

CULTURE IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES

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THE MOTIF OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MACEDONIAN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser

Social motifs are deeply interwoven within Macedonian culture, beginning with folklore patterns, all the way to contemporary literary and other artistic achievements. Although their domination, in terms of literary history, is most frequently related to expressionism, existentialism and realism in the period before and after the Second World War, through the work of the founding modern poets, such as Kosta Solev Racin, their variable presence can be traced throughout the overall development of Macedonian poetry.

When we discuss the motif of social justice in poetry, we are in fact talking about the complex and still provocative issue of literature of commitment. From the moment that this notion was coined by Jean-Paul Sartre in his essays "Literature of Commitment", "What Is Literature?", "What Can Literature Do?" etc. immediately after the Second World War, all the way to today, fierce discussions are being led concerning what is understood by this concept. The understanding of commitment has many nuances. For some, it is vulgarization and pouring art into an ideological mould, for others it is a part of the superstructural humanistic layer of every creation. Some interpret commitment as *a priori* assuming an ideological position, i.e., creating with a deliberate idea that the work should serve a certain purpose, whereas others consider that commitment naturally follows the impulse that the creator receives from his/her social context, which is

added subtly to the primary aesthetic layer of the literary work. Some consider that commitment is located somewhere outside of the author – it is imposed on the author as an order; whereas others understand that there cannot be a committed literary work without broad reception, so that the audience is its true medium. After the culmination of the pejoratively understood commitment of the socialist realism period, which, fortunately, compared to other national literatures, did not gain great momentum in the former SFR Yugoslavia, where Macedonian literature developed as well, a gradual subduing of the interest for commitment in literature followed. In literary history, the phase of the realism-modernism conflict in the 1950s and 1960s marked a complete rejection of writing according to prescribed ideological matrixes, and enabled the appearance of a more sophisticated type of commitment, “commitment against commitment”, that is, a creative principle that opposed an ideological framework given “from above”, and marked the liberation of the creative work from the day-to-day political and ideological connotations of suitability. After recovering from the extreme sentimentality, in the 1970s and 1980s Macedonian poetry branched into a multitude of various kinds of poetics, among which some were more reflexive and metaphysical, others focused on everyday life, and others still displayed interest in experiment, fantasy elements, surrealism; in terms of content, some discussed basic existential dilemmas, others national identity and patriotic issues, some were thirsty for new spaces and entered intertextual dialogues. In a word, social motifs were suppressed, rejected as something that was more appropriate for the injustices of the past. The presence of social motifs was automatically linked to social activism, and in those years it was underrated as something that did not belong in the domain of true art.

But what happened to the relation between true art and commitment after the great shifts for which the word transition is

generally accepted, which caused tectonic movements in the order upon which Macedonian culture had been developing? Since 1991 the Republic of Macedonia has been a fully autonomous and independent sovereign state, developing its national culture (ostensibly) without any obstruction. However, obstacles are felt from all sides: the internal poor economic situation, the difficulties in establishing a democratic and just system and external problems in relations with neighbouring countries. Commitment seems to be a necessity – can anyone, especially the intellectual and creative artist, remain completely indifferent towards the things that surround him? And what kind of a creative shape does this non-indifference have at a time which challenges humanistic values?

In answering these questions, I start from the position that there is an intensified presence of the motif of social justice in Macedonian poetry since the process of transition began, and a more profound understanding of commitment in literature has developed, surpassing in a certain way the already existing understanding. There is an impression that the postulates of Sartre's philosophy of commitment in literature are again in focus, although they were rejected and almost forgotten for a long time in Macedonian culture because of their direct contact with leftist ideology. In the critical transitional period, literary commitment has positioned itself above any ideologies, and it represents a subversive act in a broadly understood civilizational context, and in conditions of globalization it often grows into activism. I will try to support this postulate through several examples, to detect the basic variations of this motif in more recent contemporary Macedonian poetry, to indicate several leitmotifs that provoke the Macedonian poets to speak out in verse. The conclusion will revise and comment on the concept of literature of commitment today from the aspect of cultural studies.

