

STATEMENT

on the PhD dissertation of Francesca Ivanova Zemyarska

“Mask and Gender in Marguerite Yourcenar’s Work: Staging of Voice”

in 2.1. Philology

Literature of the Peoples of Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia – Western European
Literature

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by

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Subject, aims and objectives of the dissertation

Francesca Zemyarska's dissertation "Mask and Gender in Marguerite Yourcenar's Work: Staging the Voice" is an original literary research that weaves in unexpected perspectives and enriches the context of contemporary literary studies in Bulgaria. First of all, Marguerite Yourcenar's work has not been the subject of a dissertation study in Bulgaria, nor of a monographic work, and from this point of view the choice and direction of the study are valuable. The research perspective is also original, involving both complex cultural-historical, literary and anthropological categories such as gender, mask and voice, and attempting to relate the research to the stakes of the idea of world literature. Relating the complex and multidimensional categories of gender, mask and voice creates a number of expectations and opens up unsuspected possibilities.

A basic premise of the dissertation is the culture of the book, of the text, and of the humanist heritage as a whole as inseparable from the construction of the subject as a site of intersection and intersounding of voices, of the co-enactment of masks. From this perspective, the categories of *voice* and *mask* are used as heuristic tools of a process that I would describe as the literary genesis of the subject, or even as the epigenesis of the subject. The dissertation expresses this plastic quality of the subject with the definitions of the Emperor Hadrian borrowed by Yourcenar from the *Memoirs of Hadrian: varius, multiplex, multiformis*. I note in passing that the notions of metamorphosis and plasticity (and hence *figure*) are closely associated with this conceptual order.

This PhD dissertation attests to an exemplary command of the object of study, first and foremost the entire corpus of Marguerite Yourcenar's work, as well as that of Virginia Woolf and Thomas Mann. The work also testifies to a capacity for in-depth comparative work, for interpretation and contextualization of the text, and for working with theoretical tools that manifest cultural, historical, political, and existential substrata. The theoretical tools used are fully adequate to the direction and tasks of the work, as well as its literary-historical character. Of course, from a strictly theoretical perspective, the theoretical spectrum could be more complex and further clarified; but this is not the main task of this literary-historical study, in which the theoretical toolkit functions precisely as a tool. It allows the elucidation of questions of the constitution of the figure of the subject in the narrative text, through the plas-

tic modulation of discursive and narrative “instances”, through the multidimensionality and fluidity of their elaboration into narrative figures. In this respect, the “voice” and the “mask”, the main analytical categories of Zemyarska’s research, constitute a kind of transformative device reworking the level of discourse at the level of figure. From this point of view, the tasks of the work are fully and successfully fulfilled.

I will focus my examination and evaluation on several aspects of Francesca Zemyarska’s dissertation, corresponding to my research competences and priorities.

Methodology

The methodology is based upon significant theoretical propositions and concepts (the importance of the authoritative studies of Julia Kristeva, Miglena Nikolchina and Amelia Licheva is highlighted at the outset), which she organizes into an original theoretical constellation that has a heuristic role. Zemyarska’s interpretive method, even if inspired by various disciplinary paradigms and models, is largely derived ad hoc from the texts under study, unfolding their reflexive potentiality (which in authors such as Yourcenar, Thomas Mann and Virginia Woolf often receives autonomous expression, even producing an autonomous meta-critical layer). If my assumption that the narrative text, and the literary text more generally, produces immanent patterns of its own semantic regulation, then the interpretive operations performed by Zemyarska are not only legitimate but justified, if not necessary. For me, there is no doubt that it is the interpretive operations that focus the heuristic potential of the work and make it a contributory work.

The main theoretical categories of the work – *mask* and *voice* – have a particular dual status; they represent both a research object and an analytical tool. They are introduced correlative as follows: “The work’s hypothesis concerning mask and voice is that they do not oppose each other but enter into a common dynamic through what Yourcenar notes as a specific technique of its writing, which involves the staging of a narrative voice through whose timbre, range, pitch, and internal modulations both the novel’s fictional reality, the narrative’s time, and the heterogeneous subject in process are smoothed. Crucially, the voice is always secondary and reconstructed, imagined through texts, archives, and written traces.” This stag-

ing is complex; the disjunction between discursive object and subject will take on constructive significance and has a productive effect.

The mask in particular is conceived as a particular modality of the figure, introduced and successfully motivated by the following thesis of Roland Barthes: “These dramaturgical portraits, which we may safely call *dramatis personae*, are the figures of the discourse of love: “These fragments of discourse may be called figures. The word is not to be understood in a rhetorical sense, but rather in a gymnastic or choreographic sense; in short, it is not a ‘scheme’ in the Greek sense; much more vividly it expresses the gesture of the body caught in action” (p. 149) I note in passing that the dissertation thus connects with and unfolds the perspective that I define as figure studies and which has a significant tradition in Bulgaria (at least since Tsvetan Stoyanov), including in the PhD student’s research unit – from her supervisor Miglena Nikolchina’s engagement with the figure of Prometheus at the end of the last century to the very recent research of Kamelia Spassova and Bogdana Paskaleva. I believe that this continuity is valuable for the development of an original Bulgarian literary-historical practice and methodology.

Interpretations and theoretical potential

A particular quality of the dissertation is the interpretive work. The proposed interpretations, often based on intertextual relations between the studied narrative texts, testify to a genuine literary-historical culture, above all to a thorough knowledge of periods and trends of European and classical literatures (a necessary quality for a young researcher, but also a teacher of literary history).

