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A Contribution to the Rethinking of the European Cultural Heritage

Abstract: In this text the author questions the possibility of unique European identity and the processes of forming the common European cultural heritage. The problem of Eurocentrism, the unstable categories of center and periphery in culture, the geopolitics influences and the problem of Eurocentrism and exclusiveness are considered as well. The incorporation of Macedonian culture in the European heritage shows a very specific angle of perception, because it has many difficulties and prejudices connected with so called “small cultures” identification. It is discussed through the examples of two eminent Macedonian intellectuals: Blaze Koneski and Goran Stefanovski.

Key words: European cultural concept, European identity, Eurocentrism

European cultural concept means unique European identity based on the common cultural heritage and memory. However, in practice such a thing is still an abstraction which can't be marked precisely because it is rather obvious that there is not only one, but many different Europe(s), as had claimed the controversial French economist and thinker

Jacques Attali, for example, in his book published in 1994 with the very same title ¹. It is fact that there are many variations of the Europeaness. First, they are marked with geographic categories, such as West, East, North, South and all combinations between

¹ Attali, Jacques: *Europe(s)*, Paris, Fayard, 1994

them, or with main seas and other geographic points of orientation. Of course, the politic movements have very strong influence on the understanding of the European cultural concept. Also, there is even relative individual understanding of Europe (my, yours or her/his Europe) as a private life story and personal feeling and understanding of this concept². Moreover, there is the provocative contradictory between the center and periphery, or maybe it will be more appropriate to use again plural and to say center(s) and peripherie(s). All those problems with the location of the European culture through the spacial terms contribute to its rethinking as much more complex phenomena than just a simple characteristic of one of the world's continents.

Are the geographic points or geopolitical tendencies the only arbiters of what is or what is not part of the European cultural heritage? Is the economic and political interest enough for bearing the unity of Europe? Another Frenchman, Jacques Delors has stated: "You cannot love a common market. We need to give Europe soul". This soul could be the core of culture and in its frames, the literature as one of the most creative human practices. But the question is: Is there an European Literature? How it could be studied? What is European in the European Literature – just the belonging of some nations that are part of Europe Union, the usage of the European languages or something else? It is fact that during the history there were periods when this tendency for cultural

unity of Europe was rather emphasized, similarly to this current moment when it is one of the top subjects of the humanities. The European cultural concept has always preferred the diversity within the common system of values. In the *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (written in 1948) by T.S.Eliot, we read: "We should start bringing together the best in new thinking and new writing on our time, from all the countries of Europe that had anything to contribute to the common good". Recently this same concept can be recognized in the project of electronic data of the European cultural heritage on the web-net (www.europeana.eu). It is also incorporated in the main documents of EU, such as *European Cultural Convention* (1954), *Declaration of the European Identity* (1973), *Maastricht Treaty on the European Unity* (1992), *Declaration for Cultural Diversity* (2001) etc.

In the field of literary studies this concept is discussed in the shadow of the Eurocentric position of the classical comparative literature as a discipline which is historically strongly connected with it. Eurocentrism is like a kind of incurable disease, which is involved in almost all attempts to speak about the European imaginary. Although the strong tendency of decolonization and planetarity (argued in this field by the comparatist as Spyvac, Armando Gnishi, Moretti and others?) is very much present in recent approaches to this question, still some perfide forms of Eurocentrism are rather influential and effective. The new European imaginary is crucified between two tendencies: to connect all the different streams in one common identity based on the common memory and creativity, and, in the same time, to take care about

² We can mention in this context the book *My Private Europe* by the Ukrainian author Jurij Andruhovic and Polish writer Andzej Stasjuk.

the specificity and uniqueness of all the different identities in its frames. The idea of *unity in diversity* is very positive, creative and potential, but it is still very far away from its practice. What is the correct balance between the unity and the diversity, unfortunately, it is still impossible to say.

The opposition *center-periphery* comes from the sphere of linguistics, so it is appropriate to discuss it mainly from the point of view of the languages. However, the factors of their positioning are various: geographical, political, economic etc.: but if we want to summarize, we can say with another words: the power, the money, the greatness in quantity sense make the picture of the world. But the stigma of being peripheral is not characteristic only for poor, weak or “small” peoples and cultures. The richest regions of Europe (on its North) have the same problem with the complex of being peripheral. Also the cultures that use the Spanish language, which is among the most widely spread languages on the Earth, are in the same position.