The motif of social justice as an extensive concept

The world in global terms, the Balkans, and Macedonia itself experienced great upheavals at the beginning of the 21st century. The spirits of evil of the two world wars seem to be revived and are inciting new armed conflicts, terrorism, exoduses, fear and apocalyptic threats, injustice, poverty, hate. Predatory capitalism establishes the power of the material and threatens humanistic principles. Although grand narratives have been rejected by postmodernism, and although ideologies are despised, the old human menaces appear on an even greater scale and threaten even more ferociously the survival of the world. This is the climate in which the Macedonian poetry of the 21st century is created, where the motif of social justice, understood in all its breadth, takes a greater and more significant position.

The motif of social justice is an extensive concept that covers many layers. In the past it was linked to the leftist ideological world-view, but today, abandoning those frameworks, it stretches through a broader civilizational ethical sensibility, directed against everything that signifies injustice, threat, and jeopardy of the primordially humane. Of course, Macedonian contemporary poetry also contains elements of the traditional understanding of the social motif, especially among the poets from the older generation, who have included the transitional experience into their creative work, but these verses no longer have a rebellious-awakening (revolutionary and even optimistic) tone, but, on the contrary, they are immersed in sarcasm and pessimism. One such poet, who establishes his poetics upon the critical observation of the social context, is Risto Lazarov. His verses are filled with discontent and despair at the perpetual social injustice permanently present in the changing political system. The collection of poems *Odvajnadežna* (*Barely Hopeful*) published soon after independence and the beginning

of the transition in 1993 includes the poem “And Sane¹ the labourer did not receive his pension” (Lazarov/Лазаров, 2009, kniga 2/ книга 2, p. 50). Its stripped reference, that is, the fact that the most exhausted person in the town, who has performed the most difficult physical work, did not receive a pension from any of the authorities that replaced one another, creates a specific reflexive-lyrical aura. The poet does not refrain from reminding us of the ideology of “dialectical materialism” and “the rules of social justice”, or from including these ideologically loaded phrases in his verses, with strong irony and mistrust in the notion of “justice”, even the “divine” one. The poem ends with the “anger” that remains after this naked fact, which radiates from the gravestone of the unjustly treated man.

A somewhat later poem, published in 2016 by the younger poet Jovica Ivanovski, has a similar title – “Nadežna” (‘Hopeful’), without the “barely” present in Lazarov’s work, but the meaning of the title after reading the poem itself seems to turn into the exact opposite. The poet reflects the contemporary grotesque moment in the tone of resignation and contempt: “Hypocritical everyday reality. / Beggars and hoisted flags. / Roma rummaging through capitalism, / laborers unload democracy. (...) There are no protests with unfounded requests, / nor authorities that will not ignore them. / All is so simple and worn-out. / Those who do not have, crave, / those who do have do not give. / Only revolution can change things. / And if successful, only the capital / will go from one’s hands to another’s. / And again, those who do not have / will crave, those who do have / will not give” (Ivanovski/Ивановски, 2017, p. 89). It seems as though there is no hope at all for the poet in transitional contemporary life that a balance in society can be established, and any attempt to establish it is useless and meaningless, as long as the main, guiding principle is “to have”.

¹A personal name.

The corrosive effect of the materialistic principle is voiced through many of the verses of the poets from the younger generation. For example, Zvonko Taneski's quatrain from 2012 is shocking: "It is better to be / sad in a Mercedes / than joyous / on a bicycle", especially when we go back to the title of the poem: "Ispovedta na eden makedonski osmoodelenec vo godina shto izminuva" ('Confession of a Macedonian Eighth-Grader in the Passing Year') (Taneski /Танески, 2012, p. 62). This quatrain, seemingly simple, referential, colloquial, suddenly explodes to the reader as an awakening slap, as a warning of the destructive consumerist spirit that lures its victims into the materialist whirlpool from a very early age.

