

Petre M. Andreevski

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STORIES: *Sedmiot den* (Skopje: Kultura, 1964);
Neverni godini (Skopje: Makedonska kniga, 1974);
Site lica na smrtta (Skopje: Zumpres, 1994);

NOVELS: *Pirej* (Skopje: Zumpres, 1980);
Skakulci (Skopje: Naša Kniga, 1984);
Nebeska Timjanovna (Skopje: Naša kniga, 1989);
Poslednite selani (Skopje: Zumpres, 1997)
Tunel (Skopje: Tri, 2002)

POETRY: *Jazli* (Skopje: Kočo Racin, 1960);
I na nebo I na zemja (Skopje: Kočo Racin, 1962);
Denicija (Skopje: Kultura, 1968);
Dalni nakovalni (Skopje: Mislá, 1971);
Pofalbi I poplaki (Skopje: Mislá, 1976);
Šaram baram, pesni za deca (Skopje: Detska radost, 1980);
Večna kukja: tažalenki (Skopje: Naša kniga, 1987);
Kasni porasni, pesni za deca (Skopje: Detska radost, 1992)
Lakrimarij (Skopje: Zumpres, 1999);

PLAYS: “*Bogunemili*” (Skopje: Makedonski naroden teatar, 1984);
“*Vreme za peenje*” (Skopje: Makedonski naroden teatar, 1975);

ESSAYS: *Segašno minato vreme* (Skopje: Štrk, 2005)

Petre M. Andreevski belongs to the third generation of Macedonian writers, who began their writing careers in the late 1950's and early 60's. He was born in the village of Sloeštica, in the Demir Hisar region, where many of his characters were “born” as well. The collective memory of the people in Sloeštica and their cultural traditions are the inspiration for much of his poetry and prose. He attended the first grade of elementary school in his native village before the Second World War in a Serbian school. During the Bulgarian occupation he attended three more years in a Bulgarian school. After the war his parents insisted that he learn a trade, but his ambition was to continue with his education. As a protest against his parents' wishes, he says that he threw himself on a fire. They pulled him out and gave him a good beating. His grandmother was instrumental in convincing his parents to let him attend school. He was only 12 when he left village life, but it was during those few years that his world view was shaped for the rest of his life. After finishing high school in Bitola he enrolled at the University of Skopje, where he received a degree in Yugoslav literature. During his college years he also began to focus on a literary career more intensively, writing his first poem on a paper bag, and publishing his first series of poems in local literary journals. Upon graduation his first job was as a journalist for Radio Skopje. He worked as an editor at the Macedonian Television station, and was also an editor of the periodical *Razgledi*. He has received numerous literary awards, including twice the prestigious *Brothers Miladonov* award at the *Struga Poetry Evenings* festival. He is a member of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts since May 2000.

In the development of Macedonian literature Petre M. Andreevski counts among the most prominent Macedonian writers. He has been labeled by various critics as a realist, naturalist, surrealist, and more recently as magical realist. The inspiration for much of his prose and poetry comes from the folk traditions of the village and the people who practice the traditional rituals. His village and the childhood years spent there are the departing point for much of his prose and verse. He notes that it is during these formative years that one has the purest sense of the world, it's original archetypal picture. Writing about those people and places for him is in a sense like living there with them. He understands his characters because both he and they have maintained the same traditions that they have inherited from their ancestors. “We can't run away from our traditions, because they have entered our spiritual being. It is what keeps us in contact with deceased ancestors that we have never met,” he notes. These traditions are embedded in the author through his observations of traditional folk rituals and through the

narratives that he has heard from the simple, village people. As he says, “I do not have my own words, I only use the words of my people.” He writes about people whose memory he still maintains. With the exception of his last novel *Tunel*, all of Andreevski’s prose focuses on the reality of the Macedonian village, from the Balkan wars at the beginning of the twentieth century, through both world wars, the aftermath of collectivization, and the difficulty facing the village in trying to comprehend the new world order. Andreevski’s characters, according to the critic Venko Andonovski, “live on the edge of reality, facing big historical events, world wars, collectivization, they live on the edge of history and myth, between reality and imagination, between science and superstition, between political banners and religion. They refuse to leave mythical time and step into reality.”

