

Review

of Yoanna Neykova, “The Fragmentary Exigency and the Potential of Literary Transgression”, PhD thesis in research field 2. Humanities, area 2.1. Philology (Literary Theory)

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

On the basis of order No. RD-38-99 of 19.02.2024 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 Yoanna Ivanova Neykova. 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 (Theory of literature) as well as the requirements of the applicable normative acts and the code of the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Research Activity of the PhD student

Yoanna Neykova graduated from the BA program "Bulgarian Philology" and the MA program "Literary Studies" at the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski". From 2020 to 2023, she was a full-time doctoral student in literary theory; since 2022, she is a reader in literary theory at my home department. She is the author of 5 publications in edited collections and 7 papers, including 1 presented at an international conference and 2 at conferences with international participation. The presented dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion; the volume is 222 pages; the bibliography

consists of 162 titles, of which 101 are in English, French and German. As the StrikePlagiarism report demonstrates, the thesis is an original work of Joanna Neikova.

Evaluation of the Thesis

The fragment can be conceived of differently: as a genre, a practice, a concept. Yoanna Neikova considers it as a requirement to step beyond the limits, towards the edge of the possible (p. 6–7). Since such a step beyond is possible primarily in thinking and writing, the thesis constructs the fragment as a concept of writing and thinking at the edge of the possible. In this section of the review, I will briefly describe the defining features of this concept.

As it was already noted, the first step in developing the concept is a step beyond the reduction of the fragment to a genre or discursive form. That first step already leads to an aporia: a fragment is not a whole, but it is what it is only insofar as it is a fragment of a whole; therefore, the fragment is possible due to an absent whole, it is shaped by the the pressure of "a center that organizes and gives meaning to each of the fragments, without disturbing its fragmentary nature and without including it in a given totalizing structure" (127–28, n. 233). The fragment therefore implies a particular mode of representation that Yoanna Neykova describes as the presence of the absent (154); an expression of the lack of inner completeness (71); "blossoming of the hidden and closed" (150); "immediate obviousness which at the same time holds at its core something hidden" (64).

However, what is a fragment insofar as the condition of its possibility is the absence of the whole to which it belongs? One can find a way out of the aporia if one assumes that an absent whole is not simply non-existent but rather a whole that has existed or can exist (44, 48). In

the first case, one would treat the fragment as an archaeological object (79), perhaps even as an object of a discursive archeology (44; Foucault claims that it is precisely the fragmentary that is the object of discourse analysis). Yoanna Neykova opts for the second, "more enigmatic" (7) option. As a result, the first aporia develops into a second one: the fragment is possible due to the absence of a possible whole, but at the same time the whole is possible because of the fragment; therefore, the fragment makes possible the condition of its possibility. Nevertheless, the whole to which the fragment refers is not an abstract possibility; it has not sunk in the non-necessarily true pasts like the impossibility conceptualized by Gilles Deleuze. Instead, the whole that makes possible and is made possible by the fragment is rooted in the future (48). The fragment is, thus, essentially a movement that transcends the horizon of the presence.

For the purposes of this review, we can summarize Neykova's concept in the formula that the fragment is what is not yet. Despite its brevity and incompleteness, this formula already demonstrates, firstly, that fragments imply a particular form of negativity retracing the rift between what is and what can be the case. In the course of the study, this negativity unfolds in a series of contextual variants: boundary, discontinuity, opposition, rift, edge, gap, limit, the outside. Secondly, the originary negativity of the fragmentary is not static: it is the condition for the possibility of a becoming which in turn makes the fragment possible (10–11, 150). Nonetheless, although this becoming is driven by negativity, it is inconceivable as a dialectic. Instead, Neykova describes the becoming of a fragment as an eternal return (16); as a beginning interrupting a process so as to allow it to begin again (22); "a mobile, dynamically fragmented unity" (150); "an endless series of mirrors that multiply and disseminate the given forms" (38). Although Yoanna Neykova notes the dialectical origin of this becoming, the dialectic here is folded onto itself, it is closed in a circle, perhaps even

condensed to a point. This allows a third conceptual move: Yoanna Neykova assumes that the fragment is precisely the becoming of the fragmentary; in her words, fragment means restlessness (6), pressure (129), movement (129), dynamism (85, 150), the eternal historical decay (81), a step beyond the actual that does not lead to another actuality.

