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THE DEVELOPMENT OF REALISM IN THE BULGARIAN
AND GREEK LITERATURES

In the last years the question of the development of realism has been ever more attracting the attention of literary criticism. There have appeared books which subject to profound and extensive examination the artistic method that has yielded rich fruit and prepared the ground for creating unsurpassed works of literature and art. Outlining the essence of the realistic method, the definition that the social analysis of society and of the individual person, the study and portrayal of social relations between people are becoming its foundation and distinctive aspect, is imposing itself with growing strength.

As far as the Balkan countries are concerned, however, the problems of realism, of its nascence, development and the stages through which it has advanced continue to be insufficiently explored, and no serious attempt has been made to compare what has been achieved in the individual Balkan literatures, the peculiar reflection of reality by the method of realism. There is an increasing number of such opportunities because besides the common features of the method which unites the separate writers, there are also such particularities which are of a more limited, regional character. Realism developed and was enriched by expressing itself in a special way in the different literatures, manifesting only particular traits in the different stages.

Such a comparative study invariably stands on slippery ground, like the parallel study of any Balkan literature with the development of the European literatures. But it is useful even in this respect because on the basis of the bringing to light of some particularities it is possible to see the more general tendencies, the fundamental processes which have become signposts in the development and enrichment of a literature.

The original development of Greek literature in many respects directs us to the problems and trends that we have encountered in the Bulgarian literature. The answer to why this is so is an easy one: the conditions of the social and economic development of the two countries have been almost identical. For many years and even centuries their destinies have come up against the same insurmountable obstacles. In this respect again there were

peculiarities, but they did not play a decisive role and for this reason we will not consider them in detail.

In Greek literature, like in Bulgarian, poetry occupied a leading position for a long period of time. The profound upheavals, problems and events in the historical fate of the people and the nation found their original reflection in lyric poetry. For a long time poetry took on the functions of some yet undeveloped literary forms. Poetry in the Bulgarian and Greek literatures, and more generally in those of the Balkan countries, was transformed into a weapon of the national liberation struggle. What was characteristic of the Balkan literatures of the National Liberation period and the ensuing period of activation of the fight against the enslaver and in a certain sense later as well, was that poetry, in the broadest sense of the concept, written also in prose form, occupied a leading place in literature. Poetry responded with appropriate vigour to any event of greater importance in the history of the Balkan countries. The national liberation struggle was the new "Odyssey" of the inhabitants of the Balkan countries. The emotions and hopes in the impulse to reject Ottoman oppression became the principal cause for the emergence of poetic works which raised their authors to the crest of the revolutionary wave. I will not embark at length on this question, I will mention but a few names that in themselves speak in a sufficiently eloquent way: Rigas Velesinlis, who sang the hymn of the new Virgin called Freedom, Dionysios Solomos, Andreas Kalvos, Aristotelis Valaoritis, Hristo Botev, Georgi Sava Rakovski, Petko Slaveikov, Ivan Vazov, Djura Jakšić, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, Mihail Eminescu, Migjeni and others.

Although the first realistic works were discovered in lyric poetry, they were not of a pure kind. Under the influence of the West European and Russian literatures the call for realism in the Balkan literatures preceded the writing of realistic works. Because the social conditions had not yet matured to become the texture of well-known artistic works, romanticism and realism for a long time marched hand in hand and they can be found in the same works. The ideas of the Russian revolutionary democrats, the achievements of such writers as Gogol, Nekrasov, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky hinted to many Bulgarian creative artists that literature assumed new functions, that it should serve the new social relations and intervene in a more definite manner in the political struggles. A vivid example in this respect is not only the poetic but also the overall work of Hristo Botev, the prose of Ljuben Karavelov who occupies a special place not only in the Bulgarian but also in the Serbian literature, Ivan Vazov, Petko Slaveikov, etc.

After poetry, with the accelerated development of the Balkan countries

following their national liberation, with the rapid change of the historical tasks and the anecdotal mixture of elements of different formations, the concise forms for a certain time proved to be the most adequate and the most accurately expressing the motley gamut of changes. Through them the writers reacted more quickly to the events in social and political life. As a rule they were characteristic and were characterized where there was an eclectic mixture of heterogeneous elements and steady social relations.

Both during the National Revival period and the next period, the greatest achievements of Balkan prose were in the field of short literary forms. They proved to be the most suitable for the economic, political, psychological and ideological state of the people, revealing the political, economic and ideological conditions of development. The significant adventures of the new class, the bourgeoisie, were exhausted by the feuilleton, the short story and the memoir. The original prose of these peoples is found in the memoir because it was associated with personal life, in the feuilleton because it was connected with the anecdotal backwardness and in the short story because it most easily reacted to the topical events and reflected the social experience of the writers themselves.

The feuilleton, short story and novella over a long period of time remained the only prose forms through which the Balkan writers responded to the changes of their country's national life. By their potential of social and moral criticism they stood between poetry and critical history.

