was considered by him as “an intimate defeat”. As a thinker, he had a very sophisticated comparative sense for the intercultural nature of human spiritual achievements and a special relation with the tradition; therefore, his name in Macedonian literary studies has often been connected with the ideas and concepts of T. S. Eliot. The struggle between two forces: one, to be firmly rooted inside one’s own national tradition, and the other, to establish a communication with the world order of values, is obvious in one of his popular poems entitled *Recollection After Many Years*:

I was perhaps not quite twenty  
 When I wrote:  
 “So much did woe cry out within me  
 that I was born into a tribe in need,”  
 And to this day  
 The injury will bleed:  
 I’m haunted by that ever-present woe  
 And one that’s greater still,  
 So that, sower of barren seed,

I'll say,  
To change the words a little,  
"Still does the woe cry out within me  
that I am born into a tribe in need."

And yet I hope this isn't so  
Since I have undergone the test  
Of such great woe.

The ambivalent feelings about the fact of "the place of birth" and belonging to a small "tribe" or speaking a less widely spoken language are expressed in these verses. On the one hand, the poet is aware of the disadvantages of his national culture, but on the other, he continues with his "worthless" efforts, finding in them the meaning of his existence.

The other Macedonian and European intellectual is the playwright Goran Stefanovski who chose to live between two cultures, in two countries – his native Macedonia and Great Britain. Asked about the language of his work in an interview, he answered: "I can think in English, but I can't feel in English". He was fascinated how much confusion his name created at the counters of European banks, railway stations and other similar places. He has collected more than fifty letters with his name misspelled, although it is one of the most common names in Macedonia (Stefanouski, Stefanoksi, Stefanovski, etc.); he framed them to remind him of the collision of two cultural discourses, two different stories, European and Macedonian. In the essays *Stories from the Wild East* he also describes the elementary problem of the Macedonian writer working with a computer: "The keyboard of my computer has some English letters totally useless in my native language: W, Q and Y. But they are helpful. If I press W, I get our V (B), if I press Q, I get Ja (Я), and if I press Y, I get a "hard i" (bI). So, I just need a little bit more concentration. (...) When I write the letter И [a conjunction in Macedonian] the computer automatically writes it as a capital letter, because in the English language the letter I, when it stands alone, designates the personal pronoun/first person singular. So, writing in my mother tongue is a continuous fight with a globalizing creature, a kind of multicultural fire machine, which contains my performances but is willing to give it back to me only under a special visa regime. Every Macedonian text is automatically underlined in red by the computer as absolutely incorrect, even illegal".

Stefanovski has written excellent plays that are very often on the repertoires of Macedonian and other European theatres. The most common topics in his plays are the stereotypes of the European and Macedonian (Balkan) mentality, getting over them and creating a constellation in which the differences will respect and accept each other. His works provide exceptional material for imagological studies of the question of "Europeanism". He says: "It's not enough for me to be at home in Europe, I want Europe to be at my home". He understands Europe as a field of "real reflection, criticism and

debate,” as a civil society with “wide opinions” in which, as he says, “my diversity will not be a problem, but a solution”.

I will now try to cope with the difficult *Fifth question*: Which are the most influential centers of irradiation for the Macedonian literature to-day – Russia? or other Slavic countries? or Western countries?

In the cultures of the peoples speaking languages with Slavic origin, the attitude towards Slavism is very complicated and questionable. It has many faces and it could be discussed from various aspects. The intercultural relations among Slavic peoples vibrate between two extreme forms, described by the French comparatist Daniel-Henri Pageaux<sup>1</sup> as so-called “phobias” and “philies”. In the same time, they are strongly influenced by one unifying stream, which under the mask of the prefix “pan-” (the case of pan-Slavism is meant here), shows up as a cruel arbiter in positioning and giving appropriate or inappropriate place and attention to the cultures, peoples, ethnos belonging to the Slavic circle. It is rare to find cases of contacts between Slavic cultures that are immune to such negativities. The “philia”, as a real intercultural dialogical relation, which means reciprocal respect, tolerance, understanding and knowing each other, is still a desirable form of relation to which aspire, more or less, all the Slavic cultures.

