

OPINION

by **Plamen Antov Petkov**, Prof. DSc.
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on a dissertation for the award of the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional field 2.1. Philology, scientific specialty Ancient and Western European Literature: Comparative Literary Studies.

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Topic: “*Bulgarian Images in Austrian Late 19th-Century Literature*”

1. General Presentation of the Procedure and the Dissertation Candidate

By order No. RD-22-1557 of 26.06.2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski” (PU), I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for ensuring a procedure for the defense of a dissertation on the topic “*Bulgarian Images in Austrian Late 19th-Century Literature*” for the acquisition of the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences” of PU in the field of higher education 2. Humanities, professional field 2.1. Philology, scientific specialty Ancient and Western European Literature: Comparative Literary Studies. The author of the dissertation is Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Mladen Tsvetanov Vlashki** – Department of “History of Literature and Comparative Literary Studies” at the Faculty of Philology of PU “Paisii Hilendarski”.

The set of materials on paper presented by Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Mladen Tsvetanov Vlashki** is in accordance with Art. 45 (4) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the University of Plovdiv, and includes all documents indicated as necessary:

The candidate has attached one monograph and three publications in accordance with the minimum requirements of the LAW ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACADEMIC STAFF IN THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA and the regulations for its implementation. From the attached biographical information and publications, it is clear that the candidate Assoc. Prof. Vlashki has long-term and extensive research experience on the topic of the procedure: monographic studies (in Bulgarian and German), numerous smaller-format publications, specializations in German-speaking countries, including Austria. Special mention should be made of his work with archives, the discovery and publication of new, unknown or little-known facts, as well as the correction of some widely known, but not always accurate, notions circulating in the form of scientific myths. Moreover, I would commit to the statement that in the area in question (the topic of the procedure) Assoc. Prof. Ml. Vlashki is the most prepared and most authoritative specialist currently in Bulgaria.

2. Relevance of the topic

From the perspective of Bulgarian studies of modernism, and in particular of Bulgarian literary modernism, the “relevance of the topic” is indisputable. In a narrower, specifically scientific sense, this relevance is presupposed by the role of the reception of the so-called Viennese Modern (i.e. modern Austrian literature at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries) in the development of Bulgarian modernism over a long period of time – not only in literature, but also in the entire cultural life: theater, fine arts, music... But although not so indisputable, an extension to other levels of relevance is possible, for example, in view of some close typologies between the catastrophism of the eras: the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy as the strongest symptom of the “sunset of Europe” and today’s total crisis of Europe (EU) as an economic union, but even more so as a high spiritual tradition:

the correspondences between the two eras are obvious and deeply disturbing, and Viennese Modernism provides us with examples of cultural reflection that can be instructive for us, whether in a “straight” (positive) or in an opposite (negative) sense. This instructiveness is present in the background of the proposed study.

3. Knowledge of the problem

I have already said that if there is anyone in Bulgarian literature today who knows this problem both in its broadest (cultural/literary-historical) logic and in its specific details, it is Assoc. Prof. Mladen Vlashki.

4. Research Methodology

The chosen methodology allows achieving the set goal and an adequate response to the tasks solved in the dissertation work. Successfully defining itself as modern positivism, the methodological approach offers a dual perspective on the subject – a productive combination of a close and a distant perspective. Scrupulous factual searches, archival finds, work with unpublished or little-known facts – biographical and creative, and often resorting to a statistical approach, on the one hand. And on the other – a large-scale conceptualization of the researched processes in broad literary-historical and socio-cultural contexts, Austrian and Bulgarian. The author himself defines his work through three causally building upon methodological approaches: archaeology – observation – interpretation.

Being primarily comparative, the study is based on the three-component scheme of the receptive theory (chapter two): a parallel examination of the two literatures/cultures – the source and the receiving, with particular attention to the mechanisms of mediation connecting them. In this case, these mechanisms (in a dissolving progression) are: 1) literary translation and one’s own artistic creation (their abbreviation will be several specific creative figures); 2) theater as a specific, synesthetic form of literary text rich in possibilities plus broad social participation; 3) book publishing practices, literary periodicals; in general – state cultural policy in its own political-ideological contexts, which inevitably determine it.

5. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation work and contributions – presence/absence of plagiarism

It is with the clarification of its methodological perspectives that the dissertation begins in its second (after the introduction) chapter. In the next large (and first proper) chapter 3, the subject of clarification is the background in the receptive plot – Austrian literature and the “Austrian” in its own mode. The entire dialectic of identity and difference of the “Austrian” as belonging to the German-speaking cultural circle, on the one hand, and on the other, in a broader sociocultural aspect – as part of the intermediate, multinational and multicultural area of Central Europe is explored: the deep generative tension between these two factors, producing the specific status of the “Austrian”. The principles of literary-historical construction are revealed, the fruit of which in the specific context of the end of the century in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is the Viennese Modern. A systematization of the main ways in which current literary scholarship in Austria today thinks and retroconstructs the “grand narrative” of Austrian literature is proposed. Within this narrative, individual cases (Altenberg) are focused, which illustrate in miniature the workings of the grand processes. This first large chapter is the necessary approach to the actual, nominal subject of the dissertation – to the literature of the Viennese Modern (1870–1918) and to its “transfer reception” in Bulgarian literature and culture, which constitutes the second large (actual) chapter 4. This is the main – and most voluminous – chapter in the dissertation. The two plans are maintained in parallel – the literary one itself and its narrower and broader socio-

cultural contextualizations. The factors and mechanisms modeling the entire “horizontal” and “vertical” dynamics in reception are studied: intensification at certain moments and deceleration at others; priority of some names and marginalization of others... Three periods of reception have been distinguished, having an entirely external, political-ideological basis, the separator of which is the dates 1944 and 1989. – And here I will allow myself the only significant remark I have about the dissertation – namely the overreliance on the “external” ideological presumption in the approach to the specific literary and cultural facts. In fact, there is a certain, even significant, discrepancy between them (or between the “big” and the “small” truth, to use another operational idiolect). The “big”, that is, ideological “truth” today requires that the period between 1944 and 1989 be presumptively stigmatized; but this period in itself is not monolithic, it has its own internal developmental dynamics. Looked at closely, the picture is much more ambiguous; the “small truth” partially refutes the “big” one: in practice, it turns out that the period of late socialism (the 1970s and especially the 1980s) was the most productive for the translation reception of Austrian modern literature in Bulgaria, when almost all significant authors and titles were translated (with the exception of two – *The Man Without Qualities* and *The Sleepwalkers*); the theoretical approach then also reached its peak, it is enough to mention the name of Atanas Natev (especially the book *Literary Ideas of the 20th Century. Individual and Culture* from 1985, to which I personally owe a lot for my initial comprehensive acquaintance with Austrian modern literature). Unfortunately, the period after 1989 added little to what was done in the 1980s: apart from the two super titles mentioned, only the name of Sacher-Masoch was partially rehabilitated; the usual market chaos replaced strict planning. (But in general, Ml. Vlashki points out, during all three periods the systematic presentation of the literature of the Viennese Modern gives way to the personalistic-selective one, producing lasting, stable asymmetries: authors like Zweig and Rilke, for example, enjoy interest throughout all periods and all ideological conjunctures, while others – Ferdinand von Saar, for example – inexplicably remain in the shadows; or the asymmetry between the “easy” Schnitzler and the “difficult” Hofmannsthal.)

The dissertation scrupulously examines the fluctuations in Bulgarian reception during the three periods, and in the different (above-mentioned) levels and spheres of cultural life. But its real interest is directed primarily to the first period, which is also classic for Bulgarian modernism; here are the real discoveries. The focus is on the transfer work of four of the greatest, most deserving figures from different generations and in different fields of activity, who “cover” the entire vertical-horizontal spectrum. Iv. D. Shishmanov presents the first post-liberation generation of Bulgarian humanitarians, when modernity was not yet modernism/modern in the narrow sense of the term. Teodor Trayanov is, of course, the central, focal figure in both this dissertation and the subject under discussion in general. He alone and to the greatest extent carries out the transfer of ideas not only theoretically, in translation and popularization, but also through his own poetic work. Trayanov is not the first time that Assoc. Prof. Vlashki has been the subject of his scientific studies – this monograph builds on, expands, and further consolidates what has been done so far. Among its contributions, I would single out the punctual periodization of Trayanov’s stays in Vienna and the specific productivity of each of them. And in methodological terms – again the productive combination of a close and a long-distance perspective: the study of how specific “small” cases (for example, an art exhibition or a motto) give rise to large consequences or are a symptom of such. As I have already pointed out, not only are new facts (and even works) extracted from the archives, but some inaccurate opinions prevailing in scientific ideas are also corrected. – Such discoveries accompany the presentation of the other major figure in the Bulgarian reception of the Viennese Modern – Geo Milev. They are both in an empirical (biographical-factual) and in a conceptual, meaningful aspect. The emphasis is on Geo Milev’s theatrical ambitions – the never-to-happen production of *Elektra* at the

Bulgarian National Theatre. The case is particularly indicative in a number of aspects, including the complex, ambiguous nature of the channels of cultural transfer, when even one negative, non-occurring fact can play an important role – more than a number of occurring ones. – The translation of *Electra* by Hofmannsthal is also central to the work of N. Liliev, the latter name distinguished for its special merits in the assimilation of modern Austrian culture (not only literature) and its role in the modernization of Bulgarian culture during the interwar period.

