

The presence of Portuguese contemporary poetry at the Struga Poetry Evenings

A presença da poesia portuguesa contemporânea no Festival de Poesia de Struga

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Abstract: The idea of political union of a democratic Europe must be founded upon its cultural dimension. Poetry is a very important dimension of European civilization and an essential exercise of creative freedom for approximating individual human beings and countries. The topic of this paper will be the presence of Portuguese contemporary poetry at the Struga Poetry Evenings (SPE), an international poetry festival started in 1962. The SPE has a very significant role in reception and promoting the other literatures and cultures to the Macedonian authors and readership. The selection of Portuguese contemporary poetry at the SPE included several books:

1. The poetry of Vasco Graça Moura, the «Golden Wreath» Winner at the SPE (2004);
2. The selected poems of Casimiro de Brito (2006);
3. One anthology of the Portuguese contemporary poetry (2001).

The literary translation has a very important mission: every Encounter with the Other creates a dialogue, but it also means Self-knowledge. This poetic «joint-venture» of Macedonia and Portugal (both with republican traditions in constructing the collective memory and history) through the SPE could be a good symbol: it does contribute to a long tradition of uniting the world through the word of the poets.

Keywords: Portuguese contemporary poetry; Struga Poetry Evenings; Vasco Graça Moura; Casimiro de Brito.

Resumo: A ideia de união política de uma Europa democrática deve basear-se na sua dimensão cultural. A poesia é uma dimensão muito importante da civilização europeia e um exercício essencial da liberdade criativa para aproximar seres humanos individuais e países. O tema deste artigo é a presença da poesia contemporânea portuguesa no Festival de Poesia de Struga, um festival internacional de poesia iniciado em 1962. O Festival de Poesia de Struga tem um papel muito importante na receção e promoção de literaturas e culturas alternativas para os autores e leitores macedónios. A seleção da poesia contemporânea portuguesa no Festival de Poesia de Struga incluiu vários livros:

1. A poesia de Vasco Graça Moura, o vencedor da «Coroa de Louros» no Festival de Poesia de Struga (2004),
2. Os poemas selecionados de Casimiro de Brito (2006) e
3. Uma antologia da poesia contemporânea portuguesa (2001).

A tradução literária tem uma missão muito importante: cada Encontro com o Outro cria um diálogo, mas também leva ao Autoconhecimento. Esta poética «associação» da Macedónia e Portugal (ambos países com tradições republicanas na construção da memória coletiva e da história) através do Festival de Poesia de Struga poderia ser um bom símbolo: ela contribui para uma longa tradição de unir o mundo através da palavra dos poetas.

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Palavras-Chaves: Poesia contemporânea portuguesa; Festival de Poesia de Struga; Vasco Graça Moura; Casimiro de Brito.

In order for it to work, conscience needs
another conscience;
the text needs another text; the culture
needs another culture.
(Yuri Lotman)

In the age of great discoveries, in 1497, to be more exact, Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama sailed out of Lisbon in search of a sea route to India. In ancient times, *circa* 330 BC, Alexander the Great set out from the territory of what today are the Balkans, including my country, the Republic of Macedonia, on a campaign to the East and reached India.

India! One should only think of the delight with which American Walt Whitman wrote his late-19th-century poem «Passage to India», honouring the sea route around the world starting from India in the East, as well as his vision of an interconnected world.

Then think of *A passage to India*, the 1985 Oscar-winning David Lean film. Based on E.M. Forster's novel, the director manages early on to introduce the mysterious and frightening mien of the unknown, as well as its calm and beauty tempting us to explore the maze of our very souls. «India forces one to come face to face with oneself. It can be rather disturbing», says Mrs. Moore. This very idea lies behind the terrifying story of the strange, «holy» and monstrous *book of sand* from Jorge

Luis Borges' short story with the same title: a book with no beginning and no end which, according to the narrator, originates from India.