In this actual moment – after states representing Slavic unities have disappeared – the understanding, rethinking and filing of the Slavism concept gets some new dimensions. There are about twelve Slavic peoples with their specific national and cultural identities. But, it is very interesting to mention that it seems they hide and hold back their Slavism. The interest for the concept of Slavism seems to have begun and stopped on the level of ethnology and folklore.

The concept of Slavism in Macedonian literature and culture has an ambiguous character: on the one hand it is an image of something else, up to a certain point strange and unfamiliar, on the other, it is an image of itself, of its own origin and of one basic segment of its identity. That is why it is a complex phenomenon, which connects the view to outside and to inside, towards the Other and to the Self, to someone else’s, but also to the own in the same time.

The drama *The Slavic coffin* (1996) by Venko Andonovski is one of the very few literary works completely devoted to the problem of Slavism in which can be discussed the special sensibility identified as Slavic. Its title designates one symbolic object, treated as a “person” in the play, and closely described as “an object in which is hidden one whole lost world”. In the very beginning of the play a signal is given that Slavism is considered as “a lost world” of specific values. In one point the content of the coffin is said to be “shadows”, in the other “icons”. In any case it associates the rich spiritual world and tradition of Slavic peoples, expressed in their mythology, folklore and in art as a whole. As an opposition of this rich tradition, the cruel image of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Pageaux 1994.

reality shows up. The “Slavic misery” is spiritual as well as material: “All the Slavs are on their knees. Serbia takes out the blackness from under the nails. Bulgaria sells state reserves. Czech – prostitution as you wish. In Russia they stole somebody’s finger in the tram, because he has got a golden ring on it. They have cut it with plumber tongs. In Poland they collect the drunks with vans. They have drunk denatured alcohol in lack of something else<sup>2</sup>”. This contrast between soul and substance, sensibility and crime, love and violence, is the main problem in the play, and it is presented as a sense of wondering before the growing evil in the Slavic world, a feeling that may be defined as “minor-chord sensibility”, characterizing soul and emotion. As an opposition to this now demystified Slavic sensibility, the author puts cruel reality of a rough, inhuman, extremely criminalized life.

In this play Slavism is shown as a world of shadows, world of dreams, world of “spiritual pain” and fantasy. “All the Slavic monsters were ransomed by Hollywood. And it sells them. It is world mythology. Nobody has heard about our Viji, the master of shadows. Everybody knows about Frankenstein. What do you know about yourselves? Tell me one Slavic god. You don’t know<sup>3</sup>”. The dialogues between the main character of the play – called Doll –, and his antagonist – called Snake –, construct the image of the mentality of Slavs in details, with their ignorant and neglecting attitude towards tradition, but inferior and humiliated in comparison with West-European rationality.

In spite of the great spiritual treasure of the Slavic world, contemporary Slavic peoples underestimate their own values. They don’t care about them, and put them on the second place, after the values of the West-European culture. Older generations were seriously concerned about their own traditions. The contemporary Slav doesn’t show any interest of it: “You must be a modern Slav. You are so superficial and uncurious. The old Slavs would have opened it for sure. [this is related to the coffin]. By curiosity. An old Slav sensibility.<sup>4</sup>” Flattering the European “civilized” and “cultural” world, the modern Slav minimizes its own value and ruins Self-identity: “You come here in a competition: who will say worse thing about East, thinking that in that way you’ll become West. You send your plays, poetry, paintings, by post, saying that nobody in your country understands, because your Dads lag behind. You think the world will fall on it’s ass if you criticize yourselves. You fight against classic, but you still don’t have it. If you can, you would defecate on your grandfather’s grave. Only if the West says it is art. Actually, you make western trash. Instead of painting frescos. Do you know what would have done West, if it had had your frescos? It would have spat at all its decayed avant-gardes, transavantgardes and postmoderns!<sup>5</sup>” These dialogues point at the necessity of self-respect and dignity for all the Slavic peoples, especially for Macedonian. That is:

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<sup>2</sup> Andonovski 2001: 198. All the inserts are taken and translated from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*: 210.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*: 209.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*: 314.

the necessity of a constructive approach to one's own historical and spiritual values and identity.

