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Postmodernism in Macedonian Prose

In the last decade of the twentieth century, postmodernism was still a dominant concept in Macedonian prose, very different from its predecessor – modernism. This article does not focus on the conceptual distinctions between these two formations, nor does it question whether postmodernism is a continuation of modernism. It concentrates instead on the outlines of postmodernism – as defined by the well-known theories of F. Lyotard, J. Derrida, J. Baudrillard and M. Foucault – and attempts to locate its emergence in Macedonia within the framework of international postmodern trends, while also highlighting certain specific aspects of Macedonian postmodern prose.

It is always difficult to pinpoint the start of a new trend. Initially, the beginning is generally closely linked to the theoretical awareness that the old style has run its course and that new poetical principles are emerging in literature. Newness, in this case, is not necessarily synonymous with inventiveness, but refers to the fact that such principles are starting to prevail over others. The very fact that the philosophical principle of "postmodern" epistemological doubt may be dated back to no less than Gorgias, is an adequate example of what I mean. The postmodern quotation method and the collage is easy to see in the works of Dadaism; there are clear traces of irony in romanticism and carnival in the Middle Ages; constructivism is part of modernism: all these fundamentals are now leading principles in the new postmodern era. Initially, they did not emerge in large numbers and blossomed somewhat timorously: discerning scholars, however, will soon recognize the first signs. Such skills are apparent in certain works of the Macedonian critic Venko Andonovski: in his article *Postmodern peaches* (Andonovski 1989: 34), while interpreting Vlada Urošević's novel *The taste of peaches*, he points out that the novel totally lacks narration, which is replaced by a poetic principle that aims to annul time and action, and the striving for collage works. Moreover, the novel is interwoven with focalizations that include the quoting subject within the text, thus making a knotty net: in other words, this means putting an end to modernistic and realistic narration. Venko Andonovski acknowledges this novel as the first bud of postmodernism, and the year 1965 as the beginning of the postmodern era in Macedonia. Compared to other Balkan countries, Macedonia embarked on its postmodern era very early. Aleksandar Jerkov (Jerkov 1992: 17) sees 1965 as the beginning of Serbian postmodernism too,

when the first novels with a 'whiff' of postmodernism were published: *Ash garden* by Danilo Kiš, *Time of the miracle* by Borislav Pekić and Mirko Kovač's *My sister Elida*. The Croatian critic Dubravka Oraić considers 1968 as the borderline between modernism and postmodernism. In Slovenia postmodernism was inaugurated around 1977 by the generation which – according to Barbara Czapik (Czapik 1996: 172-173) – offered its own, original postmodern look and prides itself on having appeared earlier and being more progressive than the other South-Slavic countries. In Bulgaria, the postmodernists that gravitated around the group "Synthesis" made their appearance in 1989 with the publication of a Bulgarian and English language anthology simply entitled *Ars Simulacri*. So the advent of postmodernism differs at most by a matter of decades in each Balkan country, unlike other literary movements whose appearance differed by a matter of centuries.

There are contrasting opinions about the genesis of the various South Slavic branches of literature. Danilo Kocevski (Kocevski 1989: 25), author of the first post-modern monograph, sets the beginning of Macedonian postmodernism somewhere in the Eighties, coinciding with the first program-texts, gatherings of postmodernists and public discussions on that very issue. According to Kocevski, the very first theoretical work is *One step away from discourse*, dated 1980 and written jointly by Ljupčo Dimitrov-ski, Miloš Lindro and Kocevski himself. Kocevski regards this review book as relevant because of its quotation of Roland Barthes' *A literature of depletion* even though Barthes himself was referring to poetry.

Around 1981-82 several groups of artists emerged (*Literary context* No. 2, 183): their members were mostly representatives of the visual arts, such as *USTA* (Mouth) and comic-art authors *Tus laboratorija* (Ink laboratory) and *Kiks-strip* (Kicks-comics). The musical group *Usta na usta* (Mouth to mouth), was postmodern- orientated as well. Again in 1981, Alexander Prokopiev started the serial of his *Anti-instructions for personal usage*, which also reveals the importance of a program-text.

