

## **REVIEW**

**by Professor Dr. Habil. Cleo Stefanova Protohristova,**

**Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski**

of the dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the educational and research degree of *Doctor of Sciences (Doctor habil.)*

**in the Sphere of HE 2. Humanities; Area of professional qualification 2.1. Philology  
(Ancient and West European Literature: Comparative Literature)**

**by assoc. prof. Mladen Vlashki, PhD,**

Dissertation topic:

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

Following Order № P ПД-22-1557 от 26. 06. 2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski, I have been appointed a member of the academic review board to provide a procedure for the defense of the dissertation work “Bulgarian Images in Late 19th-Century Austrian Literature” in fulfilment of the requirements for the educational and research degree of *Doctor of Sciences* in the Sphere of HE 2. Humanities; Area of professional qualification 2.1. Philology (Ancient and West European Literature: Comparative Literature) by assoc. prof. Mladen Vlashki, PhD from the Department of History of Literature and Comparative Literary Studies at the Faculty of Philology of the Plovdiv University of Paisiy Hilendarski.

The materials presented by Assoc. Prof. Vlachki Set on paper is in compliance with The Rules for Development of the Plovdiv University Academic Company and includes the following documents:

- Application to the Rector of the PUP to open the procedure;
- CV in European format;
- a copy of the diploma for the educational and scientific degree "Doctor";
- protocols of cathedral councils related to the opening of the procedure and the preliminary discussion of the dissertation work;

- dissertation work;
- Autoreferate;
- a list of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation;
- copies of scientific publications;
- Declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;
- reference to compliance with the minimum national requirements;

Mladen Tsvetanov Vlashki has been employed by Plovdiv University since 1986 following his successful passing of an assistantship exam in Western European Literature. Throughout this decades-long period he has been conducting lectures and seminars in Ancient and West European Literature in a range of philological majors; he has also delivered numerous MA level courses among which Current Bulgarian Literary Critique, Regulatory Processes in the Media Space of Europe and Bulgaria, Culture and the Media, European Policies, Semiotics, Contemporary Bulgarian Culture. In parallel, he has been very engaged in working with the students, offering guidance and leadership in a number of diverse projects and educational internships. Besides his active pedagogical role at PU, he has also taught courses in its Haskovo and Kurdzhali branches, and at the University of Shumen. In 2015 he defended his PhD thesis on the topic of “Literary and Dramatic Resonances of the Dramatic Output of ‘Young Vienna’ in Bulgaria before 1944”. In 2020 he was appointed to the academic position 'Associate Professor' at the Paisii.Hilendarski University. From the same year he was posted as a lecturer in Bulgarian language and literature and culture in Albertlud-Viggs-University, Freiburg (Germany) until 01.08.2023.

In the period between 1997 and 2001 he was a Member of Parliament in the 38<sup>th</sup> National Assembly and between May and December 2001 he was a member of the National Council for Radio and Television.

His international pedagogical profile is impressive: it includes lectures and academic activities in Germany, Austria, Spain, Russia, Hungary and Romania under the auspices of

Erasmus+ and other programs for academic exchanges and various research projects. During the winter semester of 2023/2024 he was a guest professor of world literature at Göttingen University (Germany).

Usually, the assessment of the relevance of a scientific work under discussion is made automatically, by default, since the very question of whether a study is relevant is not free from controversy. In the case of Mladen Vlashki's work, however, it can be said with absolute certainty that it is not only relevant, but also urgently timely and necessary. This is because the fate of Viennese modernity, its collapse and disintegration, provides a frightening lesson about the vulnerability of our own illusions of stability and continuity of cultural values, especially in the context of the current catastrophic retreat from the principles of liberalism, pluralism, and democracy. Mladen Vlashki suggests that the failure of his cosmopolitan cultural project a century ago should be interpreted as a warning about the possibility of a repeat of this unfortunate historical experience.

