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The European *Topos* in the New Macedonian Novel

Abstract

The European *topos* in the new Macedonian novel is accepted as a home. Young Macedonian authors consider Europe their home. The fact that they live outside the European Union, or outside the European West, which has for a long time been considered the implicit cultural centre of the world, does not make them less European. Originally born in Macedonia, a cultural centre of the distant past that used to consider Western Europe a periphery, writers such as Goce Smilevski and Olivera Kjorveziroska materialize in their works the ‘Western European *topos*’ in a seemingly sidelong, but none the less essential manner. They draw attention to the dark side of Western culture and the suppressed content that official historiography tends to conceal. They remind us that Europe’s spiritual being knows no boundaries and that literature transcends institutional, conceptual, and ethical frontiers. Liberated from European stigma (fallacious moral, repressed memory, colonial traumas), these Macedonian authors reveal certain parts of the European Shadow (the collective unconscious, the historical archives full of shameful bits). No civilization is without its dark facets. That is the law of Light. That is how Europe is, composed of West and East, but also of North and South. It is liminal and intercultural. In its process of assimilating, it becomes assimilated.

The interpretation focuses on novels by Goce Smilevski (*Razgovor so Spinoza / Conversation with Spinoza*, 2002; *Sestrata na Sigmund Frojd / Sigmund Freud’s Sister*, 2007/2010, *Vrakanjeto na zborovite / The Return of the Words*, 2015) and by Olivera Kjorveziroska (*Zakluchenoto telo na Lu / Lou’s Locked Body*, 2005).

Keywords: new Macedonian novel; Europocentric narratives; scandalous images of Europe; Balkans; imagology; alterity/otherness; history; metafiction; identity; cultural conversion; Goce Smilevski

Le *topos* européen dans le nouveau roman macédonien

Résumé

Le *topos* européen dans les romans macédoniens les plus récents est accepté comme domicile. Les jeunes auteurs macédoniens considèrent l'Europe comme leur propre maison. Le fait qu'ils vivent en dehors des frontières de l'Union européenne, c'est-à-dire hors de l'Ouest européen qui était pendant longtemps le centre culturel implicite du monde, ne les rend pas moins européens. Originaires de Macédoine, le centre culturel d'autrefois pour lequel l'Europe occidentale faisait partie de la périphérie, les écrivains comme Goce Smilevski et Olivera Kjorveziroska actualisent “le *topos* euro-occidental” d'une manière à première vue périphérique, latérale, mais d'ailleurs essentielle. Ils poussent l'attention vers la partie sombre de la culture euro-occidentale, vers les contenus que l'historiographie officielle a tendance de cacher. Ils rappellent que l'Être de l'Europe ne reconnaît pas de frontières et que la littérature dépasse les frontières institutionnelles, conceptuelles et de valeur. Libérés de la stigmatisation européenne (morale fausse, mémoire inconsciente, traumatismes coloniales), les écrivains macédoniens reflètent

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des parties de l'Ombre européenne (l'inconscient collectif, l'archive historique pleine de taches noirs). Il n'y a pas de grandes civilisations sans visage sombre. C'est la loi de la Lumière, de l'Humanisme et de la Civilisation. Elle est comme ça l'Europe : constituée d'ouest et de nord, mais aussi d'est et de sud ; liminale et interculturelle. En assimilant, elle devient elle-même assimilée.

Mots-clefs : nouveau roman macédonien ; narrations euro-centristes ; images scandaleuses de l'Europe ; les Balkans; imagologie ; altérité/être Autrui ; histoire ; métafiction ; identité ; conversion culturelle ; Goce Smilevski

In the beginning of the XXI century, Macedonian novelists were focused on the so-called 'European *topos*'. Prominent European topics were explored in the novels of some relatively young, but also well-established Macedonian authors, in a new-fangled way. In the Macedonian novel, these topics are presented through their antinomies, starting with the contradictory ethic dimension of the European *topos*, and ending with its overlaying ethnic / national and cultural diversity.²