The image of Slavism in Andonovski's drama is a lamentation for it, sympathy and pain for the world of Slavic peoples, particularly of Macedonian people. That is why the action of the play is situated in the year 1996, in the first years of the independent Macedonian state, that seeks its confirmation, through the specific relation to its own past and tradition and through the acquiring of an appropriate place, reputation, even a name on the map of Slavic, Balkan and European areas.

As far as the *Sixth question* is concerned – about peculiarities of the younger generation of writers and their relationships to linguistic and stylistic use of contemporary literature of other countries – I will analyze the two novels I consider most relevant for the connections between historical and biographic “reality”, and literary mystification: *Conversation with Spinoza* by Goce Smilevski (2002, already translated into English and Polish) and *Lou's Locked Body* (2005) by Olivera Kjorveziroska. These two novels participate in the most common intellectual preoccupations of contemporary society. On the literary level, they belong to the wave of literature, which oscillates between fact and fiction. In their reinstated approach to cultural memory the two novels may be ascribed to an already established genre that can be defined as *mystifying, apocryphal, falsifying biographism*. This is a literary technique which transforms in a specific way historical facts into aesthetic creations, thus renewing and also enriching the memory of a given historical figure.

Although much has been written about the philosophy of the Dutch thinker (Ben-to Baruch) Benedictus de Spinoza in past centuries (Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Heine, to name only a few), his popularity reached its zenith towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the large number of outstanding books and articles testify that he has become an icon of the European 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>.

Spinoza's heteroglossia has proved to be specially inspiring for the Macedonian writer Goce Smilevski. In his novel he takes advantage of his ability to play with at least three levels of intertextuality: the philosopher's biography and his ideas, works about him written by other authors and the subtle aesthetic messages of Flemish painting. How looks Smilevski's Spinoza like? The novel's two layers enable the writer to invent/present/interpret Spinoza in two opposing variants: in the first, the philosopher appears as the impassive intellectual being who strives for the absolute, more precisely, at being a *homo intellectualis*; in the second, as a passionate, lively, warm-blooded man to whom “nothing that is human is alien” or, more precisely, as *homo sentimentalis*. Such a technique

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<sup>6</sup> Let us remind first the works of the leading French specialists Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Macherey and Alexandre Matheron. Most influential have been Antonio Negri's essays Negri 1990 and 2004. Genevieve Lloyd's book *Spinoza and the Ethics* (Lloyd 1996) contains a bibliography of over 100 books and articles.

captures in an interesting way the dichotomy which permeates Spinoza's philosophy: reason, eternity, the absolute and the spirit on the one hand, emotions, senses, beauty of ephemeral things and life itself, on the other. Smilevski's novel is an apology of life and its transience, beauty and uniqueness. In this context, the central motif of Spinoza's love for Clara Maria is rejected and suppressed by reason in the first variant, while in the second, she is accepted and love is fulfilled. Although the author does not reveal his presence in the novel (he is "dead" in Foucault's sense of the term), nevertheless, his position in the resolution of the dichotomy is clear, when he addresses his hero in such terms: "How sweet are these transient moments...experience transience, Spinoza, allow it to hurt you".