Misery, poverty, the destruction of human dignity in transitional Macedonia is also a motif in an exceptionally evocative poem by Lidija Dimkovska from 2016, entitled "Grpka" ('Hump'). In her authentic poetical style, which is based on an extensive narrative on the border between cruel reality and grotesque phantasmagoria, Dimkovska chooses to focus on a typical profession during the transition in Macedonia – the gatherer of empty plastic bottles. Everywhere else such bottles are recycled, whereas in Macedonia they are an opportunity for work, that is, for survival – the poor collect them from containers to sell them to the recycling centres for a very small amount of money. The lyrical subject in the poem gives us the image of the bottle gatherer: "Worn-out trousers, / furrowed hands, / a pair of mismatched slippers, (...) I hear his stomach rumble" ² (Dimkovska/Димковска, 2016, p. 17). And underneath the torn T-shirt, the man has "a hump, marked with pain / as with a Star of David". The association with Jewish tragedy and exclusion is no accident, but gives poverty a dimension

² The English translations of all the verses by Lidija Dimkovska in this passage, from her poetry collection *In Black and White*, have been used from the English edition translated by Ljubica Arsovska and Patricia Marsh.

of global catastrophe. Suddenly, the poem turns into a surreal image: the subject-witness of that pain becomes depersonalized because of nausea, dehumanized, loses her essence, her “hope, future, and aim evaporate” and the speaker turns into one of the plastic bottles in the cart. The social motifs in the poetic world of Dimkovska is forked into a spectrum of motif shades, intertwined with the motifs of nomad and wanderer, femininity and religion, but also with direct impulses from contemporary reality. In several poems from her collection of poems *Crno i belo (In Black and White)* from 2016, Dimkovska discusses the social catastrophe of the refugees in Syria: “But the blood of Syria has clotted, / every new drop flows inwards, not out of the wound. (...) have been thrown by the smuggler out of the truck / right behind the Syrian Embassy. / They stand bewildered like a still life / in front of the cleaner, who knows the world would squash them / even if he managed to save the lot of them” (Dimkovska/ Димковска, 2016, p. 57).

The refugee situation, which left a strong mark on the fragile Macedonian social reality, especially during 2015, provoked many poets to react in their verses, and among them poets from the older generations, whose poems in the past were not much concerned with social themes. Thus, the classical poet Mateja Matevski in the ninth decade of his life wrote poetry that also spoke about the Syrian refugees, reminding us of the tragedy of refugees from various historical periods and locations. “They come They come They run from all sides / of sadness Of the irreversible pain Of hate / towards the imagined hope (...) there is no one to give them a hand... It is all the same again under the cosmic circle No lesson is learned”. These are verses from the poem “Begalci” (‘Refugees’) which is at the beginning of the collection of poems *Budenje na kristalite (Awakening of the Crystals)* from 2016 (Matevski/ Матевски, 2016, p. 7-9).

Risto Lazarov, mentioned above as a poet with exceptional openness towards the realistic social impulse, in his poetry collection *Mrak*

(*Darkness*) also published in 2016, dedicates a poem to Alan Kurdi, the boy-refugee from Syria, whose dead body, photographed on a beach, made global headlines. This poem entitled “Udavenoto dete so crvena maicka na morskata plaza” (‘The Drowned Child with Red T-shirt on the Sea Beach’) calls upon stirring that little conscience of global humanity, upon the traces of sympathy and empathy in the human community of the modern era.