As for the question of whether the dissertation demonstrates a reliable understanding of the scientific problem, it can be said without any risk of exaggeration that the field of research presented in the dissertation has been "appropriated" by Assoc. Prof. Mladen Vlashki in the most essential and productive way. The degree of his mastery is evidenced by the two doctoral dissertations devoted to the Bulgarian reception of the dramaturgy of "Young Vienna" and defended at the University of Plovdiv in 2015 and at the University of Vienna in 2020, his habilitation thesis, which presents Vlashki's research on the reception of Kafka in Bulgaria until 1989, and a series of monographs reflecting this academic asset: *Young Vienna in Young Bulgaria* (Plovdiv: Hermes, 2017), *Reflections of Viennese Modernity in Bulgarian Literature from the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries* (Plovdiv: Hermes Publishing House, 2018), *Kafka's Reception in Bulgaria until 1989* (Plovdiv: Literary House Association Stranitsa, 2020) and *Materialien zur Rezeption der Wiener Moderne in Bulgarien bis 1944. Hermann Bahr, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler* (Peter Lang, 2022). It is appropriate to add to these an early

edition – the anthology *The Joyful Apocalypse. Aesthetics and Literature of the Viennese Fin-de-Siècle*, which he compiled and partly translated, and also wrote the notes and afterword (Pygmalion Publishing House, Plovdiv, 1996), since this book provides additional insight into the longevity of his research commitment. There is no doubt that, in their complexity, the scientific works of Assoc. Prof. Vlashki, focused on late Austrian literature, are his *opus vivendi*.

I consider it appropriate to begin my assessment of Mladen Vlashki's work with the conclusion that is of decisive importance for the present procedure, namely that the dissertation proposed for defense contains the results of fundamental scientific research, which legitimizes its aspirations to obtain the scientific degree of "Doctor of Sciences."

The dissertation is the result of decades of systematic research, which the author rightly describes as "literary archaeological," "literary-historical," and "comparative-literary," impressive both in terms of the scale of the work accomplished and the depth and productivity of the procedures used to systematize and rationalize a monumental volume of empirical material and an impressive collection of theoretical sources in order to produce a clearly defined, comprehensive, and convincing picture of the reception of Austrian *fin-de-siècle* literature in Bulgaria, covering the entire range from synchronous reception to retroactive and compensatory transfers.

The dissertation is distinguished by its enviably solid methodological foundation. Selected and constructed systematically, in accordance with the specific challenges that the author had to deal with – working in parallel with empirical material, images, and various types of interpretations, but also with the need to identify intermediaries and reconstruct contexts. The research strategies are the result of productive coordination between a systematic understanding of literature and literary sociology, with a dominant role for Bourdieu's field theory, cultural transfer theory, receptive aesthetics, and analytical comparativism.

An important merit of the dissertation is its impeccable structure. After the introductory part, which clearly formulates the parameters of the cultural-historical field under study and clarifies both its internal dynamics and its characteristic, chronologically predetermined duality,

the main methodological strategies of the study and the literary-historical models of Austrian literature for the period under review, used as a starting point, are presented analytically. These served as a basis for specifying the author's own framework of Austrian late medieval literature and as a guide for the necessary taxonomic clarifications. Sixty-nine authors have been identified in the relevant literary field, thirty five of whom are irrelevant to further analysis because there are no traces of their reception in Bulgaria and, accordingly, no possibilities for any possible generation and subsequent developments, positive or negative, of their reception images.

The second, main part of the work, entitled "Transfer, Reception, and Images of Austrian Fin-de-Siècle Literature in the Literary Field in Bulgaria," begins with my own original attempt to characterize the Bulgarian literary field, necessary in view of its functions as a target area of transfer and as a framework for reception, largely experimental, since it cannot rely on reliable previous studies on the subject. This is followed by a presentation of the main mediators in the research process (Ivan Shishmanov, Teodor Trayanov, Geo Milev, and Nikolay Liliev), the transfer channels (periodicals, theater, book publishing), the images of Austrian fin-de-siècle literature generated by them, as well as the movement of these images in the Bulgarian environment, their interpretation, and the processes of appropriation or decline.

