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The Kaval¹ or the Piano – The Racin Essay on Folk Poetry

Abstract: Kocho Racin (1908-1943) is a Macedonian national icon, the creator of the innovative nationally-linguistic poetic undertaking. Racin’s name, among other things, is tied to the beginnings of the Macedonian literary criticism, bearing in mind that he (in the years prior to the Second World War) published a few literary-critical articles on the pages of the then Yugoslav periodicals, whereas a part of the texts in this category (such, as for example, he essay on folk poetry which is the subject of interest of this paper) were traced back to his estate and was published long after the liberation. “Until present day we have not heard a more subte apotheosis of folk poetry as the eternal creative stand-out from the one uttered by Racin” – writes Dimitar Mitrev in honor of his essay on folk poetry. The Racin essay, “The Macedonian Folk Song” confirms the most beautiful definitions of the subtle, border-line, heterogeneous discourse called *the essay*, as the “perfect attempt”, “an eternal yearning for a system”, according to György Lukács, or as “a miniature linguistic counterpart of the musical shape, a variation on a theme”, as Kica B. Kolbe puts it.

Keywords: Kocho Racin, essay, Folk Poetry, kaval, piano

¹ End-blown Flute

No art is more stubbornly
national than poetry.
T. S. Eliot¹

“The old piano plays an air,
Sedate and slow and gay;
She bends upon the yellow keys,
Her head inclines this way. (II) (...)
For elegant and antique phrase,
Dearest, my lips wax all too wise;
Nor have I known a love whose praise
Our piping poets solemnize,
Neither a love where may not be
Ever so little falsity. (...) (XXVII)”

This is how James Joyce sings in *Chamber Music* sometime at the beginning of the 20th century (more specifically in 1907, one year prior to Racin’s birth), choosing explicitly the music that the piano produces versus the one born to the sounds of the kaval, which the lyrical subject finds foreign in sensibility. Our Racin, too, speaks on the topic of the piano and the kaval as two oppositional musical instruments (an opposition which, in fact, alludes to the relation – élite versus folk culture) in his un-

¹ “Poetry differs from every other art” says Eliot “in having a value for the people of the poet’s race and language which it can have for no other... No art is more stubbornly national than poetry... one of the reasons for learning at least one foreign language well as that we acquire a new language instead of one’s own is that most of us do not want to be a different person.”

<http://yabaluri.org/TRIVENI/CDWEB/concerningindian-writinginenglishoct78.htm>

finished essay on the Macedonian folk song a few decades later.

“Macedonia has not produced complex instruments. It has not come up with the piano, which is so complex and so rich. It does not have sonatas and symphonies. Its song is simple, interlaced with an insurmountable measure of sorrow, with a moving serenity which contains both tears and pain, but also hope. There are no more moving movements, moments which border on ecstasy then when the accrued pain, deeply and intensively, would be embodied by the hand of the simple tambura² or kaval player. With the piano, with such a rich and marvelous instrument, survival becomes an artistically enriched experience through the coloring of the many tonalities. A virtuoso transfers his mastery, allowing for the prism of his inner life to take hold. The folk poet, however, sings simply, rather unmediated, with an unspoiled and iconic purity” – we read in Racin’s aforementioned essay (2007: 310). This rationale, in fact, would later on be applied also by Blazhe Koneski (Блаже Конески) in his plea to the old *embroideress* (in the same titled poem), who asks the poet for advice about “how to give birth to a song of pure Macedonian worth”. If the piano and the kaval are equally immanent to Ireland and to Joyce on the one hand, but also to the Ireland of W.B. Yeats, on the other, one seemingly elitist, but in fact, small-minded, twisted, ridiculously patriotic, whereas the other one – pure, filled with rapture, immersed in myths and legends,

² (N.B.) A long-necked plucked lute.