These few examples show that the social justice issue is a comprehensive theme that is interwoven in Macedonian contemporary poetry through several motif cores. Poverty and exploitation, but also exile and the refugee crisis, patriarchy and all shades of authoritarianism, hate and marginalization, identity, racial, religious conflicts, the threats to democracy and civil rights, the ecological, pharmaceutical and other threats to the civic unwritten code – all these are in a way segments of the motif of social justice. Macedonia, especially in the second decade of the 21st century, is faced with the violation of the established norms of social justice at many levels: the problematization of its identity; its stigmatization as an outcast of Europe; the re-writing of its history; the limiting of the freedom of the media and other freedoms; the usurping of the public sphere; ethnic, minority and religious intolerance...

The dominantly urban contemporary artists, especially poets, are greatly disappointed by the shapelessness and baroque reconstruction of the Macedonian capital Skopje through the so-called “Skopje 2014” project, that is, the change of the city’s appearance, an urban transition which has deep social repercussions. In that context, the title of the poetry collection of the above-mentioned Jovica Ivanovski *Gradot shito ne e vekje moj* (*The City which is no Longer Mine*), also published in 2016, which represents a reflex against the “Skopje 2014” project, is paradigmatic. It is one of the many poetic and artistic voices that contributed to the revolt against the defects of the existing system, a revolt that has already been remembered in recent Macedonian history

as the “Colourful Revolution”, with the slogan “No justice – no peace”, which was primarily directed against the city’s baroque appearance. The practical manifestation of this prolonged civil revolt was the daubing of the monuments and buildings of “Skopje 2014” in a combination of various colours. The verses of the beatnik-like rebellious poet criticize not only the aesthetic failure of the Skopje “botox-baroque”, but also touch upon its criminal background: “Architecture for the masses / that remained hungry because of It” (Ivanovski/ИВАНОВСКИ, 2016, p. 62). Ivanovski’s poems are drastically referential, supported with exact dates and factual descriptions of protest events and allusions to real people, so that their commitment is easily recognizable. With his verses, the poet creates a clear creative manifest of what he names the *Skopje Spring*, that is, the awakening of Macedonian civic awareness and conscience, at moments as vulgar and direct as a diary entry, and at moments lucidly reflexive and sensible. These verses are often desperate or full of resignation: “We got lost, (...) In the imitation of democracy, / in the system that fucks us all systematically (...) In the painful yearning for a healthy Macedonia, / which will slalom as an ambulance / carrying cure to poverty” (Ivanovski/ИВАНОВСКИ, 2016, p. 15). Sometimes they are rebellious and striving for justice, although essentially sceptical and ironic: “The bikers fight for / their rights – they are unjustly treated / almost as much as the homosexuals” (Ivanovski/ИВАНОВСКИ, 2016, p.12). However, they occasionally display mild optimism: “Walls do not a restaurant make / nor ugly buildings and monuments – the city. / The people are what counts most especially those / that did not yield, did not kneel, / did not change sides, did not become part / of the new facades of hypocrisy” (Ivanovski/ИВАНОВСКИ, 2016, p. 83).

The civil protests in Skopje during 2016 are also the inspiration for Vladimir Martinovski’s poem entitled “Protestna (pretesna) pesna” (‘Protest [Narrowest] Poem’). It distances itself from the specific

facts and through linguistic play typical of the poet it builds a poetic image of the trans-historical persistence of injustice (social, that is, any kind). In a strictly structured poetic construct, the poet uses the whole spectrum of expressions that refer to injustice, marginalization, subordination, thus alluding to all shades of social (in)justice that persist through the various historical epochs. He also remembers to imply the ecological perspective: "Tree rows are cut down. Mountains are eradicated." (Martinovski/Мартиновски, 2016, p. 100); whereas at the end of the poem he states with resignation the fact that: "The unfair game continues The same peripeteia again: / for the rebels crosses / are raised again. For new crucifixions" (Martinovski/Мартиновски, 2016, p. 100).