European topics are treated in the Macedonian novel through historical narratives with literary dimension. There are plenty of topics related to: the persecution of witches, the status of free / critical thought, of philosophers and theologians, of women intellectuals in the XII century; we ought to mention, as well, the 'Spinoza question' in context of one's identity (and the multiple fields it touches, focused on: one's name, cultural integration, anti-dogmatic beliefs, language and sexual identity); 'the Freud question' (focused on questions regarding anti-Semitism, psychoanalysis, alienation, sexual, religious and gender Otherness); the 'Macedonian question' (focused on: forced migration, acculturation, restoration of identity); post-Socialistic migrations and integrations (focused on: cultural and civilizational shock, on a clash of civilizations, the European decadence, its cultural 'creolization' and hypocrisy...).

The literary transformation of European historical narratives (stories, memories) is accomplished through several techniques, such as: psychological and biographical fiction, grotesque, epistolary, in multimedia form, historiographical meta-fiction. Moreover, the sensitization of the people from the Balkans for European topics (from *dream* to *despair*), as well as the idealization of the 'European principle', the societal transitions, the change of state borders and the notions of the very term 'border' itself, have created cultural and creative ambience for the creation of a novel with dynamic, 'Eurocentric focus'. It can be added that the new Macedonian novel constitutes a nuanced image of Europe saturated with contrasts, dark shadows, traumas and stigmas. This image is almost equivalent to the European chronotope presented in the new Macedonian novel.

The term 'new', in sense of the Macedonian novel, is not mainly focused on the newer generation

² Questions regarding Jews, Russians, Netherlanders, Austrians, Germans, Italians, Portuguese, Castilians.

of novels, but on those that specifically treat the ‘European question’. These novels usually reflect the European *topos* and construct a specific literary chronotope, with an accent on Western and Central European urban places (Vienna, Amsterdam, Paris, Rome, Prague). The category ‘new novel’ is partly based on chronology and partly on style and semantics. It is basically a Euro-imagological novel that combines different genres, styles and narrative techniques: the historical and documentary technique, the meta-historical (historiographical meta-fiction), meta-fictional, intertextual, psychoanalytic, biographic, epistolary, fantastic, grotesque, allegorical.

Representatives of this literary wave of Macedonian ‘European-like novels’ are: Tanja Uroshevikj (1939), Kica Kolbe (1951), Tomislav Osmanli (1956), Ermis Lafazanovski (1961), Venko Andonovski (1964), Olivera Kjorveziroska (1965), Lidija Dimkovska (1971), Goce Smilevski (1975) and Kalina Maleska (1978). They have created meta-historiographical works with admirable aesthetic values that have caught the attention of European literary critics and audiences. The reception of some of these authors is fascinating (the novels of Goce Smilevski, for example, have been translated into over 25 languages). Some authors have won prominent European literary awards (Goce Smilevski and Lidija Dimkovska).

In recent years, Europe has become an imaginary destination and a spiritual challenge, as well as a second home, for some of these Macedonian novelists, in professional and existential terms. Some already live in the EU (Kica Kolbe, for example, lives in Germany, while Lidija Dimkovska in Slovenia); others often visit and stay for a period of time in the European literary and cultural centres (such as Goce Smilevski, the most frequently translated Macedonian author); the rest continue to live in the Republic of Macedonia, but they slowly, but surely ‘migrate’ towards the Western European region as a result of their works being translated into other languages (Olivera Kjorveziroska, Ermis Lafazanovski, Venko Andonovski, Tomislav Osmanli).³

The fact that most of these authors live in the Republic of Macedonia, or rather outside the boundaries of the European Union, makes them neither more Balkan nor less European. Only the threshold of sensibility is what is brought into question, on the Balkans, as well as in Europe; this resulted in the creation of a certain ‘criss-crossed Europe’, a zone of discrete cultural conversion and assimilation. This, consequently, reduced the rigid boundaries between European cultures. Finally, the attribute ‘European’ itself has lately experienced visible transformations that affect the category of identity in historical and in

³ The interpretation in this paper will be based on examples taken from the novels by Goce Smilevski (*Conversation with Spinoza*, 2002, *Sigmund Freud’s Sister*, 2010 and *The Return of the Words*, 2015) and Olivera Kjorveziroska (*Lou’s Locked Body*, 2005).

contemporary Europe, and these processes entail revision of the identity as such in Southeast Europe and in the Balkans.