One of the key achievements of the thesis is the idea to conceptualize the becoming of the fragment as a transgression (20). It develops the concepts of fragment beyond its limited horizon, and turns it into an optics for studying the immanent negativity of becoming. In this respect, Yoanna Neykova follows a line of problematization outlined by Michel Foucault.

The introduction to the dissertation summarizes that line of problematization as follows:

"freeing transgression from the contradictory logic characteristic of dialectical discourse"

(22). One should also take into account that Yoanna Neikova's view of transgression makes possible a new, productive reading of Maurice Blanchot's much-interpreted texts on literature which focuses on the conceptual proximity between Blanchot and Bataille (136). More importantly, that Foucauldian reading of transgression disentangles Blanchot's concepts from the knot of dialectics and substitutes it for the well-known concept of *désouvement* (77)

However, if the fragment is becoming, it involves power; insofar as the becoming of the fragment is an expression of immanent negativity, this power is negative, yet immanent to the fragmentary (121). The study describes a series of variants of the power of that immanent negativity: the pressure exerted by the limits of the literary work (11); the neutral writing which forces language to transgress itself (24); "the beginning of the oeuvre interrupting the continuity of the original" (142); "the resistance of literature to subjectivity and unequivocal messages" (12); the metaphorical or metaphysical subject questioning "the notion that a literary work is unified, complete and whole" (10); the exhaustion of language (162); the

obliterating power of speech (195); the work of death in life (191). All the variants of the power of becoming-fragmentary are organized in a constellation centered around the concept of fragmentary exigency (15). Yoanna Neykova derives it from one of Blanchot's fragments. To conceptualize it, she links it to the romantic idea about fragmentarity discussed in *The Literary Absolute* by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (35); additionally, as is often the case in contemporary Bulgarian theory, the fragmentary exigency is developed into a concept by means of the accumulation of alternative translations. The concept of fragmentary exigency is itself unfolded as a series of variations: literary absolute (34); dialogue (55); fragmentary principle (60); ruin (81); allegory (107); borderline experience (135); commencement (142); modesty (147); prophecy (155). This series of variations incorporate the fragmentary exigency into the discursive texture of the particular analyses in the thesis and, at the same stroke, constitutes it as the absent center which transforms into allegories of the fragmentary Neykova's discussions of early German romanticism, Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, Yulia Krasteva, Hölderlin, Samuel Beckett, Paul Auster and Maurice Blanchot himself. This approach, based on the transformation of concepts into allegories, should also be recognized as an important achievement of the study.

Questions and Remarks

I would like to pose three questions intended to further clarify the theoretical perspectives outlined in the thesis. Firstly, insofar as the fragmentary exigency is an expression of power, is this power inherent in literature (as an "essential aspect", 8; see also 171); or, on the contrary, we should recognize the power of fragmentation in the immanent negativity of any becoming; or should we actually conceive of literature itself as a becoming, as a fragment that is always 'not yet' because it "aims at the future, at all ... that could be" (34)? Secondly,

in the ending of the first chapter one can find the following statement: "The fragment is a form of communication, its individuality and singularity presupposes the establishment of a community based on language" (59). I would like to ask whether this statement can be generalized as an account of the fragmentary exigency in general, or is the statement only valid for romanticism. Thirdly, "in the section "The Song as a Beginning: Orpheus", where Blanchot comments on the image of the Thracian poet in Rilke's poetry, he notes that "He [Orpheus] is the poetic work, if the work could become a poet, it would have become an ideal, an example of poetic integrity" (144). Does that comment refer only to the figure of Orpheus in Rilke's work interpreted by Blanchot, or Yoanna Neykova considers it as a characteristic feature of fragmentarity; in the latter case, how can one balance between the ideal of embodying the poetic work as a poet and the pressure to establish a community mentioned in the context of my second question?

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 5 scientific publications which are undoubtedly original works by Yoanna Neykova. The text of the publication submitted with the thesis extends further the analysis of the neutral writing in the novels of Samuel Beckett. Since the arguments of the publications are successfully integrated into the dissertation, therefore is no need to discuss them separately.

Recommendation

The innovative, philologically scrupulous and erudite thesis submitted by Yoanna Neykova is a significant achievement in the field of literary theory. In view of that, I strongly recommend to the jury to award Yoanna Neykova the academic and educational degree "doctor" in field 2. Humanities, area 2.1. Philology (Theory of literature).

Reviewer:

May 10, 2024

Sofia