The longing for India as a universal longing unbound by time or space may be one of the first instances of intercultural encounters between two geographically distant cultures within one single Europe — the Portuguese and the Macedonian. Oddly enough, the «encounter» is marked by absence, that is, it excludes the presence of the subjects imaginarily orbiting around the shared object of desire. The encounter is indirect, realized through a motif shared by both cultural memories without even being aware of one another. Nevertheless, the encounter suggests a certain harmony between these two cultures, since the self-imagological function performed — recognizing oneself in the Other — attests to a kindred sensibility pervading these two different national identities, considering the fact that the Other — in this case India — is shared.

The history of this encounter is further developed in Luís de Camões' national poem *The Lusads*, published in 1572, ending with an allusion to Alexander the Great and containing a particular geographical reference to Macedonia. The translation of these cantos would be the first poetic translations from Portuguese into Macedonian language — the latter standardized after the Second World

War when the Republic of Macedonia became part of the Yugoslav Federation.

This past decade, first in the new millennium, was marked by the most intense literary and cultural contacts between the two countries, primarily at the international poetry festival Struga Poetry Evenings held each summer since 1962 on the Ohrid Lake coast, in a carnival manner honouring the Queen of the Arts — Poetry. In fact, the following three collections of contemporary Portuguese poetry have been published:

1. An anthology of contemporary Portuguese poetry (Vasco Graça Moura, Egito Gonçalves, Pedro Tamen, Fernando Pinto do Amaral, Paulo Teixeira, Ana Hatherly, Rosa Alice Branco) entitled *Sluh-zatočenik* (2001), or *Hearing-Prisoner*, selected by Manuela Júdice and translated by Aneta Manevska from Portuguese, Paskal Gilevski from French and Bogomil Gjuzel from English;

2. A collection of poems by Vasco Graça Moura, winner of the Struga Poetry Evenings Grand Prix, the Golden Wreath, translated from French by Mateja Matevski, Jordan Plevneš and Vlada Urošević, and

3. Poems by Casimiro de Brito entitled *Ljubovta, smrtta i drugi poroci*, that is *Love, death and other vices*, published in the prestigious Pleiades edition, selected by Monserrat Gibert and translated by Mateja Matevski.

Macedonia is considered a poetic nation. Not only that, but there is also a myth regarding the Macedonians' talent for poetry, particularly lyric poetry. This myth has been developed by 20th century Macedonian poets and critics and perpetuated by a number of European poets and prose writers familiar with contemporary Macedonian poetry. The Struga Poetry Evenings festival has for half a century been attesting to this exceptional appeal to the magic of poetry and of the wondrous word-play on Macedonian soil.

According to Martin Heidegger, only poetry has the power to reveal the truth of the world. We live in a world that is a symphony of horrors, in difficult times filled with violence, hatred and depravity. The language of poetry, however, is the language of love, and outburst of yearning and delight, of pain and loss, deeply familiar to all and to each one of us (Merwin, 2005: 7). Despite the differences in language and culture, the love of poetry, the appreciation and need for it are neither national nor ethnic, but deeply rooted in human nature. That is why we need a poetry festival. That is why we have a poetry festival.

«Poetry is a very important dimension of European civilization and an essential exercise of creative freedom for approximating individual human beings and countries» — stated Portuguese poet Vasco Graça Moura upon receiving the Golden Wreath at the 2004 Struga Poetry Evenings. He continued to say that:

[...] the inclusion of a representative of the Portuguese language and literature in the long list of the nominees for the Golden Wreath does contribute to a clearer and strong image of the multiplicity of identities which form Europe. [...] The idea of political union of a democratic Europe must be founded upon its cultural dimension. (2004: 6).

«Vasco Graça Moura is an erudite poet, a poet of intellectual sensibility» — writes esteemed Macedonian poet Vlada Urošević, one of the translators of Graça Moura from French, in the preface to the Macedonian edition of his poetry. He further states:

Deeply rooted in the Portuguese tradition, Vasco Graça Moura's knowledge and experience are confirmed and enriched by the artistic works he is familiar with or feels as his own. There are many aspects in Vasco Graça Moura's work that justify the critic's opinion of him as a poet of true European identity: in his works he underlies the uniqueness of the European culture, its interrelatedness and capacity to erase the national boundaries and establish a wide domain of spiritual kinship. (2004: 10-12).