yet both equally true, Racin's attitude on the aforementioned musical instruments takes us back to a different time and space: Europe in the days of Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism, when folklore becomes a key segment of tradition, a necessary link in the chain of the national cultural identity. Although he lives and works during the era of the many avant-garde movements which ruffle the feathers of the European public in the first half of the 20th century, Racin as their contemporary, generally speaking, has no interest in the numerous "isms", apart from the already emphasized connection with the leftist-oriented expressionism. According to the cult towards folklore which he undoubtedly nurses, Racin is closer to the spirit and sensibility of Romanticism, which is perfectly understandable since this very epoch is tied to the birth of nations (and national literatures) and the development of a national consciousness, parallel and simultaneous with the present cosmopolitan spirit and the interest expressed towards other/foreign literatures and cultures. This typical Romanticist merger of the national and the international, of the individual and the universal, as a kind of an apotheosis of the heart and the open human world, limitless, is also present in Racin's worldview, which in turn springs along in the famed verses of the poem "Tatuncho":

„Ако куќа не направиф
со високи шимшир порти,
куќа цел свет братски ми е
братски срце што отвора,

срце - порта највисока,
срце - куќа најширока.“³

Let us remember also that the entire European intellectual public during the first half of the 19th century lives with the ideas on nature of the French writer and philosopher-sentimentalist Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau-ism is realized as a reaction to the phony and closed-off salon life, one which advocates a return to nature, and as such finds a fertile ground in Germany even during the second half of the 18th century, most specifically through the ideals of Johann Gottfried von Herder, the founding father of the Sturm und Drang generation, its theorist and leader. The premise of his treatise, entitled "Selection from Correspondence on Ossian and the Songs of Ancient Peoples" (1773), is the idea that 'true poetry is natural'. Set against poetry which has been rationally created, Herder postulates the kind of poetry whence the irrational, the natural, reign supreme, henceforth, he finds folk poetry as the most authentic of poetries, since it represents a creation of what he terms 'the spirit of the people'. "Macedonia's song is her prayer, the mirror to her soul and her sigh" – states our Racin.

Herder, henceforth, divides poetry into *natur* (natural) and *kunst* (artificial, artistic). The

³ (my own translation) "If I didn't build a house/with high arching gates,/ let the entire world be that brotherly house/ brotherly opening my heart,/ the heart – the highest gate, / the heart – the roomiest house."

first kind includes the canonical works, such as those by Homer, or the Old Testament, or Ossian. Later on, this position of Herder's on *Natur Poesie* would be taken over and popularized in the literary circles by the young J.W. Goethe, the founding father of the term 'world literature', who also took feelings over reason, nature over culture. And what are the kaval and the piano in our Racin's vision if not a translation from another language of these same ideas, a metaphor for natur and kunst poetry?!

Culturally speaking, Racin's views create also an auto-imagological image of Macedonia as a kind of a crossroads-land, whence several civilizations and cultures co-exist. "Apart from the oriental sound to the folklore and the rich tides which came from the Turkish and the Persian-Arabic East, the first salons, in our midst, came accompanied by Western music" – writes Tomislav Osmanli (Томислав Османли) in his study on the city salon as an institution (2011: 193), thinking exactly of the tradition of folklore on the one hand, and innovation which brings *the piano* to our parts of the world, on the other. Without a doubt, Racin's essay on folk poetry can also be read through the context of the aforementioned relation East-West, or through the context of the famed essay by T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", which points out once again its timeliness and multi-significance. It's no accident that we've referenced also the Irish modernists par excellence, Joyce and Yeats, who resided during the cusp between the two centuries (19th and 20th), when the Irish War of Independence was

taking place, while, culturally speaking, as part of the movement called "The Irish Cultural Renaissance" (which, by the way, included Yeats too), the emphasis is placed on reclaiming the Irish identity through the collection and study of Irish folklore, something akin to the role folklore played within our own national framework at the time of the reformers (during the 19th century), all the way through the Macedonian dramatists between the two World Wars, up until the founder of the Macedonian new literature, K. Racin.

