**Review**

of Neli Popova, “Identity, Memory and Otherness in the Novels of Rea Galanaki”, PhD thesis in research field 2. Humanities, area 2.1. Philology, PhD program "Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia (contemporary Greek literature)

by Prof. Todor Hristov, Department of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature, Faculty of Slavic Philology, The University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski”

On the basis of order No. RD-38-319/12.06.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" I was appointed as a member of the scientific jury for the defense of the PhD thesis of Neli Popova. The procedure complies with the relevant normative requirements. The PhD student meets the requisite minimum national requirements for scientific field 2. Humanities, area 2.1. Philology as well as the requirements of the applicable normative acts and the code of the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Research Activity

Neli Popova has graduated in contemporary Greek philology at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski", with an academic minor in French language and literature. She is teaching contemporary Greek language and literature since 2002. Neli Popova is an assistant professor at the University of Sofia since 2008. Her selected publications include 9 academic publications in edited collections (one of which in a foreign publishing house) and 5 translations from Greek.

Evaluation of the Thesis

The thesis consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, an addendum and a bibliography; the volume of the dissertation is 190 pages; the bibliography consists of 129 titles, of which 97 are in Greek, French and English. As the StrikePlagiarism report demonstrates, the thesis is an original work of Neli Popova.

The object of study are four novels by Rea Galanaki. The goal is to analyze the relations between identity, memory and otherness. To a reader uninitiated in contemporary humanities, the task might seem clear. Nonetheless, it has inspired a conceptual and interpretative discovery. To outline it, I will contrast Popova's account with the non-critical, naive approach that still forms the basis of present-day identity politics.

According to that approach, identity is self-evident or at least transparent to the self: I know who I am, and who I am not; therefore, I am defined by knowledge of the difference between myself and the other; insofar assuch a difference is subjectively experienced, it cannot be objectively verified; identity is based on that differential knowledge reflecting my self-reflexive experience.

However, the protagonists of Galanaki's novels defy that notion of identity: Ismail Ferik Pasha is both Muslim and Greek; Eleni Boukoura-Altamura poses as a male art student while being a woman in love; Andreas Rigopoulos, the last romantic in an unromantic age, is split between love and revolution; Martha Matsa, a half-Jewish teacher in a Crethan village, is alienated from herself in the eyes of the villagers as a "female Judas" (p. 148).

Such split lives demonstrate that the naive notion of identity as self-definition has semiotic conditions of possibility: firstly, it relies on a grid of disjunctions: Greek or Muslim or Jew; either a painter or a woman; either a lover or a revolutionary. Secondly, the oppositions are combined with evaluations, perhaps even a system of judgment: Ismail Ferik Pasha and Martha Matsa are rejected by the Crethans as not really Greek; after discarding her male mask, Eleni Boukoura-Altamura does not become a proper woman; Andreas Rigopoulos is "not so passionately in love with Louise" (p. 113). Thirdly, any negative judgment triggers another classification: since the Crethan boy has come home as an Ottoman general, he is an enemy, and if he is not even an enemy, then he is a traitor; since Eleni is consumed by mourning instead of living a normal life, and since she is a woman, she is a witch; in his love life, Andreas Rigopoulos metamorphoses into Loui who, in contrast with his public self, is no longer a revolutionary who outlived the revolution, but rather the ideal inspiring the true revolutionary, Louise, who, locked in her privacy, disturbs the social order of the local community more deeply than the Greek uprising with her desperate love for Loui.

To sum up, any identity is grounded on an arborescent series of qualifications and disqualifications. That discursive ground makes possible any self-definition, yet the non-critical approaches to identity fail to take it onto account. Galanaki's novels narrate lives that breach the ground of self-definition, and consequently, foreground identity as a problem. To approach that problem, Neli Popova applies the classical distinction between identity and ipseity proposed by Paul Ricœur. Yet although thesis summarizes his concepts with an outstanding clarity and precision, they are the starting point rather than the end of the analysis. Following Ricœur, Neli Popova assumes that identity has a temporal dimension, and although one is constantly changing, one remains oneself insofar as she or he is able to organize her or his life as a story; furthermore, to tell one's story one has to remember what happened, but memory is not a chronicle; it is a lived past rather than a chain of datable events; it entails a subject, and thus, it is organized as a life story; as a consequence, both identity and memory are structured as narratives. However, in her novels Rea Galanaki describes lives that do not develop as a storyline. As it was already noted, the lives of her protagonists are traversed by liminal thresholds beyond which one becomes other, yet the shadow of his past self always follows her or him, so that she or he is neither what she or he has been, nor what she or he have become. Galanaki's protagonists are inescapable not-whole, and thus, their lives can be recounted only in the form of fragments, both narrative almost lyrical. Furthermore, stories such as those of Ismail Ferik Pasha or Eleni Boukoura-Altamura cannot be recounted in one voice, hence the complex, delicately balanced polyphony described by Neli Popova in her discussion of Galanaki's poetics (p. 21; perhaps the most obvious illustration of that polyphony is the enunciation in *I Shall Sign as Loui* where the voice of Andreas Rigopoulos is mediated by Louise's reading of his letters).

