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The Exiled Modern Artist: Nostalgia, Antinostalgia, and Allegorical Thinking in Witold Gombrowicz, Zbigniew Herbert, Henryk Grynberg, Gëzim Hajdari, Giorgio de Chirico, Andrey Tarkovsky and Nadav Lapid

Dissertation review

Ms. Jora Vaso has submitted her dissertation titled *The Exiled Modern Artist: Nostalgia, Antinostalgia, and Allegorical Thinking in Witold Gombrowicz, Zbigniew Herbert, Henryk Grynberg, Gëzim Hajdari, Giorgio de Chirico, Andrey Tarkovsky and Nadav Lapid*, written under the supervision of prof. nadzw. dr hab. Katarzyna Jerzak (*Akademia Pomorska w Słupsku, Wydział Filologiczno-Historyczny, Instytut Neofilologii*), as part of the requirements for the PhD degree at the *Instytut Polonistyki, Wydział Filologiczno-Historyczny* of the *Akademia Pomorska w Słupsku*. The dissertation extends to 233 pages and is composed of 7 chapters, an annex containing the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and the frames of Andrey Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* and Nadav Lapid's *Synonymes*, a summary as well as a bibliography

containing works in Polish, as well as Albanian, English, French and Italian. The titles of the individual chapters are as follows: chapter 1 “An Introduction to Modern Exile, Nostalgia and the Irreversibility of Time;” Chapter 2 “The Unprivileged Modern Exile: from Nostalgia to Antinostalgia and Beyond;” Chapter 3 “The Return;” Chapter 4 “Antinostalgia, Resilience and the Fruits of Exile;” Chapter 5 “From the Ruins to the Present: Nostalgia, Antinostalgia and Allegory;” Chapter 6 “The Allegorists: Herbert, De Chirico, Tarkovsky;” Chapter 7 “Conclusion.”

The dissertation focuses on the notion of exile and approaches it through three major theoretical constructs, fundamental for modern thinking and, indeed, for the experience of modernity itself: namely, nostalgia, anti-nostalgia and allegory. These are completed by a constellation of other concepts such as melancholy, mourning or remembrance, as well as resilience. All these frame Vaso’s carefully erected theoretical framework, constituted through a wide range of thinking drawn out of major figures of modernity and not limited to the literary field, but touching upon the discourses of art history, cinema, philosophy, psychology, and sociology, among others. It is with such theoretical tools that Vaso delves into different literary and artistic traditions and reads some of the most representative works of Gombrowicz, Herbert, Grynberg, Hajdari, de Chirico, Tarkovsky and Lapid.

Vaso sets off to describe the condition of exile as a metaphysical condition. This does not entail necessarily that Vaso denies the actual and factual parameters that define exile; it rather means that, for her, these parameters activate emotional states or mental conditions, and in so doing, redefine exile’s very essence. In this sense, although supposed, physical displacement alone does not circumscribe the exilic condition, in that the very essence of this condition is rather the psychological displacement that arises from the sense of not belonging as its result. Movement in space is thus twofold, defined both by geography and its measurements and by delving into the interior self, plunging into one’s psychic nature. At the same time, and in

consequence thereof, this movement implies time as well; and in becoming temporal it reconfigures our relationship to space and our desire to return to it as a point of origin.

It is in this sense that exile is considered the fundamental condition of literature; indeed, the act of writing presupposes a horizontal journey in space as much a vertical exploration of the self, a retrospective consideration and rereading of one's past along with the imaginary perception of the future. In this context, the condition of exile does not entail exclusively the emotional, psychological or even philosophical posture of nostalgia – the *ache to return* – that is, a constant reference to a future ideal which may be more imaginary than real, or even possible; it legitimizes what Vaso calls anti-nostalgia, defined not in opposite terms than those of nostalgia, but, in Vaso's words, "the exile's, or victim's, reaction to nostalgia, the antidote to the incurable, irrational disease that is nostalgia." As much as nostalgia can be said to be the exile's order of things in an imagined transient temporality and a constant reference to return, anti-nostalgia is the palliative mechanism that grounds the "here and now" with reference to the "there and then" and constitutes the new, estranged subjectivity. Departure now does not necessarily entail return yet it results in a sense of displacement that characterizes the subject.

Vaso agrees with some thinkers' and writers' view that nostalgia is a characteristic of people – and thus artists – from poorer or less affluent countries (30) or even less "culturally privileged" (214) ones. Analyzing various ways in which the feeling of inferiority arises from this fact, Vaso follows Herbert, Hajdari, Gombrowicz and Grynberg in their moves to depart from home and exposes their whereabouts in new spaces that redefine their conditions as nostalgic subjects. I should note that I found the sketching of Albanian literary history extremely useful and the positioning of the writers Vaso examines in it very accurate; Vaso elucidates the particularity of the Albanian case with historical, linguistic and literary

references and explains it partly as lacking parallels and affinities with the literary and cultural evolution of the West.

For Vaso the feeling of nostalgia relates to the feeling of love; it resembles it because, like love, it often enters the realm of the irrational and the disproportionate: indeed, attempting to appropriate the other is parallel with the desire to return. Yet, this return, real as much as imaginary, is nothing else than an attempt to regain time through space and, in regaining time, an attempt to endeavor to find one's identity, to return to it or to redefine it. It is only normal that such a project cannot but fail, and thus the condition of the nostalgic subject is one of disappointment and disillusion. The realization that space lost is essentially lost time leads to de-realization (using Freud's term), inevitably provoked by the only possible outcome of return. Vaso follows this process in the writers she studies and analyzes the ways they have dealt with this wound.

One of these is certainly anti-nostalgia, which Vaso inscribes in the larger theoretical framework – as well as practical quality – of resilience. Focusing on Gombrowicz and Grynberg who, setting off from different conditions yet arrive at similar directions, and using the theoretical framework provided by Cyrulnik, Vaso analyzes the practice of writing as the narrative strategy of resilience; a writing that constructs their respective authors' anti-nostalgia through the confessional mode. In this context Herbert's work is also approached, in the light of his brief sojourn in the USA.

Allegory, the third major theoretical concept of the dissertation is approached and interpreted as well. Vaso uses Benjamin's foundational work and its inspiring reading by Svetlana Boym in order to understand allegory anew and then proceeds to read the work of Grynberg, Hajdari and Herbert in this light. Benjamin's treatment of allegory, as a condition rather than trope, echoes well in Vaso's subtle analysis of the pictorial as well as the cinematic text. Her

readings of Lapid, de Chirico, and Tarkovsky shed light upon this figure, emblematic of modernity, while completing the image of the exilic subject as defined and explained throughout her thesis.

This is an achievement ambitious in range and scope; touching upon different traditions that redefine perceived notions of major and minor literatures, studying a variety of textual media as well as a wide range of theoretical discourses, Vaso's work is a fine example of comparative approach. Constructing a solid argument accompanied by persuasive theoretical grounding, Vaso offers a reading of some major expressions of the modern and contemporary literary and artistic scene, one that manages ultimately to explain, and thus historicize, the modern human condition.

The dissertation is well-written and edited; it has no typographical or factual errors and is written in a way that engages the reader's attention. Quoted works are provided both in the original language and in English translation. Each chapter inscribes the author, the painter or the director in the context he is examined and covers primary and secondary bibliographical sources in a satisfactory way. Based on my review of the dissertation and in accordance with the requirements for this type of scholarly work, I evaluate it positively and hereby move for further proceedings in the doctoral process.



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