

REVIEW

by Prof. Kalina Bahneva, PhD, professor at the Department of Slavic Studies, Sofia University "St Kliment Ohridski",

I have been appointed as a member of the academic jury regarding the procedure of acquisition of the academic rank 'Professor' in the field of higher education, announced in "Durzhaven vestnik", issue. 31, 12.04.2019: 2. Humanities, professional direction; 2.1. Philology (Slavic Literatures).

Candidate: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zhorzheta Petrova Cholakova, head of the Department of Slavic Studies in the Faculty of Philology of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski".

1. General overview of the procedure and the candidate

The set of materials in physical and electronic form submitted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zhorzheta Petrova Cholakova is in accordance Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADASRB), with the Implementing Rules of ADASRB and with art. 76 (4) of the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff of PU.

The research publications and documents presented constitute the formal aspect of the procedure. As we know, however, the acquisition of the academic rank 'Professor' presupposes an established scientific authority within the national and the international academic circles, a genuine creative contribution to the university community, a talent for lecturing, an ability to organize a school of research with generations of followers – Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zhorzheta Petrova Cholakova possesses all such qualities. Our colleague from Plovdiv University has long fulfilled the requirements for the acquisition of the aforesaid academic rank. It is only the maximalist attitude and precision in the field of research, the wide scope of intellectual engagements (including the candidate's achievements in the art of translation), as well as the long-standing administrative occupation, alongside the editing/publishing activity of Assoc. Prof. Cholakova, that has held her back from advancing a professorship.

I reduce the enumeration of the basic stages of the author's professional biography to the remarkable studies on Karel Hynek Mácha, since Zhorzheta Cholakova is an established authority in Bulgaria and abroad and needs no detailed biographical overview. For many long years, her name serves as an emblem of the best scientific achievements of Plovdiv University, a symbol of the potent development of Bulgarian Slavic Studies and its prestigious stature abroad.

2. Relevance of the subject matter

Only a year ago Assoc. Prof. Cholakova successfully defended her 'major' doctoral thesis *Mythopoetic Genesis, Artistic Evolution and Contextualization of the Lake in the Poetry of Czech Romanticism*. Following the monumental study, in which the author treated the artistic development and contextualizations of the lake image in Mácha's poem 'May' from the perspective of the philosophic and aesthetic transformations of the lake from antiquity to the period of Western-European and Slavic Romanticism, and the publication of her book *Karel Hynek Mácha, or the Voice of the Broken Harp* (1993), containing a wonderful translation and analysis of the famous poem, as well as the Czech researcher's contribution in the volume *Karel Hynek Mácha – Izbrano* (2018) where she published a second translation variant of 'May', including around 30 so far untranslated poems, the subject of the poetic heritage of the greatest Czech representative of Romanticism seems to be exhausted. Zhorzheta Cholakova possesses, however, a great creative potential, which allows her to continue reflecting on one of the principal literary areas of her research interests. In the monography *Poetics of Melancholy. Karel Hynek Mácha* (2019) she discusses the specifics of Mácha's melancholy understood as a 'personal poetic identity' that transforms 'the emotional suffering into a meta-space of the ontological cognition of the world' (p. 301).

With a view to Bulgarian and foreign literary studies the book presents a new research perspective towards the artistic world of the most prominent Czech romantic poet. The modern aspect of the subject is obvious – as manifestation of 'mental alienation' melancholy is a perennial morbid (clinical) case and is conceptualized afresh by modern psychiatry in the beginning of the 19th century, but also a culturological problem, a philosophical and aesthetic concept from ancient to modern times. The transformation of melancholy from a diagnosis into an ethos - the focal point of the research - is a process, without which the understanding of modernity and today's (post)modern culture would be impossible.

Determining the relevance of the subject discussed would be unthinkable if we fail to consider the method of its analysis and conceptualization. Zhorzheta Cholakova's hermeneutic reading of the specific manifestations of melancholy in K. H. Mácha once again proves her talent of researching by illustrating the idea that the essential hermeneutics unifies the methodological beginnings of all the individual literary theories during the course of the 20th century – this talent consists in a certain skill, rather than in theory and method.

No less significant - with a view to the development of modern Slavic Studies, Literary Theory and the history of ideas - are the studies, thematically related to her monography, that

Zhorzheta Cholakova has published in specialized periodicals and study collections. These are the two articles devoted to the melancholic beginning interpreted as philosophy of life in the works of the great 20th century poet and Nobel laureate Jaroslav Seifert: ‘Jaroslav Seifert or the Poetics of Melancholy’ (2013) and ‘Melancholické reflexe války v poezji Jaroslava Seiferta’ (2015); the study ‘The Romantic Melancholy vs. the “Black Bile” of Antiquity’ (*Reflections on the Poetics of Karel Hynek Mácha*, 2017), which, alongside the already mentioned romantic transformation of melancholy from clinical phenomenon into philosophic category, emphasizes the ambivalent character of the subject discussed. Worthy of mentioning is the study ‘Religious Melancholy. Etiological Perspectives’ (2019), reflecting the crisis of sacral consciousness throughout the individual cultural ages – from antiquity to the Baroque period.