Injustices change their shape, but cannot be eradicated. Although times change, the old pain in regard to social injustice seems to persist and perhaps even strengthen. In Macedonian poetry, the verses of the national bard already mentioned at the beginning of this text, Kočo Racin, are predominantly social. This is understandable when we take into consideration the fact that his poetry was written just before World War II. It is interesting that in later years the social element of his poetry had a secondary significance, and was interpreted historically. However, in time it was precisely the social dimension that became exceptionally significant in the reception of new generations of readers, so a large part of his readership identify themselves with that facet of his verse. The tradition of Racin's work is increasingly present in various forms of social activism, and references to his verse have become increasingly frequent in poetry. The great respect towards Racin's work is institutionally manifested every year through the literary festival Racin Encounters, at which, among other events, prominent Macedonian writers give a speech to honour this significant figure in our poetry. In 2009, the poet Mateja Matevski in his speech stated that:

As a human and as a poet, as a national bard and fighter for national freedom and for all humiliated and hungry, for his workers, for the people laboring till exhaustion, Racin can peacefully rest in the hands of his accomplished national and cultural ideal, but not in the unaccomplished social justice and this torturous, unfortunate transition, in which the factories and the fields have become empty, and the homes, streets and restaurants have become full, which would awaken his humanistic piercing and rebellious lyre. (*Nova Makedonija*/ Нова Македонија, 2009)

The younger generations of Macedonian poets speak with a “humanistic piercing and rebellious lyre” in the age of transition. Let us discuss at least one example from the youngest generation of poets, Istok Ulcar. In the poem “Drugar Solev, sega i drugite dvorovi se crni” (‘Comrade Solev, now the other yards are black, too’), he refers in the title itself to one of the most broadly known poems by Kočo Racin. He ironizes the ideals of Kočo Racin’s poetry, presenting his own social context as a complete moral breakdown, and so he says: “You do not know that / Your Lenka now whores around / with managers, MPs, mercenaries, / who killed your diggers and tobacco workers. / Travelling sleepily towards their offices, / people neglect The white dawns, / The morning above us is becoming more and more cloudy” (Ulčar/Улчар, 2016). Lenka, the tobacco workers, the diggers – these are all titles of poems from the cult book of Kočo Racin *Beli mugri* (*White Dawns*), the only book of poems that every literate Macedonian has (or is supposed to have had) read. And if Racin’s verses reflect injustice through the destiny of the girl Lenka who catches tuberculosis as a result of her working with tobacco, the verses of young Ulčar speak of other variations of injustice, forged diplomas that can lead one to become a member of the academy, newly created viruses by the pharmaceutical mafia, the unjustly imprisoned and institutionalized etc.

Social motifs also dominate the poetry of a group of young poets that gravitate towards the global movement *100,000 Poets for Change*, whose Macedonian coordinator is the young poet and civil activist Mitko Gogov from Strumica. In an interview, asked about this movement, he answers:

Taking into consideration the situation at the local and global level, every day we are witnesses of unpleasant news and events that shake us from our state of comfort into which we all sometimes drift, ignoring the problems that do not directly concern us or do not threaten us. This manifestation, for six years in a row in Macedonia gathers at one place the poets from our country, and with the specific theme calls, we send an appeal every year to the community about the things that seriously concern us, such as: police brutality, corruption, wars, terrorist attacks which are terrifying as never before, execution of people and poets, whose human rights are jeopardized in their own states, violence, genocide, etc. (Gogov, 2017)

Through such and similar manifestations, creativity that grows into concrete activism is supported. Additionally, following the example of some events in other cultures, above all the American, attractive performance forms for sharing poetry are increasingly popular, such as the organization of several slam-poetry festivals in Macedonia, which entail activism and social commitment. Especially provocative among them are those that deal with women's rights, which in their own way have become a part of the general trend of raising gender awareness in Macedonian culture. However, one must be aware of the difference between committed poetry, that is literature, and activist (pseudo)art, which is only rarely aesthetically valid. Activist (pseudo)poetry has the power to point out social anomalies and affect an audience if it achieves popularity. Committed poetry with a primary aesthetic value

may go unnoticed by the general audience, but it can achieve slower, though more effective impact on public awareness. Sometimes, activist performances contribute to creating the illusion of being released from or having resolved problems, which, in fact, persist or even deepen.