Enormous efforts were made to collect the material, the analysis of which made the dissertation possible, as evidenced by the number of periodicals reviewed de visu, relevant to the exceptionally long period under study, systematic library searches, and materials extracted from archives. The reconstruction of the processes behind the extremely valuable empirical data was carried out with methodological consistency and professional expertise, and their assessment is convincingly argued.

The conclusions drawn are difficult to be fully assessed because they essentially construct and structure an independent, almost completely unexplored field of research. In addition to their validity for the Bulgarian reception of Austrian regional literature, they also have the potential to revise Bulgarian cultural and, in particular, literary history of the twentieth century.

I would like to note that the dissertation under discussion is so extensive in content and so rich in ideas, observations, and conclusions that an adequate assessment of it could not fit

within the strict limits of a standard academic review. The numerous observations, analyses, and conclusions presented in the exposition convincing in their argumentation and articulated with elegant precision, provoke in the reader ideas for reconsidering one or another thesis and are a cause for genuine joy. I would like to believe that when the work is published as a monograph, this inherent inadequacy of the assessment will be compensated for. Therefore, I will return to my overall impression of the work as a complete, flawless realization of a monumental project, which, not coincidentally, seemed unreasonably ambitious and unachievable when it was first announced decades ago. It can be said with justified certainty that with his research, Mladen Vlashki has earned the position of a mediator with a decisive role in the transfer and reception of Austrian *fin-de-siècle* literature in Bulgaria.

The significant number of publications by Mladen Vlashki related to the dissertation, presented in accordance with the procedure, testify not only to the good publicity of his research achievements, but also to their impressive effectiveness, illustrated by the attached list of authoritative citations. Special attention should also be paid to the numerous prestigious awards that Dr. Mladen Vlashki has received for his publications and other professional activities, including the Hristo G. Danov National Award for Criticism and the Pencho's Oak Award for his book "Romanology?".

As a long-time lecturer at the Faculty of Philology at Plovdiv University, I had the opportunity to observe firsthand the academic presence and development of Assoc. Prof. Mladen Vlashki, first as a student and later as a colleague, but also his multifaceted activities as a lecturer, researcher, literary critic, initiator and editor of publications, author of radio programs, and public figure. For decades, he has devoted his talent, imagination, and diligence to all these activities, but also his infectious enthusiasm, which has won him supporters and collaborators.

Although predictable, in the context of the high merits of the dissertation highlighted so far, I should also note its impeccable presentation in the abstract attached to the documentation

for the procedure. Prepared in full compliance with the relevant requirements, it provides a clear and comprehensive overview of the content and achievements of the research. Moreover, it demonstrates an impressive degree of self-reflection, which presents it as a test, not simply summarizing what has been done in the dissertation, but also surpassing it.

In conclusion, and in accordance with the standard formulas provided for in the Regulations of Plovdiv University for reviews of scientific procedures, I will summarize that the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Mladen Vlashki contains scientific results that represent an original contribution in the field of comparative literature and receptive studies and meets all the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for the Application of ZRASRB, and the relevant Regulations of PU. The materials presented and the dissertation results fully comply with the minimum national requirements adopted in connection with the Regulations of Plovdiv University for the application of the ADSRA.

In agreement with all of the above, as well as with my conviction of the significance of the scientific contributions contained in the presented dissertation, I find it reasonable to recommend that the esteemed Scientific Jury award the scientific degree of "Doctor of Science" to Assoc. Prof. Mladen Tsvetanov Vlashki in the field of higher education: 2. Humanities, professional field 2.1. Philology, scientific specialty (Ancient and Western European Literature: Comparative Literature) and would gladly vote for the confirmation and in favor of this proposal.

September, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2025

**Reviewer:**

Prof. Cleo Protohristova, Dr. Habil.