Realism was called to life in the Bulgarian and Greek literatures by a number of economic, social and cultural prerequisites. The major economic changes and the disintegration of the patriarchal foundations had a decisive impact on literature and art. The victory of capitalist relations, which were progressive for their time, coincided with the withering away of patriarchal life where the traces of the national liberation movement led to another, much desired direction towards the liberation of man's forces. All these hopes were prematurely dashed. The class laws quickly revealed their cruel face. The tragic encounter of two civilizations made the socio-psychological processes particularly acute. Processes, which in the normally developing capitalist countries proceeded almost for centuries, now, compressed into decades, took an excessively rapid course. The clash between the old and new forms gave birth to the works of a whole range of writers who saw the collision of the contradictions. Being contemporaries they could not grasp their profound meaning. They paid attention chiefly to the funny discrepancy between dream and reality. In this way the satire, grotesque, comedy and farce were given a particular boost. As Aristos Kambanis notes, the end of the 19th century in Greek

literature may be best represented by the feuilleton: "For a long time the feuilleton was the only literary food of the Greeks. It replaced all kinds of prose, critical literature and the description of everyday life"¹. The development of the feuilleton in the Bulgarian and Greek literatures was not accidental. In general we will find the "great adventure" of the bourgeoisie and its anecdotal backwardness in the feuilleton. In Juvenalian style Andreas Laskaratos, for instance, exposed the political amorality of the rulers, the falsity of the church which was not slow in anathematizing him, and ridiculed the gullibility of the people sunk deep in economic and spiritual poverty.

The meeting of two civilizations, the collision of different ways of life and of two cultures we find brilliantly reflected in Aleko Konstantinov's "Bai Ganyo". The post-Liberation history which concealed very many metamorphoses, and the confusion of moral virtues with social vices provided the social foundation of the work. Aleko Konstantinov takes as a yardstick, as an indisputable measure, a given type of culture, manners and relations which have been sufficiently manifested and consolidated in the civilized countries. Even the most cursory comparison with his hero who falls short of this measure gives rise to humour and hilarious situations. He becomes a feuilleton hero. It is interesting that the same reality, taken as a measure, was the object of study by other literary genres in the developed countries. There, viewed from the inside, it revealed new cankers, often much bigger. This did not occupy Aleko Konstantinov's mind in this case, at the moment he did not "investigate" that reality which had not fully exposed its vices in the country. He became a satirist only and took the ready historical comicality created by the situation in which the backward people found themselves.

The problem of the patriarchal way of life which was gradually dying and the new forms of life was one of the key problems in the creative quests of many Bulgarian and Greek realist writers after the Liberation. They new forms of social life which came up against the patriarchal attitude. If we follow up the work of Ivan Vazov, for a period, and of Todor Vlaikov, Anton Strashimirov, Georgios Viziinos, Alexandros Papadiamandis, Andreas Karkavitsas, Konstantinos Theotokas, Konstantinos Hadzopoulos, etc., we will discover the different aspects of the dying patriarchal way of life. In spite of the historical anachronism, part of the Balkan writers were on the side of a form that had outlived its day. They could not at once accept the new, the historically progressive, because already in its rudimentary stage it manifested all its lack of ethical values, all its perverseness and amorality. Bourgeois development

which manifested itself in its most drastic forms, met with the opposition of the writers. They often looked back to the old, to its forms fully of ethical content, and rejected the unacceptable bourgeois reality that quickly revealed the greedy breathlessness of the struggle for profits which had become the basic striving stifling any more elevated human impulse.

Another feature again characteristic of most of the Balkan literatures was the mixing and interfusion of the literary movements and currents. Owing to the specific historical conditions which slowed down the development of the Balkan countries and their literatures, a period of accelerated development to overtake the advanced ones was called for. Whole stages characteristic of the development of European literature here left but superficial traces. Different movements and currents manifested themselves simultaneously and cohabited in peace in the works of the same writers.

It is true that the imitation of French and Russian artistic models led to the appearance of immature works which were abundant for a long period in the Bulgarian and Greek literatures. It may be safely claimed that works which followed the organic path of development where contradictory elements, the co-existence of realism and romanticism were met, proved to be paving the way for realism. The first works of realism, such as in prose, "Bulgarians of Yore" by Lyuben Karavelov and "I Papissa Ioanna" (Pope Joan) by Emmanuel Roidis, possessed a further characteristic feature: only some of their characters were bearers of the aesthetic discoveries of their authors and it was in them that the realistic content of the work was concentrated. What turns Lyuben Karavelov's novella into a stage in the development of Bulgarian literature are his two principal characters: Hadji Genscho and Grandfather Liben. The other persons not only are below their level but have been created by the laws of different stylistics, with the romantic and sentimental often creeping in and displacing the realistic presentation.

By his novel "Pope Joan" Roidis threw a stone in the stagnant waters of the papal institution. Using the realistic method, the author exposed many of the defects of the church and brought them to the knowledge of a wide circle of readers. In the preface Roidis notes: "Many would, of course, accuse me of a graver sin for the audacity with which I stirred the ecclesiastical slime of the Western and Byzantine Middle Ages by allowing myself at times some digressions about the present state of our Orthodox Church. The impartial reader will become convinced, however, that at least in this respect, in my book there is not a trace of hostility to it. The outrages both of the West and the East are set forth with the same indifference and impartiality, the visions of the mediaeval theologians and the dreams of the German professors are

ridiculed with the same zeal. Wherever I discovered something that would give rise to laughter, I used it no matter whether it was hidden in a monastery or in some academy, under the habit of a monk or the mantle of a philosopher. The religious or philosophical paradoxes from the Creation of the World to our days are set forth with the same indifference with which the navigator records the direction of the winds in his log-book"². Here again not all the characters are realistically portrayed.