Instead of a storyline, such fragments of lives delineate fractures, and thus, open up a depth beyond or beneath the self-reflexive subjectivity whose principle can be condensed in the formula 'I am myself and not an other'. From the singular vantage point provided by Galanaki's novels, Neli Popova describes the otherness that makes us ourselves. The study captures that otherness by the concept of memory derived from the works of Paul Ricœur and Vladimir Jankélévitch. Nevertheless, she makes a step beyond their theoretical framework because both Ricœur and Jankélévitch associate memory with the type of subjectivity studied by phenomenologists, whereas in her novels Rea Galanaki describes memory whose roots can be traced beyond the phenomenological subject and even beyond the individual unconscious, to the sunless realm of the dead, to the dust of the archives, to the sands of historical past (this is the reason why Jungian psychoanalysis is methodologically indispensable to the study). More importantly, the roots of memory as described by Neli Popova reach beyond the ground of the past that was once actual to the aether of pure past that has never been and perhaps could not have been actualized (see for example the analysis on p. 92–97). Galanaki's protagonists are haunted by traumas, but the traumas are more than wounds left by strokes of life: Ismail is traumatized by the impossibility of any homecoming; Andreas is derailed by the obsolescence of his ideals; Eleni has been mortally wounded by the loss of their potential lives as an artist and a beloved woman. They all suffer not only from what has been but also by what could have been, from potential as well as from actual losses. Their lives are like gardens of forking paths, and whatever they choose, they end up walking on diverging trajectories, irreversibly deserting themselves, disseminating themselves into a multiplicity of possible yet incompossible selves. I believe that this is the most important discovery made by Neli Popova while she follows the paths of Galanaki's protagonists: we are who we are because of what we could have been, because of the memory of other lives that we never lived; therefore, our identity, any identity is unavoidably poised over the depths of memory, as a bridge across the chasm of inner otherness.

That discovery leads to two important reevaluations. Firstly, the historians of Greek literature often classify Rea Galanaki as a postmodernist author (see p. 11, 15). In the last decade, however, the discursive value of postmodernism has changed. What does it mean to account for a novel as postmodern now, when postmodernism belongs to the past rather than to the future, as it was still the case at the turn of the century? Neli Popova solves the problem by rethinking the concept of postmodernism. In her study, it has acquired the depth and the intensity of redemption (p. 169–170). Like the conventional postmodernist fiction, redemptive postmodernism opens up an inverted perspective to the national mythology, it shifts the focus from national identity to the interplay between faces and masks, it descibes singular existences rather than representative lives, and it develops as a self-reflexive narrative folded onto itself so as to delineate its conditions of possibility (in that sense, her novels can be considered as a historiographic metafiction). However, that postmodernist frame circumscribes a series of topoi familiar from the romantic novel: love, revolt, exile, loss, lack, nostalgia, melancholia, trauma, homecoming, motherhood. Moreover, the topoi are composed so as to pose a deeply human question: how to live with the past; how swallow it up despite its bitterness; how to redeem it. To resolve that question, even though she problematizes the identity of the agents, Galanaki represents a human agency. Therefore, her work is inherently humanist, precisely because of being redemptively postmodernist. Perhaps the concept of redemptive postmodernism cannot be generalized to any work labeled as postmodernist, yet it captures well not only the poetics of Rea Galanaki but also the characteristic features of the new form of humanism which emerged out of the attempts to solve the problems posed by postmodernism rather than ignoring them, and which Neli Popova associates with Tzvetan Todorov. Secondly, Galanaki's works have been often read in the perspective of feminism (p. 13). The thesis provides a clear and comprehensive summary of the feminist readings, particularly of *Eleni, or Nobody*. Although Neli Popova does not deny the productivity of feminism, she distinguishes it from the perspective of the author herself, and emphasizes that for Rea Galanaki the enunciative position of the woman is irreducible to écriture féminine because it is already shaped by problems deeper than gender identity, for instance the problem what mode of writing is capable of doing justice to history and its interlacing with human destinies.

Comments and questions

In the interview included as an addendum to the thesis, Rea Galanaki, in response to Popova's question about the depths of identity, mentions that the identity of all her protagonists is organized around an "invincible core". Galanaki describes that core as "inner purity" (p. 173). In the response to the following question, the core seems to be linked, albeit not explicitly, to the early childhood and to the erasure of earlier identifications by later ones. Therefore, the core of identity has a temporal dimension. If that reading of the interview is acceptable, then is it justifiable to assume that the core of any identity is memory beyond memory, the memory of an originary purity lost with childhood? Is any identity based on a "nostalgic desire to return to the time of innocence, and thus, a desire for redemption and salvation" (p. 106).

Thesis abstract and relevant publications

The thesis abstract follows the conventions of the genre and correctly summarizes the contents and the achievements of the dissertation. The documents refer to 6 academic publications which are undoubtedly original works by Neli Popova. The text of the publications submitted with the thesis develops further the analysis of subjectivity in the novels of Rea Galanaki. Since the arguments of the publications are successfully integrated into the dissertation, therefore is no need to discuss them separately.

Recommendation

The thesis offers a insightful and convincing analysis of the main problem: the nexus between identity, memory and otherness in Rea Galanaki's novels. Her work is situated in a detailed picture of the Greek prose after 1974. Neli Popova has taken into account an impressive amount of secondary literature on Galanaki. The analysis is based on a productive conceptual framework derived not only from the already mentioned Paul Ricœur, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Carl Jung and Tzvetan Todorov but also from Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Lawrence Grossberg, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Mark Freeman, Jan Assman, Maurice Halbwachs, Julia Kristeva (all discussed and used with admirable precision). I have no hesitations that the thesis submitted by Neli Popova is a significant achievement in the field of literary studies. In view of that, I strongly recommend to the jury to award Neli Popova the academic and educational degree "doctor" in field 2. Humanities, area 2.1. Philology (Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Africa, Asia and Australia; contemporary Greek literature).

Reviewer:

May 14, 2024

Sofia