Where did poetry, this empire of the spirit, get the power to establish unity of Europe and the world? Poetry is the ancient language of memory, the «mnemonic art par excellence», as per the words of Renate Lachmann. It assumes the role of collective memory and consciously

documents the scars of time. As Anna Akhmatova claimed sometime at the beginning of the previous century, «When I write, I remember, when I remember, I write». The imagery of memory present in poetry is invisible, but could go from absence to presence, from covertness to vividness developing at the level of language/writing. Thus, memory serves the purpose of establishing a hyperreality, as Baudrillard would say, generates something real without reality. Writing as memory has a magical dimension: preserves the written and reveals it in a dialogue with the interlocutors, readers, or descendants.

Hence, according to Peter Sloterdijk, poetry is a world religion free of superstition; the world poetic agreement is a prerequisite for the social agreement in legal form, and to come to this world is to come into language. The ideas of cultural space and identity produce the issue of language. Writing is as much a cosmopolitan/intercultural space as it is a field of national determination, since every writer's fundamental need and desire is to constantly be in transition, transfer, translation, as Salman Rushdie states. Thus the poet has many motherlands, and the poet's Home is multiple. Every work of art, even if written in one of the major languages, longs for a translation into another language since the other language is a different matrix of experiencing the world, and the desire for translation is a desire to conquer the world (Ќулавкова, 2010: 104). The feats such as Vasco da Gama's

or Alexander the Great's are history. In the 21st century, in an age of globalization, the poet's expression aims to remind us of the magic of the word that has never gone, but is, unfortunately, often forgotten. And it is translation as meta-creation that performs the noble function of bridging the gaps between peoples. Every encounter with another literature/culture implies dialogue, exchanging values, expanding horizons, as well as self-knowledge. Particularly when there is absence of dialogue from all levels of our modernity, the efforts to present and transfer values into another linguistic and cultural setting prove a virtual feat, on a par with the abovementioned conquering or exploratory missions of old. Hence Macedonian poets — envoys of contemporary Portuguese poetry in Macedonian — assume the roles of modern-day cultural missionaries. What is more, reading contemporary Portuguese poets in Macedonian offers the possibility of a relational interpretation of their poetry in one's own linguistic/literary/cultural code. If identity is formed and defined *through* and *by* alterity, metaphorically speaking, the Portuguese and Macedonian poetic pantheon has been built by poetic pairs — poets comparable in their poetic craft at some level. With extreme caution, I would like to suggest the following analogies:

Vasco Graça Moura's poetic discourse tinged with a subtle irony as an essential philosophy is akin to the poetic worldview of Vlada Urošević, and the lyrically meditative voice of

Casimiro de Brito and his obsession with Eros and Thanathos as every person's two crucial existential tattoos recall Mateja Matevski's moderate poetic expression and his identical obsession. The Eluardian overtones in the verses of Egito Gonçalves' *Lettera amorosa* are reminiscent of Petre M. Andreevski's collection *Denicija*, whereas the postmodernist poetry of Rosa Alice Branco resembles the poetic discourse of Macedonian poetess Lidija Dimkovska, this year's winner of the international Hubert Burda Prize, an extraordinary example of a union of the poetic expression and the theoretical academic language, an intellectual interplay of creation and meta-creation. If we also consider the intersections or correspondences in the titles of individual poems, such as Egito Gonçalves' and Vlada Urošević' «Aldeberan», or «Auto-de-fé» by both Paulo Teixeira and Macedonian poet Mihail Rendžov, it is obvious that poetic expression, as all works of art, is open to communication with all texts past and future in the established series of cognate relations. «Poetry continues the beauty of the world, aestheticizes the world», concludes Gaston Bachelard in his study *The poetics of reverie* (p. 226).

Is Poetry a gift of nature or a gift of the poet? Through dreams and fantasy, but also through the resonances of reason, poetry leads us into our spiritual gardens where we have thrilling encounters with the world and the Others as well as with our own selves. This is the dignified living provided to us by any true poetry.

With incredible ease, it establishes a new, more dignified poetic order.

So «Get drunk», in the words of Charles Baudelaire:

Time to get drunk!
Don't be martyred slaves of Time,
Get drunk!
Stay drunk!
On wine, virtue, poetry, whatever!

And come to Macedonia at the Struga Poetry Evenings!

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