Another noteworthy postmodern group –which was predominantly literary was founded in 1984 under the name *The fifth circle*. Its members included Alexandar Proko-piev, Dimitrie Duracovski, Jadranka Vladova, Hristo Petreski, Jordan Danilovski, Eliza-beta Šeleva and others who had published some of their first works in the pages of the literary magazine *Mlad Borec* (Young Warrior) and *Alfa* – published by the *Literary youth of Macedonia*. Some Macedonian authors made their break-through in 1985 in other cit-ies then belonging to Yugoslavia, and mostly in the highly distinguished literary maga-zines of that time: *Polya* (Fields) in Novi Sad, *Ovdje* (Here) in Titograd, *Dalje* (Further) in Sarajevo, *Književna rec* (Literary word) in Belgrade, *Oko* (Eye) and *Kvorum* (Quorum) in Zagreb, and *Gradina* (Garden) in Niš as well as in the anthology *Izlazak iz senke* (Break-out from the shadow) (1989), written by Venko Andonovski and Nedeljko Radlović.

Key events worth mentioning include articles published between 1985 and 1986 in the daily newspaper *Nova Makedonija* (New Macedonia) and the magazines *Razgledi* (Reviews) and *Mlad Borec*: the ebbs and flows of Macedonian postmodern works were

discussed in those issues. The same year, 1986, Alexandar Prokopiev and Hristo Petreski brought out a new program-text called *No posing for the first prose-ing.*

The first monograph about postmodernism was written by Danilo Kocevski in 1989 under the title *The postmodern poetics.* The first *Anthology of the Macedonian postmodern short-story* appeared in 1990, edited by Savo Cvetanovski. It contained works by the first heralds of Macedonian postmodernism: Mitko Madjunkov, Zoran Kovačevski, Vase Mančev, Eftim Takovski, Dimitrie Duracovski, Alexandar Prokopiev, Jadranka Vladova, Hristo Petreski, Blaže Minevski and Venko Andonovski.

The first master and doctoral theses appeared in book form at the end of the 1990s. They discussed postmodernism in general and described its particular theoretical methods. The following titles are worth mentioning: *From dialogism to intertextuality* by Elizabeta Šeleva (Magor, Skopje 2000), *Postmodern literary studies* by Jasna Koteska (Makedonska kniga, Skopje 2002), *Accused of postmodernism* by Robert Alaǵozovski (Magor, Skopje 2003), *Intertextuality in the novel* by Marija Georgieva (Tri, Skopje 2003), *Hypertextual dialogues* by Angelina Banović-Markovska (Magor, Skopje 2004), *Playful-letter – essays on the play in literature* by Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser (Magor, Skopje 2004), *In the whirlpool of derealization – the double bottom of the Macedonian play* by Nataša Avramovska and others. These works analyze the basic postulates of Macedonian cosmopolitan-orientated postmodernism, pointing out its connections with postmodernism in general.

Macedonian postmodernism participates in the general move towards broadening the framework of literature by changing the genre status of books with respect to the common genre system. One genre can hide in the shadow of another, dissembling its attributes, a phenomenon that may be called genre mimic or simply genre "disarrangement". This leads to new systems that do not correspond to old genre conventions and create mid-genre or above-genre mega-genre works, hybrids pointing in different directions. Among the first to experiment such approaches to genre is Slavko Janevski's novel, *Seven numbers roulette*, to which Robert Alaǵozovski refers as "a loose combination that fragmentarily intertwines newspaper-technique, interview, theater review, essays, bible-ism, commercials, futurology, comments, didascaly, horror-thriller" (Alaǵozovski 2004: 13). Similarly Vlada Urošević's *The court poet in a flying machine* appears as a hybrid of science-fiction, adventure and a gothic novel. See also Goce Smilevski's recent novel, *A conversation with Spinoza* and *Insomnia* by Dimitrie Duracovski: the former is composed of the two sub-genres of psychological novel and philosophical discourse, the latter is a chronicle that many theorists regard as a genuine novel.