At the beginning of the XXI century, the increased sensibility of the Balkan people towards the European *topos* became apparent. Intellectuals became visibly interested in Europe due to several major internal and external political, cultural and societal changes. Among these the most important ones were the breakup of former Yugoslavia, the declaration of independence of the Republic of Macedonia, the revision of the national and civil state (in favour of the dubious concept known as ‘multi-ethnic state’); then the change of inherited borders and moral values, the signing of the Schengen Agreement, the acceleration of migration; not less important were the manipulation with Balkan and European stereotypes of Otherness, as well as the new interpretative strategies in politics and art, the development of new technologies, media and communications (electronic publishing, social networks). Several key factors related to the European cultural policies have played their part as well. We find examples of these in the stimulative forms of integration of the Macedonian writers in European literary trends, mainly through financial support of literary translations, publishing projects with key focus on Southeast Europe and the Balkans, visits of Macedonian authors to different European residencies, winning of European awards, networking of literary festivals and associations.

This juncture affected the understanding of the European milieu, of what it meant to be a part of the European culture, but also of the very essence of the term ‘identity’. As a result of these changes, the Macedonian novel became open to the European cultural reality and history as a sort of matrix of European modernity and as a generator of subsequent ‘Euro-genic’ changes. Facing Europe closely, more personally, the Macedonian writers first experienced the European reality as a counterpoint to the marginal and marginalized Balkans, i.e. of the Macedonian ‘province’. They have also been faced with the Balkan delusions concerning European democracy, humanity and civilization. Faced with conflicting images of Europe, they began to explore the close and distant European history. They have reconstructed, in terms of fiction or meta-fiction, several historical events and personalities, primarily in terms of their internal contradictions, from the focal point of phenomenological and ontological tensions. In order to accomplish this, they did not necessarily follow, in the literal sense, the Macedonian vision of Europe. Macedonian imagology is mostly based on characters that are not Macedonians, although there are exceptional cases

(for instance in *Hrapeshko* by Ermis Lafazanovski, in *Hidden Camera* by Lidija Dimkovska or in *Casablanca* by Kica Kolbe). In other words, Europe was treated essentially, and not just through the prism of Macedonian migration in the new Macedonian novel.

The sensibility towards the European *topos* meant higher sensitivity to inherited moral, racial, gender, familial, religious and other taboos and dogmas. The liberated mind of Macedonian authors critically approached the radical forms of perfect and imperfect cultures (most notably in the opposition ‘Europe as an ideal versus the Balkans as a dump’). With this the traditional (ethic, aesthetic and ideological) criteria were destabilized, as a requirement for the establishment of a new system of values, but also of categories, that had an enormous impact on literary discourse. A new ‘worldview’ was created, or rather a discrete perception and auto-perception of Europe and the Balkans. Therefore, the literary perception of Europe has transformed into a free perception of the world via European experiences.

What is, exactly, essential for the image of Europe in the Macedonian ‘European-like’ novel? Macedonian novelists offer a vision of the ‘Western European *topos*’ from a seemingly lateral perspective. It is evident that this approach resulted in perceiving some of the essential problems of contemporary Europe. These Macedonian writers shed light on the ‘darker side’ of the Western European culture, pinpointing suppressed content, that official historiography attempts to hide and forget. The new Macedonian novel reminds us that Europe’s spiritual being does not recognize formal state borders and that literature has the ability to transcend the institutional framework, i.e. conceptual and other stereotypes related to ethnic values, as well as the divisions of the centralized and marginalized, of the bigger and smaller...

The Macedonian ‘European-like’ novels reflect, implicitly or explicitly, the relations between the Balkans and Europe, as relations between two parts of the same whole; this whole is composed of central and peripheral parts, although the identity of these two parts does shift throughout history.⁴ These novels construct a literary and conceptually provocative ‘Macedonian vision’ (image, imagology and interpretation) of Western and Central Europe in different periods (the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, as well as the end of the XX and the beginning of the XXI century). That production has profiled what today is already recognized as a wave of narrative imagology of Europe in Macedonian literature, a wave that deserves more careful interpretation in literary criticism and in literary theory.