All these conditions complicate the theoretical examination of the particular features of realism in the Bulgarian and Greek literatures. It is true that in the past years the concept of realism as a concrete historical phenomenon has played a significant role in clarifying the dilemma realism - anti-realism. At the same time realism and romanticism have been examined as phenomena connected with the corresponding periods in the social and cultural development of a particular people, "essentially different from the romanticism and realism understood as two primordial and opposed features and principles in art"³.

Looking into the questions concerning South Slav realism in his book "Introduction to South Slav Realism" Boyan Nichev pays attention to something which could be referred with all its relevance to the Balkan literatures: "If we want to adhere to historical truth, we should consider the question of South Slav realism within the framework of the relationship romanticism-realism. Because the aesthetic phenomena that we call South Slav realism and romanticism are typically very peculiar phenomena which interfuse and carry certain features which draw them closer together and at the same time distinguish them from the classical European forms of realism and romanticism in the 19th c. It is difficult to fit these two concepts in with the classical European system of literary formations"⁴.

The transformations of realism-romanticism in the different national literatures has proved to be the stumbling block for the majority of the theoretical generalizations and for the study of the general regularities and interdependences between the different literatures.

Considering the development of romanticism in Greek literature, Yannis Moschos draws a few more general conclusions which can be applied to realism as well: "The enormous difference existing between the level of

2. E. Roidis, *Papasa Yoana*, P. 1962, p. 17.

3. B. Nichev, *Uvod v yuzhnoslavyanskiya realism* (Introduction to South Slav Realism), S. 1971, p. 235.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 235.

social development—spiritual and aesthetic—of the different countries and peoples is reflected in art in the most direct way. The bringing to the fore only of the common traits of the romantics leads to the loss of their national specificity, individuality and uniqueness of the national idiom of the writers. The other extreme (or only the one aspect of the more complicated process) is the emphasis solely on the national peculiarity which inevitably leads to the loss of the purposeful perception of the picture of the general law-governed regularities in the development of literature. Going beyond the models of Greek romanticism in the context of the Balkan and then of the other literatures—is the task which still faces literary criticism”⁵.

Social conditions, the results of the victory of the national revolution, made many writers abandon their romantic dreams and take a realistic look at life. This process was not clearly delineated, though. In the Bulgarian and Greek literature there was an uninterrupted interfusion of romanticism and realism, they could not be categorically differentiated as literary movements up to the end of the 19th century. Deep in the core of romanticism there ripened the new ideas which realism was to consolidate.

European realism played a particular role in consolidating realism in the Greek literature, similar to the role played by Russian realism in the Bulgarian literature. Lagging behind because of the conditions of slavery, the two literatures drew amply from the most outstanding works of their predecessors. The experience of the advanced was of great importance: “The later this or that national literature has emerged or taken shape, the later it has become incorporated in the general literary process, the greater importance assumes for it the experience of the other more developed national literatures. Thanks to the assimilation of this experience the younger or lagging in its growth literature takes the road of accelerated development”⁶.

This process has its reverse side, though. Because the example of the advanced cuts the inspiration of the backward ones. They see their themes and situations already used and exhausted before they have touched them. The more so when this has been done with great artistic mastery. Sometimes creative artists come by a roundabout way to the same conclusions and defend them with the same passion. Alexandros Papadiamandis could have hardly been familiar with Anton Pavlovich Chekhov’s short story “I Am Sleepy” when he began to write his novella “Murderess”. The two works, however,

5. Y. Mochos, *K voprosu o grecheskom romantizme* (Concerning the Question of Greek Romanticism). In: *Etudes balkaniques*, No. 1, 1981, p. 67.

6. V. Kozhinov, *Proishordenie romana* (The Origin of the Novel). M., 1963, p. 42.

are driven by the same moral pathos. In the one case a thirteen-year old girl looking after the child in the shoemaker's home, having not a minute of rest, smothers the child in the middle of the night in a paroxysm so that she might have a few hours of sleep after weeks of sleeplessness. In the other an old woman, who has experienced the horrors of life, drowns in the well her grandchild who must otherwise inevitably take the same path of humiliation and suffering. Who is to blame for life's injustices, why is everything in it arranged in such an unjust manner, is the message implied by the two works.

Many Bulgarian and Greek writers faced these questions, looked for and did not always find an answer. The very search, however, was an orientation towards a realistic portrayal of life, towards revealing its secrets, towards man's struggles and sufferings. It is in this that can be found also the most significant achievements of writers like Elin Pelin, Todor Vlaikov, Anton Strashimirov, Yordan Yovkov, Kostas Hadzopoulos, Grigorius Xenopoulos, Kostas Paroritis, Konstantinos Theotokis and others.