To have an identity means to be different from others. It leads to *an ethnicization of culture* – writes the Macedonian author and essayist Ermis Lafazanovski (Ермис Лафазановски), in his study *Anthropological Dialogues* (in the Macedonian original, *Антрополошки дијалози*, 2002), and a breaking-off culture into ethno-cultural segments, whence each ethnic group would revitalize its own tradition and folklore due to a need for a differentiation of its own identity. However, oftentimes another phenomenon appears: the fabrication of new traditions set up in a folkloric ambience. Fortunately enough, this is not the case for Macedonian folklore, as a balance between the two utmost cultural concepts – the folk and the elite cultures. The author points out and proves that the Macedonian folk tradition bears its own mythical horizons, its own original components, which provides it, as a concept, with longevity, transferability, the aura of authenticity and the strengthening of the cultural identity – during an absence of a written linguistic expression and as the compen-

sation for a historic inhibition (Lafazanovski, 2002: 13-22). The fact remains that “folklore is just one piece from the mosaic called culture”, as Lafazanovski has emphasized, while at the same time, it remains true that “folklore may contribute towards a future self-actualization and can be put to use as a cultural seismograph” (2002: 22). These ancient impulses in regards to folklore’s creative spirituality are indeed referenced through Racin’s attitudes, expressed with admiration and a Romanticist infatuation: “When Macedonian songs are sung, a torrential wide wave, filled with insurmountable pain and depth covers the soul. We come to pay witness to the olden days, a quiet yearning and the most private of our heart’s feelings. All that could be freely said in life, all that should have been kept unsaid, all that had to be survived, had found its place inside the song. Inside the Macedonian song, a mother’s sorrow is hidden, darkened by remorse, hunched over the fire which soundlessly goes quiet, the dire voice of the wind is hidden, the one which slowly dies off inside the chimney; hidden are love’s incomprehensible moments, the flutters of joy, the quiet whispering of the blooming field narcissuses and the echoing of the white hundred-year old beech trees. Which analysis, even if came at the hands of the most astute master, could trace them inside the poem? Only the ear and the heart of those who had lived it may depict this lasting, hidden beauty” (Racin, 2007: 309-310). “Until present day we have not heard a more subtle apotheosis of folk poetry as the eternal creative stand-out from the one uttered

by Racin” – writes Dimitar Mitrev (Димитар Митрев, 2007: 402), in honor of these wonderful statements. For Kiril Penushliski (Кирил Пенушлиски), Racin is already “a complete folklorist” (2007: 397). Here, doubtlessly, we deal with the principle of continuity in regards to the oral legacy and the literary tradition from the past, a principle already present with Konstantin Miladinov (Константин Миладинов), the first representative of the individual artistic poetry in our culture. Interestingly enough, he too couples the longing for the South with a musical longing – exactly with the sound of the kaval:

„Поле погледнеш или планина,
Сегде божева је хубавина.
Тамо по с’нце в кавал да свирам,
С’нце да зајдвит, ја да умирам.“⁴

reads the finale of “Longing for the South” (in the Macedonian original, “Т’ра за југ”). The kaval as a traditional folk instrument resonates its sounds not only before but also after Racin’s time; more specifically speaking, through the spectrum of the coloring of the sunset in the poem by Mateja Matevski (Матеја Матевски) titled “Sunset” (in the original, “Залез”, from the collection, *Rains*, in the original Macedo-

⁴ Look at the plains or mountains:/Beauty’s everywhere divine./To pipe there to my heart’s content!/ Ah! let the sun set, let me die. (English translation made available through <http://www.mymacedonia.net/language/antology1.htm> [Accessed 18.08. 2011])

nian *Дождови*, 1956):

„Од тревите до кавалот
од стадото до облакот
сè е бујно
запалено. (...)

„Стадо в кавал заљубено
своно в песна изгубено
око в божур залудено
Румено. Румено. Румено.“⁵

Or, the absence of the kaval is a seeming “curse” in the same titled poem by Jovan Koteski, etc...The thematization of the musical instruments in contemporary Macedonian poetry surpasses the ambitions of this text⁶. My intention has been to point to Racin’s choosing of the kaval in his essay as a remarkable opportunity and occasion to communicate with the ancient cultural layers. Since, as Vasil Tocinovski (Васил Тоциновски) puts it “Racin’s voice is the voice of a people, his own people,

⁵(my own translation) “From the grass to the kaval/from the herd to the cloud/it all is richly/on fire. (...)./The herd lovingly follows the kaval/the bell getting lost in the song/the eye completely taken by the flower/ Crimson. Crimson. Crimson.”

