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The Critical Reception of Academician Mihail D. Petruševski's Conjecture 'Composition of Events'

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyse the critical reception of the conjecture *composition of events* made by Academician Mihail D. Petruševski. Our intention is to provide insight into the articles published in Macedonian journals (*Godišen zbornik na Filozofskiот fakultet – Annuaire de la Faculté de Philosophie, Živa Antika – Antiquité vivante, Stožer, Sovremenost*), in which Academician Petruševski communicated the new reading of Aristotle's definition of tragedy and then to make an overview of the critical responses to this issue home and abroad.

Key words: Mihail D. Petruševski, Aristotle, The Poetics, catharsis, composition of events, tragedy

„Трагедијата, значи, е подражавање на сериозно и завршено дејствие од определена големина, кое во засладен говор одделно за секој од видовите во неговите делови, преку дејствувашти (лица) а не во раскажување, со жал и страв извршува очистување од такви афекти.“

“Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious and complete, and of a certain magnitude, that, by means of sweetened speech, separately for each of its kinds in its proper parts, through people acting and not through narration accomplishes through pity and fear the cleansing of emotions of this sort. “

(Petruševski 1948, 5)

„Трагедијата значи е подражавање на сериозно и завршено дејствие од определена големина, кое преку дејствувашти (лица), во засладен (истанчен) говор одделно за секој од видовите во неговите делови, а не во прикажување, со жал и страв го завршува составот на такви (т.е. жалосни и страшни) собитија“

“Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious and complete, and of a certain magnitude, that, through people acting and by means of sweetened (refined) speech, separately for each of its kinds in its proper parts, and not through narration, *completes with pity and fear the composition of events of this sort (i.e. events that evoke pity and fear).*“

(Petruševski 1948, 14)

We have undertaken this analysis of the critical reception of the conjecture *composition of events* on Aristotle's definition of tragedy made by Academician Mihail D. Petruševski bearing in mind that it is not only an exceptionally important achievement, considered today a beginning of a new era in the academic field in post-war Macedonia (Džeparoski 2020, 10), but also that it is of global importance as “one of the boldest conjectures of our time” (Brunius 1973-1974, 264-270). In this sense, the basic aim of this article is to analyse the process of critical reception of the conjecture *composition of events* in the Macedonian cultural environment and to focus on the attention it draw home and abroad.

It is well known that the collection of the surviving Aristotle's works provoked the interest of scholars as early as Late Antiquity, whereas the question of the definition of the tragedy, that is, the problem of the so-called *Aristotle's catharsis* provoked different and opposed opinions as early as the publication of the translation and commentary by the Italian renaissance humanist Francesco Robortello (1516–1567)¹ in 1548. The Macedonian classical philologist, Academician Mihail D. Petruševski also undertook to solve this problem, one of the most intriguing issues in classical philology, in the early nineteen forties already. From the article entitled *Definicijata na tragedijata kaj Aristotela i katarsata* [La définition de la tragédie chez Aristote et la catarse] published in the first issue of *Godišen zbornik na Filozofskiot fakultet (GZFF) – Annuaire de la Faculté de Philosophie* of the University in Skopje we understand that Academician Petruševski got first acquainted with this problem when he was a student, during the lectures by Prof. Milan Budimir that he attended at the University in Belgrade, and later on from the PhD thesis *Aristotle's catharsis* (Smerdel 1937) of the Croatian classical philologist Anton Smerdel (Petruševski 1948, 1-17), who lived and worked in Skopje for a while, in the period between the two world wars. “Since then“, Academician Petruševski explained himself, “I never stopped think-

¹Robortello, F. (1548), *In Aristotelis poeticam explicationes*, Florence.

ing about this problem. The result was that on the 19th of December 1942 I came to the solution that has only now seen the light of the day. But, although the solution has not been published anywhere until today, a limited number of my friends and colleagues were acquainted with it, and among the others, my professor mentioned above, therefore for a part of our community this solution of mine has not been unknown" (Petruševski 1948, 3).