I will present some reflections and considerations on two of the central concepts and interpretations. This will not be a critique, but an outlining of a field of conversation, which in itself reveals the potential of the dissertation to provoke questions and further interpretation. My comments can be conceived of precisely as questions deployed.

The first consideration and question relates to the notion of ‘gender’, introduced as a guiding concept already in the title of the thesis. The connection between the concepts of

mask and *gender* in the title created an expectation that the problematics of identity would be considered in relation to the problematics of gender fluidity and its discursive construction shared by the main authors for the study. Already in the Introduction, Zemyarska states, “The theoretical presuppositions operating throughout the work suggest that gender is constructed through a discursive masquerade, so that the idea of identification is seen not as monolithic, fixed, or essentialist, but as playful. Hence the direct link between mask and gender” (p. 5) This position is articulated in a clear and convincing way. Yet, if the concepts of “voice” and “mask” are introduced are convincingly methodologically outlined in the introductory sections of the study, the concept of “gender” only receives theoretical density in the key to grasping the overall thrust of the work, Chapter IV. “Masked Ball and Fragments of Love Discourse” (especially in Part 3. “Misandre and Achilles: Gender as Mask,” naming the key problem), mostly through the prism of **Judith Sarnecki’s study *When Our Gender Is a Lie*** (and through her Judith Butler). The chapter introduces a constellation of classical figures and myths through the lens of Yourcenar’s reading of them in *Flames*, thus enriching the theoretical stakes and original interpretive contributions of the study. Undoubtedly, these sections are strategic in nature: they constitute a kind of interpretive prism that brings the complex and multidimensional focus of the study into clear focus. This leads me to question whether the place of the strategic parts in question is not rather at the beginning of the thesis – such an organization would allow to avoid the retroactive motivation of the central concept of the thesis.

The second consideration and question boils down to the status of the concept of humanism, which also occupies a central place in the work, firstly in Chapter IV: “Humanism that has crossed the abyss: Thomas Mann and Marguerite Yourcenar”. I was left with the feeling that the notion of ‘humanism’ was taken as somewhat self-understanding (as was the notion of ‘anti-humanism’ introduced in opposition, conceived rather trivially). At the same time, the author manages to identify the original lineage of a new type of humanism – “dark” humanism. Zemyarska takes up Yourcenar’s analysis: “The anti-humanist tendency tends towards a similar dissolution of the human; it does not go beyond the abyss. Yet Yourcenar stands on the other side: she sees the possibility of a ‘dark’ humanism in which human knowledge is prone to all kinds of transformations, in which the rational passes into the irrational and humanism into chaos. “Such a humanism, directed towards the obscure, the myste-

rious, even the arcane, seems at first sight to oppose traditional humanism: it is rather its vanguard and left wing”: Thomas Mann is seen as one of those spirits who let nothing of culture fall away, but “dangerous destroyers” (p. 128).

Certainly the revival of humanism after the caesura of the Second World War necessarily faces the abyss; neither the notion of humanism nor the notion of anti-humanism can emerge unscathed from it. From a cultural-historical perspective, it is obvious that both Thomas Mann and Yourcenar could be inscribed in the lineage of humanist tradition and culture. However, the question is more complicated from a philosophical point of view. However, in the perspective of contemporary philosophy, the position of Yourcenar and Thomas Mann would be more akin to an anti-humanist tradition (which is not to say inhuman or non-humanist, but a position, that undermines the centering on the human subject, a tendency that is already marked by Kant and Romanticism, radicalized by Nietzsche to reach a pure form in Structuralism, or in the work of authors such as Bataille, Canguilhem, Althusser, Foucault and Simondon). It is hardly possible to think Thomas Mann and even Yourcenar without Nietzsche’s anti-humanism. Moreover, the debate over the concept of humanism was at its height in the 1940s, the 1950s and 1960s (I need hardly recall the debate over Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* or Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism*). It is surprising that the dissertation does not mention Yourcenar’s famous late book on Mishima, which would also offer an unexpected “anti-humanist” key to the problematics of the mask and gender – all the more so since the book’s very title, *Mishima, ou la vision du vide*, introduces the image of the abyss. What is the reason for this “exclusion”?

I suggest, therefore, that an exploration of the ambivalence of the very notion of humanism would be particularly productive. (It is noteworthy that this type of research is one of the main directions of the work of Prof. Miglena Nikolchina, Zemyarska’s research supervisor, in relation to both the ambivalence of modern humanism and transhumanism). The notion of “dark” humanism introduced by Francesca Zemyarska is a promising step in the direction of such an analysis.

Questions, Remarks

The dissertation clearly privileges several theoretical paradigms, which is a legitimate strategic decision. What was surprising to me was the absence of leading philosophers and theorists, especially in view of the concept of *voice*, who have been present in the work of a number of colleagues in the Department of Theory and History of Literature – Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous in the first place. Is this absence symptomatic? The theory of the mask also has a long history in anthropology as well as in political philosophy along the lines of Marx.

I noticed a few minor misspellings of names, undoubtedly technical in nature: e.g., Prince Geji, Pico de la Mirandola, Jean Luc instead of Prince Genji, Pico della Mirandola, Jean-Luc.

Conclusion

Francesca Zemyarska proposes to our attention a significant research problem, subject, and interpretive perspective. The dissertation testifies to a mastery of the research context, creative intuition, a sense of the micro- and macro-levels of the literary text and the literary operation, and an ability for original comparative and interpretive work. The dissertation “Mask and Gender in Marguerite Yourcenar’s Work: Staging the Voice” is an original and valuable study that clarifies and affirms its author’s voice. On this basis, I recommend with full conviction to the esteemed jury to award Francesca Zemyarska the Educational and Research degree of Doctor (PhD).