As a matter of fact, *Insomnia* does not match any of the recognizable genre stereotypes because it unites miscellaneous literary and non-literary structures. It has been described as a conglomerate of artistic and linguistic elements composed of journal meditations, e-mails, excerpts from film and visual art reviews, in other words, an interweaving of various intertextual elements with limitless possibilities of interfering, overflowing and crossbreeding. As Stojmenska-Elzeser puts it, "intertextuality is imposing on literature a new, linking category of mutual bindings" *vis-à-vis* "the locked

image of the tradition wherein everything is settled down and organized in accordance with the recognized literary-historical conventions" (Stojmenska-Elzeser s.d.: 175). The logocentric concepts within this textual play, such as the author or the work itself, are deprived of their initial meaning, thereby replacing it with a model of open eruptive presentation that initiates a new diversity of the meaning. As shown first by Barthes and Foucault, the traditional idea of authorship is undermined by minimizing its role or by playing with the author's identity. This is the case with the short-story *Granule* by Krste Čačanski: the plot is about a restorer who discovers his own portrait under the layers of a fresco, and this creates a metalepsis reducing the author to the role of a "guest" in the text. In *Chemical wedding* by Dimitrie Duracovski the reader is confronted with the pursuit of an unidentified author. References from various works in form of citations, allusions, translations, parody etc., convey the idea of "the author's death", though it is very closely related to intertextuality. At the end we doubt the authorship itself, undermining the illusion of "referentiality" and the idea of the existence of an autonomous original work.

Quotations and intertextual relationships may be regarded as recognizable dominant features immanent to both the early postmodern works (the first short-stories of Prokopiev and Duracovski have an abundance of obvious – though hidden – quotations taken from marginal or exotic sources), and recent works by younger authors such as Andonovski, which contain numerous recognizable and false quotations and mystifications. Erasing the lines between different discourses is the basic inherent quality of postmodern prose as well as an indication of some serious upcoming changes in the narration. The introduction of scientific references in the narrative implies recognizing, deciphering, interpreting and comparing between the texts and creates the effect of a specific atmosphere of playfulness.

The playfulness of postmodernism is evident not only in the creative combination of elements of different origins in one work (whether literary or non-literary), but in the playing with the whole history of literature (folklore, realism, modernism) as well. Irony, parody, persiflage, metafictionality are often used to dig the foundations of the recognizable values. Hence we are achieving the much-needed transformation of any realistic or modern prose patterns that are now ready to move the frontiers of the absolute. There are no longer fixed sizes, dogmatic truths, motionless structures, everything is dynamic and subject to doubt. Deconstruction and reconstruction techniques are reviving the old molded texts, attaching to them a completely new meaning and making them look brand new. Hence, the logocentric premise that an established text – unlike others – holds a higher meaning or position becomes extremely questionable. A good example of this way of proceeding may be found in the works of Ermis Lafazanovski, where productive folklore elements integrate with others coming from "authentic", ludicrous and innovative creativity: the combination of these components brings a new text adhering to recognizable social paradigms. Such a text, enriched with frank humor

and dethroning carnival depictions, is highly polyphonic, dispersive and open, and at the same time creatively mimic.

By following its own open poetical concept, postmodernism huddles works of an auto-referential character, but makes of this closeness and self-centeredness the constructive presumption of its own openness. Alexandar Prokopiev's book *Anti-instructions for personal usage* may be considered as a very suitable example of prose of this kind. His narrative is full of meta-textual elements, such as writing for the sake of writing or reading; at the same time, the work reveals the author's outlook, his intentions and viewpoint on art and life, it analyses particular hidden meanings and types of reading of his own conceptual foundations. All these elements are put in the context of "straying " from standard rational and logical discourse and meaning. They are in search of a principle that would be able to express "the logic" of the irrational, like the hypotheses about the counter proportionate *ratio* of information and meaning (Baudrillard 2001: 84).