When elaborating the problem of Aristotle's definition of tragedy regarding the tragic catharsis, Academician Petruševski limited his literature references and reduced the source material to the original text of the *Poetics*, making it thus the only guide to follow. Adopting this methodology, he came to the conclusion that the expression *παθημάτων κάθαρσιν* in the definition should not be taken for granted, i.e. that in the definition itself, there is no trace of any catharsis, which is evident from: 1) the uncertainty of the word *παθημάτων*, which in most of the preserved manuscripts reads as *μαθημάτων*; and 2) the fact that in the entire *Poetics* there is not a trace of any explanation of the word *κάθαρσις*, and in the only place where it should have been mentioned, i.e. in the commentary on the definition in relation to the words *ἔλεος* and *φόβος*, there are no traces of a lacuna. Academician Petruševski revisited his own findings in the article *Ušte ednaš za Aristotelovata definicija na tragedijata i katarzata* [Encore sur la définition de la tragédie d'Aristote et la catharsis] published six years later in *GZFF*, in order to respond to the writings of two Bulgarian researchers Aleksandar Ničev and Georgi Mihailov, who adhered to their conviction that the reading of the word catharsis as meaning purification of the emotions of fear and pity in the definition was correct (Petruševski 1954, 79). On this occasion, Petruševski reiterated his opinion that in order to determine the authentic term at the end of the definition of tragedy the focus should be on the term *σύστασις* (i.e. *σύνθεσις*) *τῶν πραγμάτων* "composition of events", and pointed out that this was a basic and very important element of tragedy and therefore its most elaborated part. With this, according to his own interpretation, authentic and oldest formulation, the definition of tragedy gains a new, comprehensive and unambiguous meaning because the explanation of the most important feature of tragedy was given exactly in the last words of its definition. The readings of the words *μαθημάτων*, i.e. *παθημάτων κάθαρσιν* he considered unauthentic, with the persuasive explanation that they were a result of incompetent conjecture made by some of the educated publishers or copyists of the manuscript on the place where the damaged and unreadable words *πραγμάτων σύστασις* had been written².

With even higher degree of confidence, Academician Petruševski elaborated his thesis in the article *Παθημάτων κάθαρσιν ili πραγμάτων σύστασις?* [*Παθημάτων κάθαρσιν ou bien πραγμάτων σύστασις?*] in which he reasserted the opinion he had

² Academician Petruševski stressed that the conjecture *πραγμάτων σύστασις* is very close to the damaged text both with respect to the number of letters and with respect to the endings of the words.

presented in his first article and concluded that Aristotle, in all probability, did not know about tragic catharsis as the purpose of tragedy, “because if he knew and if the word *κάθαρσις* was authentic in the definition, Aristotle would have mentioned it elsewhere in the *Poetics*, in this *Poetics*, in which tragedy is discussed in details, that is, in the Chapters 13 and 14 in which the final part of the definition is explained” (Petruševski 1954, 236). In his articles on this subject published later on, in comparison to the evidence provided in favor of the authentic character of Aristotle's thought, Academician Petruševski, analysed, as he put it himself, the „different misconceptions and legends“ about the interpretation of the text of the *Poetics*, more precisely those regarding the definition of the tragedy that originated in different times as a result of scholasticism and mystique. To illustrate this, he quotes the reflections of the French drama critic, the abbot François D'Aubignac in his work *La pratique du théâtre* (1657), where he discussed the three unities of classical drama (action, time and place), although Aristotle in his treatise focused only on one, that is the unity of action. (Petruševski 1955, 114). As another example that corroborates the misinterpretation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy Petruševski quoted the explanation of the term catharsis in the dictionary of foreign words compiled by M. Vujaklija³ in regard to tragedy. The term was defined as a function with an ascetic value and questionable ethical-religious meaning and therefore outdated. When discussing the opinions of theoreticians from the Classicism period such as Lessing, Hegel and others, Academician Petruševski also referred to the opinion of Jacob Bernays, who linked the issue of the tragic catharsis to Aristotle's explanation of musical catharsis in his work *Politics*, a sort of a terminological and semantic shift from the sphere of religion-medicine to the sphere of aesthetics. Very close to his reflections are the opinions about this issue presented by Serbian classical philologist Miloš Đurić. In his thorough examination of the famous definition of tragedy in the article *Jedan nov pokušaj objašnjenja Aristotelova shvatanja katarse*, published in *Glasnik Jugoslovenskog profesorskog društva* 1932–1933, by using many examples from classical literary tradition, he elaborated his objections to those interpretations that analysed the influence of artworks within the limited range of their psychotherapeutic function, thus reducing the aesthetic pleasure to the level of elementary and shallow utilitarianism and equating it to the act of spiritual hygiene (Đurić 1933, 9). This opinion led to his severe conclusion that “... the cathartic influence of tragedy cannot be accepted as being medical, pathological, cheap and shallow, as Bernays and his followers do, but rather as aesthetical, intellectual and aesthetical-ethical” (Đurić 1933, 58). Đurić pays attention to the significance of the structural aspects of artwork, but nevertheless as an advocate of the idea about the cathartic purpose of tragedy: “The artistic work,” he says, “and especially the composition of the story, should be such as to entertain