Among the contributions of the dissertation is the stereoscopic, multi-layered approach to the problem under study: along with the primary, e.g. translation reception, the secondary meta-reception of the translations themselves in Bulgarian culture is also traced – their realization (e.g. theatrical), their true assimilation in concentrically expanding circles. The entire dynamics of the processes are kept under review: periods of intensity and decline, the relationship between center and marginalia (“center” in the sense of constructing a specific translation/receptive canon)... A special place in this main chapter is devoted to the channels through which the receptive (Bulgarian) literature assimilates the foreign (Austrian) one: in addition to theater, these are periodicals and book publishing.

To finish with the composition, let me state the obvious: the dissertation ends with a Conclusion, which in a mirror-reciprocal form recapitulates the intentions stated in the Introduction. But at the same time, there is a hidden promise of the vital relevance of the problem under discussion (which I have already allowed myself to explain): the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy as an event of paramount importance for the European twentieth century and the current crisis (sunset, *Untergang*) of Europe today: the special instructiveness of these readings from a century ago and more... And another, more specific aspect of continuing relevance for us Bulgarians: Austrian literature as emitting warnings about the *hidden dangers of modernization*, which remained misunderstood by Bulgarian culture.

In this sense, I am highly skeptical about the implementation of the achieved results in practice: history itself teaches that the lessons of history (whose agent – in the sense of educator, *Erzieher* – is literature) are rarely taken into account by the current, myopic history (usually understood as politics).

6. Assessment of the publications and personal contribution of the dissertation candidate

My assessment of the scientific value of the publications and the personal contribution of the candidate is the highest. My personal belief is that the value of a scientific activity in the field of humanitarian experience is not subject to quantitative measurements: counting citations and so on is only humiliating, without proving anything substantial. What I consider necessary to note in this particular case is the peculiar double position of the author Mladen Vlashki towards the subject of the dissertation (and its accompanying publications): being extra-positioned towards its subject, he is simultaneously within its reach. By examining the merits of previous figures for the transfer of Viennese Modern into Bulgarian literature and culture, as well as the mechanisms of this transfer, he himself – including with this dissertation (and accompanying publications) – is an active figure in this transfer. The dissertation (and more generally, the procedure) naturally concludes, simultaneously meta-reflects, and continues a long-term activity that began 30 years ago with the anthology “The Merry Apocalypse,” which has long since become an indispensable classic when talking about the Bulgarian reception of Viennese literary modernism.

And at the same time, when talking about the “personal contribution of the dissertationist,” the cumulative nature of science must be emphasized: with all his merits, Assoc. Prof. Ml. Vlashki appears to be a legitimate continuation of what has already been done before him – by those same figures who are the nominal subject of the dissertation. But also by others; in

examining the problem, the author relates not only in a vertical perspective to his predecessors, but also enters into a network of synchronous, horizontal relationships with his colleagues-associates, with whom he plows a common field.

The interdisciplinary scope of the dissertation presupposes a wide range of cited literature – both primary and secondary; both academic and from the daily press: Bulgarian and Austrian; from the spheres of literature, but also other spheres of culture...

7. Abstract

The abstract is prepared in accordance with the requirements of the relevant regulations and correctly reflects the main results achieved in the dissertation.

8. Recommendations for future use of the dissertation contributions and results

I have already made some critical remarks of my own, and I have no recommendations for the future use of the scientific and applied scientific contributions of the dissertation research (except for what has already been said here and there on the subject).

Despite all my carefulness, I did not come across any traces of plagiarism.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation *contains scientific, applied scientific and applied results that are an original contribution to science and comply with all* the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (LDASRB), the Regulations for the Implementation of LDASRB and the relevant Regulations of the PU “Paisiy Hilendarski”. The presented materials and dissertation results **fully** comply with the minimum national requirements adopted in connection with the Regulations of the PU “Paisiy Hilendarski” for the Implementation of LDASRB.

The dissertation shows that **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mladen Tsvetanov Vlashki** possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty “Ancient and Western European Literature: Comparative Literary Studies,” **demonstrating** qualities and skills for conducting research with the production of original and significant scientific contributions. Due to the above, I confidently give my *positive assessment* of the conducted research, presented by the above-reviewed dissertation, abstract, achieved results and contributions, and I *propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences”* to **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mladen Tsvetanov Vlashki** in the field of higher education: 2. Humanities, professional field 2.1. Philology, scientific specialty (Ancient and Western European Literature: Comparative Literary Studies).

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Prepared the opinion:

Prof. DSc. **Plamen Antov**