Postmodernism deprives the absolute of its throne and casts doubt on reality, truth and common sense. Abandoning logocentrism as a system for presenting the universe is a characteristic feature of Venko Andonovski's works, especially of his novels *Alphabet for the misbehaving* and *The navel of the world*, where this process is evident not only in the narrative structure, but in the very plot of the novel. In these works one can clearly recognize the lack of perfection, the language defects and the author's skepticism about his ability to give us the proper image of the world. These are just initial presumptions that are meant to be developed into a more profound view of literary reality and of the quest for truth, followed by the doubt that there is only one truth. The only legitimate path to construct relations between literature and reality (we'll refer to them as "referential illusions") starts from the "agonic line" of the heroes in the novels. The reference question in the works of Andonovski is nothing but a question of intertextuality, where encyclopedic information given by letters is incremented by apocryphal documents and hermeneutical principles of Christian philosophy, interpreted with a new axiological system. Andonovski may easily be seen as an illustration of some fundamental ideas expressed by Derrida about the impossibility of recognizing a unique referential meaning of a word, since words are the result of the differences in the traces which point to entirely different histories and contexts of the use of the word itself (Derrida 1976: 84). Hence, language is described as an instrument of lies, of self-deception. Indeed, the crisis and inability of the language to express the principal images from life, projected through the fall of logocentrism, is one of Andonovski's favourite ideas. The lack of any possibility of telling the stories is a philosophical issue concerning the problem of relativity and exactitude. Such ideas are also subtly incorporated into some short-stories placed in his compilation entitled – quite wittily – *Frescos and Grotesques*. Thanks to their total openness and inexactness, these stories provide a sort of explanation of the concepts of truth and entity, of power and culture, of the one and the many.

This inevitably provokes the following question: What kind of narrative principles are used to achieve all this? The only possible answer is to renounce firm semantic de-

termination and to rely only on scattered and interrupted narration, to apply to aesthetically undefined verbal and visual material, liable to numerous combinations and based on deconstructivistic principles concerning form, subject, style, metanarration and hypertextualization. These methods bring the novel *Alphabet for the misbehaving* closer to the recognizable concept of freedom, a concept intended to stand against the closed, static character of literature. The author is granted free will to construct the text while the readers are supposed to comprehend the plot creatively and connect the dots according to their own interests and viewpoints. The whole text thus exists as a compilation of independent fragments that can be put into any order. Playfulness and imagination are in the hands of both the author and the reader, who, from their own perspective, build and spread a different cobweb. The construction of *Alphabet of the misbehaved* and *Universal cracked-up glossary of Macedonian words* by Pandolf Vulkanski makes them look like raw materials in a printing house. Anyway, so far, it cannot unfortunately be said that we have any polyvalent or vivacious Macedonian hypertextual literature on the Internet.

Playfulness in postmodern works produces hypersemantics often considered as a loss of significance. I am not thinking just about a search for lost or forgotten meanings: we are dealing here with the deeper meaning of the word and questions like how many worlds are out there in the dark, what they are built of, are they similar to each other, what happens when they confront each other. The answer might be as follows: the contemporary interpretation of the world comes from the cognition that it is no longer a passive reflection of the entity, but it is built upon manifold representations derived from the sign and the symbol in the basics of the sciences and the arts. The assumptions of science or fiction of the arts are based on many random metaphors that give the artist and the scientist the freedom to reveal the world exactly as they have created it. Consequently, the apprehension of the meanings is just a multiplication of creative recycling.

History is no less concerned with this process, it loses its orthodox meaning and turns into a pile of images. History – and therefore the historic idea – fits into what Karl Popper described as the inability to verify science. Postmodernism does not cast history aside, far from it: it just modifies the use of historical materials. Historical material is still an important component in postmodern works, though certainly not in the direction of building a genealogy of the collective spirit: it serves rather as "ready made" principle to rearrange the temporally fixed historical personages, sometimes even anonymous.

In this sense, among Macedonian postmodern authors, Jasna Koteska perceives two models of new historicism (Koteska 2002: 346). The first develops fiction through an obvious travesty and ironization of officially recognized history, as we saw in the works of Andonovski and Lafazanovski; the second one employs the marginal historical names and events thereby officializing nonofficial history. This approach, noted in the early phase of Macedonian postmodernism by Prokopiev and Duracovski, is an invasion in itself and there is no point in using any additional demystification of legiti-

mate history. Anyhow, postmodernism is not casting a doubt only on historic legitimacy but on any other value which after that is to be ruthlessly scrutinized.

Allow me to conclude – in a postmodern manner – by leaving this brief article open and stressing the following: the statement of the Enlightenment that the word, speech, common sense and the mind rule the world, has been broken and misted over in the postmodern era. This is the inevitable result of the crisis of science: the crisis in itself may be considered a "productive" event, for it is only by questioning the preceding paradigms that we can open the way for progression. The crisis of logocentrism and history are not leaving Macedonian postmodern production aside. As in Thomas Kuhn's theory, any crisis is essential if we are to achieve and to introduce new post-cognitive spiritual values – the values our cultural tradition aims at.

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