³ “moral purification and rise of the soul above all bodily and sensory passions and impurities (the purpose of tragedy according to Aristotle)” (Petruševski 1955, 115).

us (ψυχαγωγεί), satisfy us (εὐφραίνει) and provoke our interest, by arousing pity and fear in order to experience the story, and through that experience a κάθαρσις μαθημάτων is achieved, a result of which is παιδεία, and σωφρονισμός and σοφία and διόρθοσις, and purification of what is το πεπονεκός" (Ibid).

The origin of these interpretative approaches suggests a somewhat metaphorical use of the term catharsis in the definition of tragedy, which according to Petruševski is contrary to Aristotle's instructions how to formulate a good definition. Pointing out that this was "the first serious weakness of the definition of tragedy, as observed by F. Knoke, and for us", he stressed this as, "the first more serious reason to doubt the authenticity of the word catharsis together with the authenticity of the word 'passions'" (Petruševski 1955, 118).

Petruševski summarized in the following way his appreciation of the weight and significance of the proposed interpretative solution and the challenges it had to face: „A truly abundant literature about this problem has amassed since the period of the renaissance until our days, and it has reached such proportions that it has gone beyond the limits of classical philology and philology in general, owing to the enormous reputation of Aristotle and the incomparable significance of his *Poetics*, whereby the term catharsis has become part of the shared legacy of poetics and aesthetics and it had been glorified to such a degree that it would be difficult to demystify, and it would take some time before everybody understands and accepts the fact that this huge mountain of literature and this sea of ink spilt in the discussion of this problem has been wasted on a fiction and legend about which Aristotle knew nothing. If 'the Master of those who know', as Dante referred to him in his *Divine Comedy* and the 'Father of science' could see how his lucid thought had been distorted and how many generations have repeated his twisted words as authentic without asking themselves how could Aristotle articulate his thoughts and definitions so ambiguously and illogically, disregarding his own clear logic and norms about how to formulate a correct and good definition, he would laugh bitterly at the poverty and narrowness of human mind" (Petruševski 1955, 122). Petruševski published more papers with reflections on this subject during the nineteen sixties and seventies, cf. *Beleški kon tekstot na Aristotelovata Poetika (gl. I-IX)* [Annotations sur le texte de la Poétique Aristote (chap. I-IX)], *Beleški kon tekstot na Aristotelovata Poetika II (gl. XI-XXVI)*⁴ [Annotations sur le texte de la Poétique Aristote (chap. XI-XXVI)], *Dali e sosem avtentičen tekstot od Arist. Poet. (1450b 25– 1451a 6)* [Le texte d'Aristote, *Poét.* 1450b35-1451a6 est-il entièrement authentique?]⁵ in the journal *Živa antika – Antiquité vivante* and the article *Za celta na poetikata i na tragedijata spored Aristotela* in the

⁴ Mihail D. Petruševski, 'Beleški kon tekstot na Aristotelovata Poetika (gl. I-IX)', *ŽA* 11.2 (1962), 251–277 and Mihail D. Petruševski, 'Beleški kon tekstot na Aristotelovata Poetika II (gl. XI-XXVI)', *ŽA* 12.1 (1962), 57–89.