⁶ For more on this phenomenon, see Vladimir Martinovski’s study, “From the Kaval to the Ocarina: Musical Instruments in Poetry”, in: *Comparativist Diptychs (Studies and Essays)*, Skopje: Magor, 2011, pp. 167-177. (Владимир Мартиновски „Од кавал до окарина: музичките инструменти во поезијата“, во: *Споредбени диптиси (студии и есеи)*, Магор, Скопје, 2011, стр. 167-177.)

a voice with binds the present to the past and the future, a voice of the lasting and unassailable human morals and ideals” (<<http://www.rastko.rs>>).

Kocho Racin (Кочо Рацин) is the “beginning of all beginnings”, if we can so claim the famous saying by Maxim Gorky, and transpose it within our own national framework, which he uttered in honor of one of the great Russian authors – Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin: a national icon, the creator of the innovative nationally-linguistic poetic undertaking. Racin’s name, among other things, is tied to the beginnings of the Macedonian literary criticism, bearing in mind that he (in the years prior to the Second World War) published a few literary-critical articles on the pages of the then Yugoslav periodicals, whereas a part of the texts in this category (such, as for example, the essay on folk poetry which is the subject of interest of this paper) were traced back to his estate and was published long after the liberation. According to Milan Gjurchinov (Milan Đurčinov), the scope (we are dealing in fact with a total of eight articles) and the character of the same, attest to “a beginner’s engagement in this area”, much more towards an occasional reaction to certain phenomena rather than towards a systematically conceived of activity, but “even as such, they attest to, not only Racin’s resolve in terms of his belonging to the movement of socially engaged literature, but also to his astute and dogma-free critical line of thinking”, Gjurchinov concludes (1988: 187).

Katica Kjulavkova (Катица Кјулавкова) too, in

the foreword to the selection *The Macedonian Essay (Македонскиот есеј (2000))*, mentions that the selection starts with Dimitar Mitrev, “one of the founders of contemporary Macedonian critique and aesthetics”, but “one of the accepted variants is also to start with the essays by Kocho Solev Racin [Кочо Солев Рацин] or Grigor Prlichev [Григор Прличев]” (2001: 146), which also supports the thesis about the historical role and the significance of Racin, amongst other things, in this domain too, although the roots of the Macedonian essay form are located by Kjulavkova already in the texts

by Clement of Ohrid (Климент Охридски) and in the medieval scripts and writings. The Racin essay, “The Macedonian Folk Song” confirms the most beautiful definitions of the subtle, border-line, heterogeneous discourse called *the essay*, as the “perfect attempt”, “an eternal yearning for a system”, according to György Lukács, or as “a miniature linguistic counterpart of the musical shape, a variation on a theme”, as Kica B. Kolbe puts it. Or, in the words of Francis Bacon, the Racin essay is like a grain of salt which gives us a bigger appetitive rather than leading us to a sense of being full.

(прегледен научен труд)

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Лидија Капушевска-Дракулевска

Кавал или клавир - Рациновиот есеј за народната поезија

Резиме: Кочо Рацин (1909-1943) е наша национална икона, творец на иновацискиот национално-јазичен поетски потфат. За името на Рацин, меѓу другото, се врзуваат и почетоците на македонската книжевна критика, со оглед на тоа што тој (во годините пред Втората светска војна) објавил неколку книжевно-критички прилози на страниците на тогашната југословенска периодика, додека пак еден дел од текстовите од ваков тип (како, на пример, есејот за народната поезија кој е предмет на нашиот интерес во оваа пригода) е пронајден во неговата заовставнина и е публикуван дури по ослободувањето.

„Сè до денес не сме чуле посуптилна апотеоза на народната поезија како вековно творечко траење од оваа што ја изрече Рацин“ – ќе запише Димитар Митрев по повод Рациновиот есеј за народната поезија.

Рациновиот есеј „Македонската народна песна“ ги потврдува најубавите дефиниции на толку суптилниот, граничен, хетероген дискурс наречен *есеј*, како „совршен обид“, „вечен копнеж по систем“ – според Герѓ Лукач, или како „една минијатура, јазички пандан на музичкиот облик, варијација на една тема“ – како што вели Кица Барџиева Колбе.

Клучни зборови: *Кочо Рацин, есеј, народна поезија, кавал, клавир*