The Czech baroque literature captures the attention of the researcher in the article ‘The Czech Literary Baroque Facing the Ideologeme “Neither alive here, nor dead there”’ (2005), treating the artistic interpretation of national and existential suffering in the work of the greatest 17th century poets. Zhorzheta Cholakova’s knowledge of the literary periods, preceding or following the European and the Czech romanticism, is exceptional. In her view, the Baroque is not a cultural formation ‘cloistered’ within the context of the 17th century. In her doctoral thesis, Western-European and Czech baroque conceptions of the lake gives rise to its romantic conceptualization and to its functioning as a structural semantic center in Mácha’s work. In her professorship monography, the European and the Czech baroque traditions shape the author of ‘May’ as a poet of the melancholic, a view that disregards the consolation of faith, yet contains the characteristic melancholic idea of the torturous experience of the world.

Romanticism is a center of the research, yet it is not the chronologically final age that Zhorzheta Cholakova is interested in. The mode of summarizing the romantic consciousness grasped as a dynamic dimension, not only grounded in tradition, but also open to the philosophical and aesthetic transformations of the cultural ages to follow as well as to modern mythopoetics, direct the Slavic researcher towards an analysis of the Czech modernism/neo-romanticism (for example, the article on the ontological figure of death in the poetics of Otokar Březina, 2013) and the innovative examination of the artistic tendencies during the mid-war decade. The scientific achievements of Zhorzheta Cholakova in the fields of study of the Czech and the European avant-garde are remarkable. The vanguard discoveries in Europe and the Slavic countries form the second, alongside Romanticism, successfully researched literary/cultural sphere, the conclusions of which ‘compete’ with what has been done in studies on Mácha. Assoc. Prof. Cholakova is as versed in avant-garde modernity, as she is in the domain of Romanticism. The texts the candidate has chosen to participate with in the current procedure

are representative of her interests on the development of Czech and Slavic literary aesthetics in the mid-war period. The studies published in French, German, Czech and Bulgarian, dealing with the aesthetics of primitivism, the poetics of surrealism and the genesis of the Balkan avant-garde, point out the specificity of this stage of Slavic modernity, reveal the prevailing tendencies and key figures of avant-garde imagination in every national Slavic literature, seek Western-European cultural traces in the course of its development, as well as the innovative artistic transformation of universal philosophic and artistic categories, pertaining to mid-war aesthetic conceptions. An example of an interesting interpretation of the Bulgarian reception of Europe's avant-garde art and cultural identity is the article, dealing with the works of the artists Jules Pascin and Georges Papazoff, which enters into dialogue with what I find as one of Zhorzheta Cholakova's most original studies on the Bulgarian trace in the reception of surrealism. I point to the masterfully written text "The Bulgarian Child" of Salvador Dali', which is not included in the text selection for the current procedure.

A separate thematic domain is outlined by the two publications, having to do with the transformation of the mythic relation Odysseus-Eurydice in the book *A Night with Hamlet* by Vladimír Holan and with the artistic metamorphoses of Orpheus in Czech poetry – from the Revival to the 20th century. Conceptualizing the role of poetry and the relation love-death typical of the Orpheus myth, the articles published in 2009 and 2010 constitute a specific approach to the principal subject of Cholakova's research studies – melancholy. As we know, Hamlet, whose figure is actualized by Holan's book that contains the dialogue between Orpheus and Eurydice, is a symbolic personification of melancholy, while the impossible love between the mythic poet and his beloved – a manifestation of the ideal love situated in another world, which, like melancholy itself, joins the object of desire with the impossible.

3. Knowledge competence on the problem

In her monography Zhorzheta Cholakova shows considerable knowledge on the theory of melancholy and its cultural transformations. This allows the author to enter into dialogue with established theorists of the melancholic and formulate her own concepts of its manifestations in ancient and Western-European literature, as well as in the course of Czech literary development. Another indicator of the mastery of the problematics concerned is the broad bibliography duly drawn up by Assoc. Prof. Cholakova in accordance with the requirements of formatting of such types of texts.

The other aforementioned publications proposed for the purpose of the current procedure affirm the assessment of the candidate as a prominent expert on Czech and Slavic literary

studies, but also on European literatures – ancient and modern. A special attention deserves the exceptional theoretical – philosophically and aesthetically – competence of Zhorzheta Cholakova, which makes her a high-ranking literary and cultural theorist.