Critical reviews of transitional poetry

The presented brief overview of the Macedonian contemporary poetry that shows a certain degree of social commitment gives us the right to summarize that in the 21st century, especially in 2016, when most of the stated examples were published, this type of poetic expression has a growing tendency. In 2013, the critic Elizabeta Sheleva, in an article about Macedonian contemporary poetry systematized its most prominent tendencies through the categories: return to the realistic, urban existentialism and feminine post-poetry; and she emphasizes that: “The ideological emphasis of the urban component, the linguistic-stylistic urbanism, recognizable non-conformism in the performativity and style of writing marks the creative work of these authors, who have felt on their own skin all ‘remedies’ of the urban transition, which thoroughly changed the appearance of the city, but also the way of life, through increasing globalization, billboardization, new ‘urbanization’, ornamented stage performance”. In the same text, she adds that “the Macedonian poetry in transition also marks underlined gender awareness” (Sheleva/ Шелева, 2013).

The transition poetry is immersed in its social context, and brings to the surface the bitterest themes of contemporary life: poverty and crime, the refugee crisis, anomalies of democracy, the architectural distortion of the Macedonian capital, corruption, marginalization, discrimination against women, etc. The underlined referencing is mostly achieved with the dominance of the narrative confessional poetic expression, which reaching for the author’s intimacy sheds light

on the impulses from the context. It seldom strives towards metaphors and stylistic extremes, and more frequently retains colloquial, everyday discourse, freely using vulgarisms and slang. It sometimes has a dose of rebelliousness, but it most frequently consists of detecting problems and artistically transferring them into humanist questioning. It must be emphasized that this type of poetry is just one of the many poetic discourses present in the contemporary moment of Macedonian literature, but it is an interesting fact that such different authors, both in terms of poetic style and in terms of age, write, among other things, a type of poetry featuring the motif of social justice. Unlike the end of the 20th century, when the poetic referencing of social motifs in Macedonian literature was minimal because of the belief that they belonged to a rejected ideological paradigm, in the 21st century they have become more emphasized, but in accordance with the preoccupations of the new transitional context.

In the critical reviews of this transitional creative work, the trend of increasing artistic commitment is commented upon enthusiastically and positively, but always outside of any ideological-political framework and with a focus on the aesthetic quality of the verses reviewed. For example, when Vladimir Martinovski writes about the poetry collection of Matevski, he says: "The poetry in this book receives a difficult, but necessary task: to be an awareness of the alienation of the human, to be a necessary conscience in the world that sinks in moral darkness, to be an oasis of sympathy and empathy in a world that sinks in indifference. To be a platform for making sense of the destiny of the human and the world" (Martinovski/Мартиновски, 2016a, p. 85). When he reviews the poetry of Risto Lazarov, he says: "There is no attempt to moderate and freeze darkness and evil in these poems. Injustice and evil-doing are not relativized. These are courageous, stout and humane poems. In fact, the whole new poetry book of Risto Lazarov is brave, audacious, rebellious. In this hypocritical time, we all need such a

warning book” (Martinovski/Мартиновски, 2016b, p. 126). Olivera Kjorveziroska, in the afterword of the mentioned poetry collection of Vlarimir Martinovski *Vnatreshni planini (Internal Mountains)* writes: “Martinovski does not let poetry ‘do’ only what it wants. Bringing the poem to the sharp edge of reality, he does not take away the poetic from it, but adds to it the time in which it is created as a clear social and civic awareness” (Kjorveziroska/Ќорвезироска, 2016, p. 138).