Liberated from the Western European stigma (i.e. colonial delusions and post-colonial traumas),

⁴ The Balkans, which nowadays are considered a ‘periphery’ or as liminal and borderline regions, were once cultural centers with great significance for Europe.

the aforementioned Macedonian novelists have focused on ambitious research and on raising the awareness towards the sensitive parts of European history and on its Shadow. They enter boldly in the European archives full of testimonies of the Medieval Inquisition and the violent conversions and persecutions on religious, political, national and ideological basis, as well as of racist memories and anti-Semitic narratives.

These novelists (especially Goce Smilevski, Lidija Dimkovska and Olivera Kjorveziroska), question Europe's collective memory, eagerly inquiring and offering indisputable historical citations that illustrate the European xenophobia, moral hypocrisy, cultural hierarchy and imperial database. They have created literary, allegoric and inverted histories of Europe through the prism of the European periphery that was infiltrated and integrated in the European centres. They sometimes achieve this by carnivalization of narratives, sometimes through intertextual irony, sometimes through direct and indirect citations and personal memories, yet always remaining faithful to the method and style of literary psychoanalysis and psychological interpretations. This enabled them to reach the zones of suppressed impulses and unconscious archetypal contents, which are given in the form of concrete and recognizable historical configurations. In their novels, the immanent European cultural diversity is turned into a narrative that suffers from a guilty conscience and unsolved inner conflicts.

The aforementioned Macedonian 'European-like' writers, surrounded by the historically and politically infected Macedonian social ambient, have shaped a new, provocative, revisionist poetics of the novel, simply because they invested their time on (researching) the European *topos*. By doing so, they have manifested satiation with the domestic reality in their own country and of Macedonian history overall. This leads to an expression of resistance towards future auto-perception of domicile history, towards ethno-romantic discourses of the Balkanized 'ethnic communities' in the Republic of Macedonia, nurtured by the attempts at antiquisation by current cultural policies.

This has led the Macedonian 'Eurocentric' novelists to the true notion of the past and present European Otherness (or alterity); they have transformed Europe in an 'object of desire', which has prompted them to deconstruct, in a critical manner, the model called Europe. Namely, they have focused not only on its positive, but also on its negative aspects. They have realized that Europe, just like any other model, is and was idealized. This has led them to accept the imperfection of the European model as a necessity and as a reality. This, consequently, has formed the basis for dethroning the European 'ideal', in order to release the excess of illusions and political dramas, in the same time enabling them to get closer to an (elusive and powerful) image of Europe as it is and as it was. In reality, Macedonians have grown

weary of the powerlessness imposed by erroneous politics in the past twenty years. They have grown weary of the feeling of being 'lesser than a grain of sand', punished to sit in a narrow corner or remain in a blind alley.

Liberated from the constraints of the ideal, paradigmatic and stereotyped Europe, Macedonian novelists managed to project European reality through a prism in which one can sense the discrete charm of the European East and the Balkans. In several captivating and thoughtfully structured novels, a literary dialogue between cultures is conceived, a dialogue between the centre and the periphery, nurtured by philosophical, psychological, political and anthropological contexts. Nothing is, nor can be absolute, pure nor perfect. Neither the Centre is an ideal 'telos' of Europeanism, nor the Periphery is a liminal cultural margin; on the contrary. For example, in the core of the leading European avant-garde in the XIX and XX century, a lot of names and texts were inscribed that bear the mark of ethno-cultural 'hybrids'.

The European culture has enormous power of assimilation and appropriation. It is mimicry of 'imaginary Europeanism'. In reality, Europe is an intercultural amalgam, often presented through its most prominent figures, representatives of the peripheral and the discriminated peoples, cultures and regions. Without these, the European culture would have been far more monotonous and more sterile. Namely, can we even imagine the colourful gamma of European culture (art, science, urban culture) without the nuances given in the works by: Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Baruch de Spinoza, Franz Kafka (a Jewish contribution to European science, literature, philosophy, psychiatry), Lou Andreas-Salomé (a Russian contribution to the European cultural stage, psychiatry, literature), Gustav Klimt (an Austrian painter with Moldovan origin), just to name a few of them?