⁵ Mihail D. Petruševski, 'Dali e sosem avtentičen tekstot od Arist. Poet. (1450b35– 1451a6)', *ŽA* 23.1 (1973), 209–211.

bulletin of the *Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts* (MANU), *Prilozi* (Petruševski 1978a, 5-38). This was actually the year in which Petruševski published his first translation *Izbor od Aristotelovata Poetika (proite 14 glavi)* (Petruševski 1978b, 901-929) in the journal *Stremež*, as a prelude to the full translation of the manuscript, published as a book by the publishing house *Makedonska kniga* the following year, 1979 (Aristotel 1979). The translation was based on the original text, and the edition, in addition to the detailed commentaries on the less clear parts of the text (pp. 81–109) comprises an exhaustive bibliography of the secondary sources used by the translator during the translation. An integral part of the critical apparatus of the edition is the article *Aristotel – ili estetikata na mimesis-ot* by Georgi Stardelov (Stardelov 1979, 9-19).

Written as a preface, in his article Stardelov emphasizes the importance of the publication of a „Macedonian“ *Poetics* as a significant date in the history of Macedonian scholarship because of the distinctness and uniqueness of this translation among hundreds of other editions of the *Poetics* translated in many different languages because it includes a divergence from the source text owing to the interpretative venture of Academician Mihail D. Petruševski. “The Macedonian translation of the *Poetics*”, wrote Stardelov, “is a scholarly critical edition in which M. D. Petruševski, approaching the Aristotelian text immanently, took into consideration the inner meaning of the problems of Aristotelian thought, strived to free the original text from all, according to him, possible, foreign, un-Aristotelian lexical layers that were created by its anonymous copyist with the copying of the primary text of the lost autograph of the first book of the *Poetics*. Because of this, the edition of the *Poetics* in Macedonian language cannot be considered only as a ‘new translation’, but also as a new reading of Aristotle by M. D. Petruševski” (Stardelov 1990, 9-19).

From the number of articles dedicated to this interpretation of Aristotle's understanding of catharsis we shall single out the article *Hefestovata kovačnica (kon novoto tolkuvanje na Aristotelovata katarsa)* by Ivan Džeparoski (Džeparoski 1979, 66-77). The author in it elaborates the issues that have prevented the correct understanding and explanation of the problem of the definition of tragedy, citing all renowned scholars that addressed this problem, but their researches failed to meet the criteria necessary for providing a generally accepted solution. In his essay, Džeparoski offered insights into the different interpretations of catharsis: as relief by Friedrich Ueberweg, as moral refinement by Lessing, or understanding the artistic being of tragedy as the ultimate *nomos* of catharsis according to Roman Ingarden (Džeparoski 1979, 68). Posing the dilemma whether these divergent interpretations were a result of the heterogeneous translations of the definition's concluding words, Džeparoski cited the translations of the Yugoslav/ Croatian classical philologist and translator Martin Kuzmić, the British classicists Samuel Butcher and Ingram Bywater, as well the translations of the Serbian classical philologist Miloš Đurić.

Similar interest in the topic can be observed in the other critical responses in our cultural environment that marked the publishing of Aristotle's *Poetics* in Macedonian. Here we have in mind the review *Isključitelno vreden prevod na prvotni filozofski tekst od antikata na makedonski jazik* by Aneta Markoska, written as a presentation of the first translation of a classical philosophy work in Macedonian (Markoska 1980, 171-176), and the article prepared for the anniversary *Dve iljadi i trista godini od smrtta na Aristotel* by Jonče Josifovski (Josifovski 1980, 14-19), in which the author focused on the importance of Aristotle's works and qualified the Macedonian translation as a solution of a two millennia old fiction. The succession of articles written on this subject in our country continued with an article by Elena Koleva entitled *Kon tragičnata katarsa*, in which she expresses her opinion contra „tragical catharsis, and pro σύστασις τῶν πραγμάτων“, underlining the *composition of the story* as the most important feature of dramatic poetry and the basic dramatic construction upon which the mental universe was erected, upon which a form filled with ideas rose.“ (Koleva 1984, 97). In her reflections on the subject, Koleva distinguished herself as a follower of Petruševski's work and at the same time as his successor. She focuses on Aristotle's thought about the polysemy of phrases and lays stress on a place in the *Poetics* where Aristotle warned that one should be careful in how many ways it is possible to understand a phrase when it denotes something opposite (Arist. 4, 1449a15), in order to reexamine and emphasize the arguments against „tragical catharsis“. In her opinion: 1. Catharsis is an ambiguous syntagm, because it occurs only once as an apparition, and is absent from the reality of Aristotle's text; 2. It is improbable, for, although seemingly real, it is not enabled because it does not refer to the “same subject“, nor to the “same thought“ of the thinker; 3. It is harmful as a delusion, a kind of σκιαμαχία for all the minds afterwards; 4. It is irregular from an artistic point of view because it distorted the thought structure, the “composition of events“, the pragmatic composition of the “*Poetics*“, a theory with a living meaning even for the most modern theories of art (Koleva 1984, 104).