Culture and social commitment

From a cultural aspect, when we talk about this type of poetry, we talk about the issues of poetry’s function in the contemporary world, the social status of poets, elite and mass culture, the (mis)use of literature, the relation between art and politics etc. Does poetry have any possibility (I deliberately avoid using the usual word “power”) to change the world – this is a question that distresses scholars. If we set off from the cultural premise that no human creative act can be observed from outside of the spheres of interest, thus it is always a kind of political act, then the attitude that poetry in one way or another is related to social commitment is a valid one. Every verse depends on what kind of a context it is created in and what kind of a context it is received in, by whom, where and how it is conveyed, how popular it is, how promoted or neglected. Even the most innocent verse on the quiver of a bird’s wings could have serious political connotations. Research in the area of cultural studies reveals that the idea of the disinterestedness of art in the Schiller sense is being abandoned (Spivak, 2012). The world is so fractured between the powerful and the subaltern (to use again Gayatri Chacravorti Spivak’s notion taken from Antonio Gramsci), the central and the marginal, and the loud and the voiceless, that everything that is created in it in a way reflects those antagonisms. What testifies to this is the fact that many of the most memorable and beloved world poets

wrote poetry that in the context of their time was politically committed (we can mention at least George Gordon Byron, Rabindranath Tagore, Pablo Neruda, Mongane Wally Serote, our Racine and indeed many others). Experience has shown that even the most explicitly political verses, if they are poetically and aesthetically masterfully shaped, can be accepted by readers as permanent values.

On the other hand, the author and the poetry are tossed in the ring of the global marketplace, and although there are poets that resist it (for example, a curious case is the experiment of the Macedonian writer Elizabeta Bakovska, who refuses to sell the samples of one of her poetry collections which she printed at her expense, but only gives them away), still they enter the whirlpool of a market society in which they barely manage not to drown. Macedonian transitional poetry has a poem with this motif with the explicit title – “Obid da se napishe socijalna pesna” (‘An Attempt to Write a Social Poem’) by Vele Smilevski (2000), which discusses the discrepancy between the idealism of poetic fervour and the prosaic effect of the poet’s hunger, that is, his struggle for survival: “The placard was readable: / ‘We want poems / we are through with bread.’ / The speaker was shouting: / ‘The poems are not an illusion / The poems are reality.’ / The crowd of people added: / ‘Down with Plato, / long live the poets.’ / ‘Close the curtains’ / the man said to the woman / in the five-floor building across the square. / For a long time afterwards / the poets were reading verses / skinny and pale / hungry for bread” (Smilevski/Смилевски, 2009, p. 29). And the poet in the Macedonian society in transition is placed on the margins of the margins, frequently on the verge of survival, if poetry is his profession and subsistence (which is almost impossible).

In order to have any impact on social awareness and conscience, poetry should above all be accepted by the audience – it should be popular. And in transitional Macedonia, poetry is the least read literature. In order to be closer to the public, poetry is interwoven with

other arts (music, video) and is increasingly becoming performative (rap, hip-hop, slam). Printing collections of poems as a market procedure is becoming unacceptable to young poets, and they frequently decide to share their poetry as public presentation in front of audiences – or public performances at manifestations of a different kind, or in the electronic space, on social networks. Thus, recognizing poetry as some kind of elite phenomenon, which mainly communicates with academic circles, is being abandoned and poetry is entering into the public sphere, not literally onto the streets, but in bars. An example of the tendency of the youthful democratization of poetry are the poetry readings of young Macedonian poets named *Astalni proekcii*, which for quite along period of time, around three years (starting in 2014), with small interruptions (a total of about 30 readings) are held every first Tuesday of the month in a Skopje restaurant bar. Anyone can attend and participate in these poetic readings. *Astalni proekcii* is growing into a significant transitional phenomenon changing the views on poetry in contemporary Macedonian society, undermining the stereotypes of the institutional character of poetry, relativizing the divisions into young and old poets (and generation divisions are a general point in Macedonian literature) and building a collective affirmative relation towards poetry (every author is invited, apart from his/her verses, to read his/her favorite poems from another author). Such a transitional relation towards poetry is a two-edged sword: it affirms, but it also vitiates poetry, and relativizes its aestheticism. All the same, it is certainly awakening the languid Macedonian cultural public.