In the novels of Goce Smilevski the author treats topics verging on the scandalous (the morally illicit) or going beyond that, thereby representing a European chronotope, a European socio-cultural, existential, spiritual and religious ambient, through the prism of a certain moral code and its anomalies. The European 'being' is contradictory and schizophrenic, torn between aesthetics / science and ethics. It is intriguing that all of the more complex 'Euro-genic' deformations are observed from a moral standpoint, despite being described subtly, in an essayistic and often theoretical manner, through the usage of psychological models. The European *topos*, as well as the European imagology, initiate ethic discourse in the Balkan 'periphery', i.e. they imply relations of conflict in the system of social, religious and civilizational values. These become apparent in topics such as: the discrimination of women, racial and

religious discrimination, but also discrimination on familial, ethnic, political and gender background. Theology, philosophy, ethics, politics, eroticism and discourses of (imperial, racial, military) power or of the (colonial) impotence are constantly intersected with the question of identity and Otherness, on a macro European, but as well as on a micro-level, in the family, in the community consisting of members of the same religious belief, in the religious (often conflicting, exclusive) interpretations of the holy scriptures (the Torah, the Bible), or in the very essence of the human being.

Goce Smilevski, in his three novels, manages to demystify the European *topos* through the stories of several prominent historical figures in different historical circumstances. In his first two novels, he raises the questions of identity, intellectual freedom, homosexuality, motherhood, excommunication, incestuality and madness, in the context of Europe's racist and anti-Semitic history (*Conversation with Spinoza, Sigmund Freud's Sister*). In his novel *Conversation with Spinoza*, an epistolary and dialogical novel (based on the concept of 'duoglossia'), the author treats the alienation and excommunications of Jews within the Jewish (religious) community, through the character of Spinoza. The persecution of open-minded people who think differently than most others in their community (the archetypal Jewish Otherness) is first noted in the familial history in Lisbon, Portugal (through multiple conversions of the ethical and religious identity, of the name and personal legitimacy of the leading character), to continue later on in Holland, where Spinoza dares to interpret the Jewish cannon in his own rational, logical and ethical manner (which will result in his expulsion from the Jewish religious and ethnical community – the so-called *heremor* censure – as well as from his family). As a consequence of this punishment Spinoza, although a brilliant philosopher, ends honing lenses for a living, being left on the mercy of a few of his Dutch friends and other prominent intellectuals. Spinoza's identity as Judaist and as a part of the Jewish community starts to disperse simultaneously, in the same pace, as the dispersion of his open-minded, sensible, bipolar gender and sexual identity.

In the novel *Sigmund Freud's Sister* the author Smilevski challenges the humanism of the founder of modern psychoanalysis, Freud, who in 1938 left Vienna in order to protect himself from the resurgent Nazism. He (Freud) later on settled in London where he met with his close relatives, maids and pets, but not with his four sisters (which later on lose their lives in the Theresienstadt concentration camp). The main narrator in the novel is Freud's most talented sister, Adolphina Freud, a figure of a victim and of an enlightened humanist. Through her story, the author tries to depict the 'splendour and misery' of the European civilization, as its tragic constant.

In his last novel, *The Return of the Words* (2015), Smilevski uses the historical figures of Peter

Abelard (a philosopher and theologian) and Héloïse (a talented student and nun) to raise the issues, once again, of motherhood, identity and the rejected son, as well as issues of marriage, love affairs in conservative and patriarchal Christian environment, the inequality of women versus men, as well as the homosexual sensibility, using Medieval XII century France as a main background. The image of Europe in Smilevski's novels moves the main focus off the primary, stereotypical prejudice of the ideal European model, towards certain problematic and scandalous figures of Europe. This sort of aspiration has turned into a cult, which people and countries (that are not part of the European Union) follow, while the European cult is used as a leading criterion of perennial values; this, consequently, generates new imaginary and real boundaries, divisions, stigmas, traumas, new segregation and new conflicts.

