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*Indirect Confession in the Modern Essay: Walter Benjamin, Clarice Lispector, Henryk
Grynberg, Ismail Kadare and Adam Zagajewski*

Dissertation review

Ms. Kleitia Vaso has submitted her dissertation titled *Indirect Confession in the Modern Essay: Walter Benjamin, Clarice Lispector, Henryk Grynberg, Ismail Kadare and Adam Zagajewski*, 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 245 pages and is composed of 7 chapters, 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 “Introduction: Accidental Self-Portraits;” chapter 2 “Walter Benjamin: The Master of the Modern Essay;” chapter 3 “Clarice Lispector: The Bare Enigma;” chapter 4

“Henryk Grynberg: The Direct Voice;” chapter 5 “Ismail Kadare: The Lone Representative;” chapter 6 “Adam Zagajewski: The Contemporary “Homeless” Individual;” chapter 7 “Conclusion: Aslant.”

This dissertation approaches the work of Benjamin, Lispector, Grynberg, Kadare and Zagajewski in a comparative perspective; what connects these authors is their practice of the essay, a hybrid prose form with a rather recent, yet substantial tradition in European literature. Vaso weaves one of the major conceptual threads connecting her work from the onset, arguing that the essay emerges only in modernity of which it is a characteristic genre, in that it is governed by freedom, both with regards to its form and its content. Freedom, according to Vaso, is the essay’s condition and results in – while at the same time presupposing – openness: the essay can only arise in freedom, and freedom of expression at that. As is the case with any genre one attempts to approach, one is confronted with different questions and of different order, like for example, those pertaining to the essay’s language, form or content, to the specificities of each tradition, or to possible ways to confront it. Vaso chooses to focus on writers whose work is defined by the way they negotiate their positioning regarding freedom, not as an abstract philosophical idea, but as an incarnated experience relating to the circumstances of their lives.

After sketching the brief history of the genre and revisiting major moments in the trajectory of the construction of its theory, Vaso proceeds to approach the work of Benjamin, an author who remains unique in the ways he redefined the essay as form. Benjamin’s particularity is double: it consists, on the one hand, in the ways he creates a language which embodies free play, and in doing so gives form to the essay’s major premise; on the other, it refers to the way Benjamin arrives at a seemingly unintentional self-portraiture by depicting others both as individual figures and as outcomes of the contexts in which they emerge. In this sense, Baudelaire’s place in Benjamin’s thought is central, since he incarnates what is essentially

modern in modern self and society, but also in that the poet allows the critic to elaborate on the formal possibilities of the essay as a modern genre.

Proceeding to examine Lispector, Vaso studies her *cronicas*, a hybrid genre, proper to the Latin American tradition, one that tests the limits between fiction and non-fiction, between reality and its representation. Lispector's work is unique in many ways, in that she creates a language through which self-portraiture emerges precisely through a persistent questioning of the possibilities of the fictional, rendering thus *cronicas* an essayistic category governed by freedom. This is what compensates, in a way, the practical base of Lispector's involvement with the genre, which however redefines the "naturalness" of "natural" inclination towards it.

The dissertation then turns to Grynberg, an author who blends the personal and the collective, the subjective experience and the objective occurrence. Unescapably marked by the Holocaust, Grynberg's writing arises as a duty, the duty to narrate. Narrative, as a way of constructing the self, permits Grynberg to negotiate (while in a sense blurring) the limits between the inevitably testimonial aspect of his endeavor and the natural literary character of creative enterprise. The essay becomes thus an exercise in resilience, and the fundamental trauma of the personal experience raises to the creative universalizability of the collective, inscribing Grynberg's project both in the historiographical and the literary canon. Vaso unveils this process in detail.

Unlike other authors examined in this study, Kadare willingly assumed the role of the national writer. Carefully positioning himself at a prominent place in the Albanian canon, Kadare has steadily negotiated his literary vocation presupposing freedom with the complexity of life under an authoritarian regime. Vaso analyzes the tension between the two, bringing to light questions of national literary history as well as questions pertaining to the possibilities of writing as resistance. A fresh portraiture of Kadare emerges through Vaso's

subtle readings in which the author's essayistic endeavors occupy a prominent position next to his major literary production, one that shows the essay's critical role as both a creative attempt as well as a liberating one.

Another Polish writer blurs the limits between the personal and the collective as well as between the real and the imaginary. Yet Zagajewski, who completes the series of authors examined in the study, represents the homeless individual: the figure who is both in constant need to return, and whose reference point is nevertheless always dislocated. Writing becomes thus a mode to devise ways of inclusion, and Vaso approaches this tension between what has been left behind and what has been conquered through a refined reading of his work. She constructs an authorial figure whose priority is the creative power of language as it strives to bring together and make sense of the world through the individuals it endeavors to depict, while constructing a self that transcends the national while being in constant reference to it.

Vaso's study is an ambitious and inspiring project shedding light upon essential aspects of the genre of the essay in its original meaning: as an intellectual attempt, and open-ended at that. It focuses on figures rarely studied together, and does so on the basis of their origins united by the condition of freedom, a fundamental human conquest which is argued to be the essay's foundational condition. Having experienced the various ways through which political and personal freedom has been undermined or cancelled, the authors Vaso examines managed to transcend the historical specificity of their condition through a genre that became a redemptive force. Each chapter tellingly draws her subjects' literary portraits as these are constituted through an essayistic production which focuses on approaching various facets of life and literature, all related to the experience of exile.

This is sound scholarly work as well as a fine piece of essayistic writing itself. Original in its associations, inventive in its insights, the dissertation offers a comparative approach of

literary figures whose essential value is yet to be appreciated. Vaso's literary portraits arise in ways similar to the ways the authors she examines constitute theirs: more than a genre, the essay is thus elevated to be a trope –indeed, the foundational mode of modernity itself.

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 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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