With democratization, poetry has become more susceptible to commitment, becoming a reflex of the difficulties of the time we live in. The inverse side of this act of commitment in poetry is the abuse of poetry for mundane political goals, something that can be interpreted as the return of the worst practices of politicizing, which

was typical for different, distant times. Fortunately, acting as agitprop does not happen directly in the new poetry, but it takes place through the fact that probably for the first time in Macedonian history, poems by Macedonian poets from the canon, such as Blaže Koneski, are being used in the political campaigns of different, ideologically opposed parties in contemporary Macedonia.

In such a way, poetry is an artform that, nevertheless, persists in contemporary Macedonia, itself in a process of transition that has not yet completely revealed its direction. In this globally and especially locally catastrophic time, will poetry come closer to a general humanistic commitment, and growing into activism, will it lose some of its traditional characteristics, or will it be compromised, manipulated as many other things in society? The title of the essay of the above-mentioned Elizabeta Bakovska is also in the form of a question: “Varvarski li e da se pishuva poezija?” (“Is It Barbaric to Write Poetry?”) in which she makes a close observation about poetry in the transitional period and asks the key questions:

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, when the global economic crisis spills over into a series of political turbulent events on the European and the North American continent, and democracy is becoming an extremely flexible category (some referring to it as democratorship), interpreted by ideologies that are essentially anachronistic, the question that arises is not very different from those posed by Adorno – does it make sense for a person to write poetry as an intimate, individual act, or with its whole rational and intellectual potential should turn towards the world in a more committed (and joint) effort to change it for the better? Or should poetry be understood as a by-product of an extreme (selfish, egocentric, self-sufficient, egotistic) individualism, in time when it seems that the participation in

the collective, public life (on local, national or global level) is considered not only an obligation and expression of a higher civic awareness, but even abstinence and neutrality in regard to ongoing issues (again on local, national or global level) seem to be a sin. (...) Poetry is a kind of a protest of the individual against the uniformity of collectivization of contemporary life, which autocratically and crudely imposes not only 'socially acceptable' objectives, but also 'socially acceptable' ways of striving for those objectives. It [poetry] is a reach towards the primordial, primary melody of language as a tool for individualization of activism, and for a deeper humanization of the frequently manipulated concepts of democracy, civil society and freedom. (Bakovska/Баковска, 2013)

On the basis of what has been presented, it can be concluded that commitment in contemporary Macedonian poetry is strengthening its presence, while the concept of committed literature is gaining new connotations. The concept of committed literature in the past used to be connected with leftist ideology, although Sartre tried to place it in a broader supra-ideological sphere. Today, in a reality which is threatening and catastrophic in its own way, with destruction, facelessness, alienation and the loss of ethical constants, the issue of commitment turns into an inevitable segment of creativity. In this sense, artistic creation has become an act of resistance, but that resistance is not framed by a specific ideology, and even less by a political platform. Poetry strives for a new sensibility, which is subversively directed towards any evil, hatred, fear and injustice of every kind. However, all Macedonian poets and critics who have tackled this topic have always emphasized that commitment is possible only if the work is aesthetically valuable. Therefore, this is a matter of an aesthetic commitment, an expression that until recently was considered to be an oxymoron, but

today it has become naturally connected to contemporary literature. The crucial notions of such a new commitment are empathy and solidarity (or, if you wish, love in all its nuances). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the most prominent theoreticians of postcolonial studies, in her book *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* puts forth a provocative thesis that precisely “aesthetic education is the last available instrument for implementing global justice and democracy” (Spivak, 2012, backcover). If we assume that poetry is precisely one of the most influential “teachers” of feeling, then the persistence of poetry, its circulation and popularization, especially among young people, might have a chance to be part of a more successful global resistance against injustice.

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