4. General characteristics and assessment of the scientific contributions of the dissertation thesis

The professorship thesis of Zhorzheta Cholakova is the first Bulgarian study of melancholy, in which the concept is treated both as a clinical and a cultural case. The treatment within the perspective of Mácha's melancholic works is accompanied by the research of a vast body of philosophical, theological, visual and poetic texts that trace the history of melancholy as a cultural idea, an existential mode and an artistic worldview. The thesis emerges therefore as the first in-depth innovative interpretation of the artistic heritage of the Czech romantic poet with respect to the knowledge on the melancholic and the methodologically model scientific study that points out the successful intellectual endeavors in achieving the heterogeneous historical and disciplinary meanings of the analyzed problem. Moreover, Zhorzheta Cholakova's monography is an example of a research endeavor that presents the principal approaches towards a given literary/cultural phenomenon treated as a unity of the universal and the peculiar, of the established standards and the innovations. The ways, in which the author discusses the specificity of melancholy in the works of the Czech romantic poet - diachronically and synchronically, against the background of European and Czech thought and within the context of both traditional and modern, foreign and national artistic consciousness – refer to Bakhtin's polyphony that professor Wlad Godzich transforms into the research figure of the 'node'. This is the node that intersects and disjoins, tangles and untangles a multitude of cultural notions and literary images, chronotope markers, individual and generational biographemes. Should we mention only a few of the innovatively interpreted nodal convergences between European and Czech literary authors, specifically between European writers and Mácha's work, which open up a perspective towards the ancient poetic and mythic heritage, we therefore ought to mention several noteworthy references: the figure of Mácha's lotus/lily, referring to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its reception in the Czech protestant circles; the figure of Vilém in the poem 'May' as non-alien to the tragedy tradition of Schiller, Goethe and Euripides and to the curse of Orestes recreated in the works of the Old-Greek author; the identification of the protagonist with a 'dreaded Forest King' – a personage, operating in the (pre)romantic poetry (Herder and Erben) and associated with the 'sinister figures' of *Rex Nemorensis* (Diana's priest) and the Elf King of the Nordic tradition, further associated with the myth of Hippolytus (the

son of Theseus and Antiope) presented in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and discussed in *The Golden Bough* in relation to the lake Nemi.

The successful discovery of the archetypal structure of Mácha's imagery, intersecting mythology, folklore and *sensu stricto* literature, and outlining the nature of this poet's treatment of melancholy, also manifests itself in the conceptualized employment of the allegory from *La Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris in Mácha's poetic language and in the analyzed image of the Garden as symptomatic of the dubious relation between the Medieval court lyric and the poetic world of the Czech romantic, as well as of the difference between the Czech court culture and Mácha's poetry.

The examples of parallel reading between established figures of world literatures and Mácha, revealing trans-artistic relations undetermined by historical synchronicity, have a broader scope of reference. They encompass the conclusions on the philosophic and poetical accord between Mácha and Villon, the innovative Renaissance summary of melancholy in painting (Albrecht Dürer), reflected also in the face and body language of Mácha's personages. The points worthy of remembering in Zhorzheta Cholakova's book include: the broad chapter devoted to 'The Sacred Face of Melancholy', the analysis of the dialogue between Karel Hynek Mácha and Bedřich Bridel, and the reception in Mácha's work of two Miltonic personages that bring together the Renaissance and the Baroque beginnings – The Thinker and The Merry Man, the innovatively conceptualized triad Pope-Jungmann-Mácha, the study on death as a dominant and obsessive characteristic of melancholy etc. For the purpose of summarizing the valuable points in the candidate's monography in regard to the acquisition of the academic rank 'Professor', we can refer to what has been reflected on in every chapter of the study.

Assoc. Prof. Zhorzheta Cholakova demonstrates a notable, almost encyclopedic philosophical, critical and theoretical literary competence, which allows her to compose a truly creative study worthy enough to be translated not only in the Czech language and therefore become available to the foreign public of experts and lovers of humanitarian knowledge.

My one and only question concerns the absence within the author's scope of study of the famous book by Marek Bieńczyk *Melancholy – On Those Who Never Recover What They've Lost*. This reminder is dissociated from my polonist bias and is prompted by the relevance of the Polish writer's study.

With respect to what has been presented in this review, adding to it Zhorzheta Cholakova's participation in a number of international and national projects, as well as her already mentioned authority of a brilliant lecturer, I propose to the honorable academic jury to confer on the candidate the academic rank 'Professor'.

Prof. Kalina Bahneva, PhD

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