These attitudes were later elaborated thoroughly in her monography *Sistasa na pragmi kako poetsko načelo*, in which the conjecture is explored as a technology of poetic creation and from a formal aspect (in reference to its optical dimension) and from an essential aspect (in reference to its artistic logic, poetic holism, its eudemonic essence etc.) (Koleva 1992).

More recently essays dedicated to the accomplishment of Academician Petruševski were written by Katerina Kolozova. In the Preface to the new edition of Aristotle's work from 2015, Kolozova points out the language and the structure of Aristotle's work as the fundamental features that enabled the translation and interpretation venture of Academician Petruševski (Kolozova 2015, 137-143). Determining the interpretation of the *Poetics* as an insight into the constitutive core of the work itself, she wrote: „What is special about Petruševski's translation, and his

interpretation of the text, is that it is about reading faithfully the text itself, in search of its structural rules and routes of inference making, without imposing a pre-conceived idea of the interpreter as to 'what the truth of tragedy should be'. The recurrent mention of the subject of the composition of events and the central position it holds in the text indicates that, for Aristotle, the structure or the composition of events is the definition in the ultimate instance of what constitutes the tragic" (Kolozova 2015). The clarification of the central position of the composition of events in the *Poetics* through a comparative approach and the contemporary philosophical language allowed for an insight into a dialectical understanding of reality. Among the number of philologists, such as Teddy Brunius, Nickolas Pappas, Gregory Scott and Claudio William Veloso, that are familiar with and affirm the philological solution of Academician Petruševski internationally,⁶ Kolozova singled out the important contemporary treatise of Elizabeth Belfiore,⁷ who with precise analysis of the arguments and without previous knowledge of Petruševski's work, had arrived at the same conclusion that systasis, and not catharsis, is the purpose of tragedy. Consequently, the author concludes: "The solution provided by Petruševski allows us to overcome the false and superfluous dualism between the composition of events and catharsis. More specifically, the analysis conducted by Petruševski only underlined Aristotle's well known consistency and thus removed one of the two agents in what seems to be false duality." (Ibid).

The insight into the process of critical reception of the conjecture composition of events shows that the openness for different issues is a prerequisite for a competent exploration of the philological problems with distinct philosophical aspects passed down by tradition. „The phrase *πραγμάτων σύστασις*, as the Academician Petruševski concluded, was created by Aristotle and it was supposed to express the basic difference in the understanding that tragedy is not just about 'narrations' but, above all, about acting (the Greek word *δράμα* means nothing else but 'action'), that in poetry, especially in the long poems such as epic, tragedy and comedy, of principle importance is the 'arrangement' or 'composition of events' (*πραγμάτων σύστασις*), that is, the myth i.e. (the contents of) the story" (Petruševski 1978, 905). Bearing in mind the fact that the conjecture *composition of events* is a result of a critical reception of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, this recontextualisation of the values transmitted by tradition, raises not only the question about the (in)comprehensibility of theoretical treatises, but also the more universal question how to develop a concept that will make it possible for the issue to become a proportionate contribution to the development of the ideas about works of art.

⁶ Further on the research conducted by these authors see Džeparoski, I. (2020). 'Katarza: Aristotel i Petruševski [Catharsis: Aristotel and Petrushevski]', *Context* 22, 7-19.

⁷ Belfiore, E. (2014), *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*, Princeton University Press.

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