Something similar can be witnessed in the novel *Lou's Locked Body* (2005) by Olivera Kjorveziroska. In her novel, the author deconstructs the methodology of physical captivity (or the quality of being locked) and of physical liberation (or being 'unlocked'). The setting for this narrative revolves around the 'imaginary history' and *mise-en-scène* of XX century's intellectual Austrian Europe. The author perceives certain common places for this cultural and historical ambient (the Austro-Hungarian setting), connected to historical figures such as: Lou Andreas-Salomé (1861-1937), Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Rée, Sigmund Freud and his daughter Anna Freud (the key that unlocks the repressed sexuality and identity), through inner, intimate, perverse, enigmatic and just seemingly marginal aspects. She unravels the 'centres' of the stereotypical European power in a metafictional, intermediary (by usage of photographs) and intertextual manner (by citations, pseudo-citations, paraphrases and allusions), creating thus a multifocal (psychological, biographical, meta-fictional, meta-historical and subversive) image of Europe.

The novels of Goce Smilevski and Olivera Kjorveziroska show us that we ought to approach Europe's historical narratives and biographies in our own (subjective) way, as if they were our own, with the level of vividness, credibility and sensibility plausible for the world of the novel, not through the lens of philistine or avant-garde Europe. The literary truth is somewhere in between, on that spot where the Western European and Balkan sensibilities intersect, the document and its simulacra, the official and the imaginary biography, the factual and the essential motherhood, the manifested and the latent sexuality, the conscious and the unconscious, the reality and dreams, somewhere between the image of Europe trapped in constructed clichés and that liberated, insolent, polygamous, aesthetic Europe.

To summarize: the novels by the Macedonian writers that belong to the (relatively) new generation (the 60's and the 70's of the XX century) project, through sensible imagology, the conflicting faces of Europe, marked by its essential and existential antinomies, with a main focus on the European hypocrisy, presented via several historical, biographical, psychological and narrative angles. It particularly stresses the Jewish question⁵ that is firmly embedded in the collective and in the individual, in historical and mythical memory; as such, it is an issue without which the shadow of Europe cannot be recognized nor accepted.

No great civilization is saved from its dark side. That is the Principle of Light and Enlightenment, the supreme rationale of Humanism, the very essence of the Modern and the Postmodern. Such is Europe, consisted of East and West, but also of North and South; full of conscious and unconscious elements, full of blockades and obstructions, of contradictions and fascinations. By assimilating its periphery, Europe assimilates itself into this 'periphery'. By adopting the world, Europe has allowed itself to be adopted by the world. This resulted in the creation of a contemporary cultural hybrid that we, nowadays, call Europe. The process of cultural assimilation has adopted elements of cultural interaction and started to look like an enormous dialogue between cultures, in which every subject appropriates elements from his fellow speaker and vice versa. This resulted in the shrinkage of the gap between paradigmatic Europeans and other people who have migrated from other continents and peripheries.

The 'individualization' of the European being is impossible without the awakening, without the verbalization and the integration of its 'black holes'. If Europe aspires to preserve the image of being the 'cradle of civilizations', of civil democracy and modern art, if it aspires to be identified with the slogan 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', than it has to face itself in order to overcome itself and leap forward and achieve higher spiritual forms of 'being'. Europe ought to, not just formally, but essentially, face the dark parts of its history (the Inquisition, the anti-Semitism, the Shoah, the racist, religious and ethnical conversions) and to finally face and resolve its current forms of violence, of discrimination and xenophobia. Europe has the creative and the intellectual potential to achieve this, which means that it can create a vision for survival of the European civilization, no matter whether this vision is created in the centre or in the periphery. Both are part of the same whole.

⁵ Europe for the Jews is not just an ordinary continent, but more of a 'country' which they have long inhabited, spreading from Portugal and Spain in the west, to Russia and Ukraine on the east, then the Netherlands and Denmark on the north, and ending with Macedonia and Greece to the south.

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