We also must have in mind that through the history the points of cultural radiation, or positions of cultural centers were changeable. Even the Balkans, that “barbarian” periphery of Europe was center of cultural radiation in particular historic circumstances. The Balkans – one of the most controversial parts of the European continent is soil in which you can, even today, find artifacts from various historical periods and different civilizations. That is why it is said that the Balkans has too much history, too much memory - much more than it can bear...At the same time, it is a mixture of many different, but also similar nations,

nationalities and ethnic groups speaking different languages and creating very close, but specific cultures. The polyvalent, inter-cultural and complex zone of the Balkans gets its European dimension through the prism of its Mediterranean context. Being the root of the modern European civilization, a crossroad of western and eastern influences, the crossing-point of various religions, philosophies and understanding of the world, the transcontinental Mediterranean cultural zone is a model of an intercultural compendium which preserves the European cultural memory, participates in the current cultural European movements and creates its contemporary profile.

In rethinking the European context, it is hard to avoid a very specific angle of perception – in our case, the perspective of Macedonian culture. It is firmly embodied in the Balkan palimpsest as a so-called “small culture” (according to the number of language speakers, about 2 or 3 million in the world). But, as Kafka has written in his diary, “the memory of the small nation is not smaller than that of the great one”. Macedonian culture can be discussed in very different contexts: the ancient Hellenic, the ancient Macedonian and Alexandrian civilizations, the West/Latin and the East/Byzantine Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the ex-Yugoslav community (as a modern state from 1945 in the Yugoslav Federation) and since 1991, as an independent state. It is also a Balkan, Slavic and South Slavic, Mediterranean and European culture, in which you can recognize in practice the real meaning of intercultural crossings.

How can such a “small” culture contribute to the great world cultural movements? How can it be

integrated in the common European culture? It is not so difficult for painters, film-makers, musicians etc., but for writers and intellectuals, who express themselves through the language, it is a very complicated question deeply rooted in their individuality. We would like to mention just two examples of Macedonian intellectuals, who, due to their extraordinary literary achievements, could be “honorary members” of the hypothetical “international fraternity of men of letters in Europe” imagined by Eliot. These are the writers Blaže Koneski and Goran Stefanovski.

Koneski was obsessed with Macedonian his native language, both as a poet and a scholar and linguist. The last words he wrote before his death in 1993 sound like an intimate confession, but also as a kind of his last will and testament for the Macedonian culture. He said: “In poetry, the same as in love, everything has been said, although it has to be said again and again... It can seem as an exaggeration when this necessity appears even in a small culture, in the language of a small nation. What does it mean? Somebody who knows better than all of us what the world order should be, obviously decided that small nations and languages should also exist beside the great nations and languages”. Although he was a polyglot, Koneski hasn't written poetry in another language. His poems have been translated into many languages and thus have become part of the common poetry treasure of the world. Very often in his verses Koneski turns back to the same question. In the poem entitled “Macedonian Poets” he wrote: “What fate!/ To have an opinion that you do/ the most useless thing in the world”. But the idea of writing

poetry in any other language was considered by him as “an intimate defeat”. As a thinker, he had a very sophisticated comparative sense for the intercultural nature of human spiritual achievements and a special relation with the tradition and therefore, his name in Macedonian literary studies has often been connected with the ideas and concepts of T. S. Eliot (mentioned above). The struggle between two forces: one, to be firmly rooted inside one's own national tradition, and the other, to establish a communication with the world order of values, is obvious in one of his popular poems entitled “Recollection After Many Years”:

I was perhaps not quite twenty

When I wrote:

“So much did woe cry out within me
that I was born into a tribe in need,”

And to this day

The injury will bleed:

I'm haunted by that ever-present woe

And one that's greater still,

So that, sower of barren seed,

I'll say,

To change the words a little,

“Still does the woe cry out within me
that I am born into a tribe in need.”

And yet I hope this isn't so

Since I have undergone the test

Of such great woe.

The ambivalent feelings about the fact of “the place of birth” and belonging to a small “tribe” or speaking

a less widely spoken language are expressed in these verses. On the one hand, the poet is aware of the disadvantages of his national culture, but on the other, he continues with his “worthless” efforts, finding in them the meaning of his existence.