In his foreword, Smilevski emphasizes his strong connection with Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza: the essays *Expressionism in Philosophy* and *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, that have exerted a decisive influence in the establishing of Spinoza as an icon, became also a constituent element of Smilevski's novel. He himself explains that as following: "I had a feeling that the novel is being written by three hands – two right hands (Spinoza's and mine) and one left (Deleuze was allegedly left-handed)". Through the intertextual link with Deleuze, Smilevski has been able to add his interpretation to a chain of interpretations which, eventually, share a common fascination with life, conceived as the supreme ideal of Spinoza's thought: life is understood as the joy of living and creating, as a transient moment that is beautiful as such, that should be enjoyed in itself, in which one should take pleasure. Such an affirmative philosophy created through the re-reading and re-interpretation of Spinoza, according to Antonio Negri, is an alternative to the postmodern hovering over one spot, and the depressing and sterile moving in circles characteristic of a great part of contemporary humanist thought. Smilevski seems to follow A. Negri's "new reading" of Spinoza (2004) as the creator of a "positive ontology [of experience and existence], a philosophy of affirmation, against the new 'weak' phenomenologies of the postmodern era".

A particularly interesting aspect of Smilevski's technique in recounting and re-interpreting Spinoza's character is the emphatic intermedial background of his literary discourse. In his bringing to life the Dutch environment in the novel, Smilevski is evidently indebted to Flemish painting. Moreover, Spinoza's characterization – one of the most important parts in the novel – is based precisely on Spinoza's portraits made by Flemish painters. Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* (it appears also on the cover of the novel's first edition) holds a special place in the novel: Smilevski made it a part of the novel itself, emphasizing the fact that, at the moment of Spinoza's conception in the embrace of his parents, Rembrandt stood in front of his easel, sketching his famous painting, in the same street where the Spinoza family lived, though in another house. Through a typical procedure of ekphrasis, Smilevski draws the reader's attention to the detail of a falling drop of blood: this reminds the reader that the problem of the body and corporeality are integral part of both Spinoza's philosophy and the novel which gives its literary reinterpretation. The concealed ekphrasis, connected with the famous

paintings of Vermeer, Frans Hals, Dirk van Baburen, Peter de Hooch and others, can be easily identified by everyone being familiar with Flemish painting. These details in Smilevski's novel confirm the significance of visual memory and, more precisely, of the pictorial experience of the world in the general cultural memory.

Similar to painting, photography has perhaps an even greater power of conservation of verifiable facts and of inspiration for reinterpreting them. Lou Andreas-Salomé has also become an icon of European imagination: she is probably best remembered for an unusual photograph showing her, with a whip in her hand, driven in a cart by two admirers, Paul Rée and Friedrich Nietzsche. Although her literary achievements have not gained permanent popularity – despite the fact that during her life her works were fairly widely read –, her name is still remembered primarily because of its association with several famous men who were her lovers: besides Rée and Nietzsche, they included Rainer Maria Rilke, Sigmund Freud and others. The famed photograph, taken in Switzerland in 1882, found a unique place in the novel *Lou's Locked Body* by Olivera Kjørveziroska.

As indicated by the very title of Lou's literary biography, Kjørveziroska concentrates on a very obscure and provocative detail from the life of her heroine – the fact that Lou did not experience physical love until she was thirty-five; later, love passion became her obsession. The thread of this Macedonian novel follows the mysterious reasons concerning this aspect of Lou's life; in other words, the novel explores the potentiality of the story that can be woven around the photograph and the biographical data. This novel, too, is a kind of reinterpretation of facts and stories: it contains a number of links with other artistic, biographical and essayist works dedicated to Lou Salomé. A direct complementary relation and dialogue can be detected with the essay written by the French writer Françoise Giroud entitled *Lou. Histoire d'une femme libre*. Moreover, Kjørveziroska's novel is connected with the novel of the Serbian writer Svetislav Basara, *Srce zemlje*, which, in a specific way, creates variations on the theme of the love affair between Lou and Nietzsche.

Through Nietzsche and Lou, Spinoza and Deleuze, Goce Smilevski and Olivera Kjørveziroska participate in the circle of writers and thinkers interested in one of the greatest riddles of existence: the body, life in itself, or the "living" life. Reinterpreting Spinoza and Lou as icons that were relevant in Europe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the two Macedonian novels contribute to the modern contemplation over the body, over its mysteries, over the puzzling intertwining of body and spirit that still remain a mesmerizing enigma.

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