The other Macedonian and European intellectual is the play-writer Goran Stefanovski who chose to live between two cultures, in two countries - his native Macedonia and Great Britain. Asked about the language of his work in one interview, he answered: “I can think in English, but I can’t feel in English”. He was fascinated how much confusion his name created at the counters of European banks, railway stations and other such places. He has collected more than fifty letters with his name misspelled, although it is one of the most common names in Macedonia (Stefanouski, Stefanoksi, Stefanovski, etc.); he framed them to remind him of the collision of two cultural discourses, two different stories, European and Macedonian. In the essays *Stories from the Wild East* he also describes the elementary problem of the Macedonian writer working with a computer: “The keyboard of my computer has some English letters totally useless in my native language: W, Q and Y. But they are helpful. If I press W, I get our Ъ, if I press Q, I get Љ, and if I press Y, I get S. So, I just need a little bit more concentration. (...) When I write the letter I [a conjunction in Macedonian] the computer automatically writes it as a capital letter, because in the English language the letter I, when it stands alone, designates the personal pronoun/first person singular. So, writing in my mother tongue is a continuous fight with a globalizing creature, a

kind of multicultural fire machine, which contains my performances but is willing to give it back to me only under a special visa regime. Every Macedonian text is automatically underlined in red by the computer as absolutely incorrect, even illegal”.

This metaphoric incorrectness or illegality of Macedonian culture in the eyes of the rest of the world, especially in the eyes of “the old lady Europe” (which is, by the way, most common stereotype for Europe in Macedonian literature), produces very deep stigma of not being accepted, of inferiority, of ignorance. That’s why for Macedonian culture you can say that it dreams its European dream, and in its frameworks you can proceed the very different attitudes towards the European cultural concept: Eurofobia or Eurofilia, Euroscepticism or Euroeuphoria, etc,

Stefanovski has written excellent plays that are very often on the repertoires of Macedonian and other European theatres. The most common topics in his plays are the stereotypes of the European and Macedonian (Balkan) mentality, getting over them and creating a constellation in which the differences will respect and accept each other. His works provide exceptional material for imagological studies of the question of “Europeanism”. He says: “It’s not enough for me to be at home in Europe, I want Europe to be at my home”. He understands Europe as a field of “real reflection, criticism and debate,” as a civil society with “wide opinions” in which, as he says, “my diversity will not be a problem, but a solution”.

Now we can go back to the question we raised earlier in this text: how can the intellectual from a small literature contribute to the common European,

or even world cultural tradition? In attempts to answer it, we have to consider some crucial elements such as multilingualism, translation, migration, biculturalism vs. multiculturalism (living in two or even more cultures), being open minded for the “other”, and all of these in perfect harmony with the native identity... That is the fate of the Macedonian, and perhaps of every Balkan intellectual, a solution for the feeling of provinciality and marginality. After all, provinciality is a personal choice, it is a kind of lifestyle; it cannot

be a characteristic of a nation, and even less of a culture. European culture can be considered only comparatively, as a dialogue between all its “dialects”, without marginalisation or underestimation of any of its components. The Eurocentric model in humanities based on traditionalism, universalism, nationalism and positivism is no longer valid. Cultural and literary researches are always between the global and the diverse, between two tensions: to look for the universal and not to forget the individual.

Literature:

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Соња Стојменска-Елзесер

Придонес кон преосмислувањето на европското културно наследство

Резиме: Текстот го проблематизира концептот на единствен културен идентитет на Европа и се залага за плурално и поливалентно набљудување на оваа категорија. Тој се распрашува за можностите за вклучување на т.н. „мали култури“ во европската матрица кои на тој пат наидуваат на низа препреки, првенствено од лингвистичка, а потоа и од друга природа. Во тој контекст се разгледуваат примерите на македонските истакнати книжевници Блаже Конески и Горан Стефановски како интелектуалци кои несомнено и припаѓаат на комплексната категорија на европско културно наследство, но нивната целосна инкорпорација во таа традициска низа е отежната од извесни субјективни и објективни проблеми.

Клучни зборови: поимот европска култура, европски идентитет, европоцентризам