The village folk traditions, songs, beliefs, rituals, superstitions are also the sources for much of the symbolism and metaphors in his poetry. Images of these traditions are the building materials from which his poems are constructed. Some critics have labeled this style *folk-surrealism*. The poem “*Žetva*” (Harvest) from his first published collection of poetry is an example of how a folk image and a typical village harvest, large groups of people harvesting wheat by hand with sickles, are transformed into a metaphor for a battle between two armies, or two antagonistic forces:

“Two armies are facing each other
neither yields

Each soldier on one side
grips a crescent moon
the others have nothing
nowhere to flee

Yet there are so many of them
their shadows are blending

Above them the sun’s bee-hives
sing hymns to the summer

(The earth burns skyward
fetch the well in your jugs)

Two armies are battling
the smaller one is victorious.”

The poem “*Dodolki*” from his second volume of poetry, *I na nebo I na zemja*, borrows images and a rhythmic form from an ancient pagan Slavic ritual rain that takes place in the spring. The rain rituals in the Slavic folk tradition are among the most ancient pagan rituals. In this poem, the village is under the rule of a two headed monster who is drinking all the rain water from the river. The *dodolki*, a group of young girls clothed in grass, sing songs asking for the monster to go away and for the rain to come back. The group designates one girl, who by tradition should be an orphan, to be the *dodolče*. They cover her with all sorts of grasses, and together they go from house to house, fetching water from each well, sprinkling the *dodolče* and singing their songs for the rains to come, for the grass to grow and for the harvest to be plentiful, so that the “orphan” will not starve. In Andreevski’s poem the wishes of the *dodolki* are unfulfilled and their song changes into a lament:

“Open rooms are shutting our song
it’s not a song but a joyous lament”

The lament, as we will see below, is another type of a ritual song from the folk tradition that Andreevski incorporates in numerous poems.

In *Denicija*, his third volume of poetry, Andreevski takes up the theme of love. When the volume was first published the readers’ reactions to the poems were similar to those expressed by Venko Andonovski, who upon reading the poems for the first time is shocked to realize that he is not the only one who has his own *Denicija*, and feels as if the poems were written for his own *Denicija*. Many readers have wondered who is Andreevski’s *Denicija*? Although the poems are addressed to the feminine *Denicija*, Andonovski notes that the referent is not a particular person, a particular love, but the universal, emotive feeling of love, its cosmic presence, love as a mover of everything in nature. When Andreevski sings of love, he sings of love for a lover, for

one's country, one's mother, etc. The poem "*Pesna za mojata pesna*" (Song about my Song) is a narrative about everything that Denicija represents for the poet, about the universality of love in all of nature, in the poplar tree growing between two desserts, in the snowball between a child's two hands, in the kiss between two pure lips, in the rainbow between two agitated forests.

Denicija also represents the poet's love for his country, as illustrated in the following examples:

"If she said anything everyone had to memorize
her words
because in her voice one could place
my entire fatherland."
("Letuvanje")

"In you were the borders of entire Macedonia
as long as I love you, I love all of Macedonia."
("Vtoroto pismo")

"When I loved Denicija
as if I participated in the creation
of the first Macedonian State."
("Koga ja ljubev Denicija")

From the euphoria in the first half of the collection where the central themes is universal love in all of nature, in the second half the poet returns to the other universal – death. The lament is the only thing left after the death of the lover, as in the following examples:

"you are leaving, and I remain all alone
because you are dead, and your death continues in me
since you were gone."
("Otkako te nema")

"You watch me from above and from below,

or is there only death after death”

“Oh, you sun, who can see everything,
tell how many times I filled the urn
and, how many times I emptied it, tell,
that I am still crying, gathering tears,
at least I can bring tears to his grave.”

“*Lakrimarij*”

“*Smrtta na babarot*” (Death of the babar) is Andreevski most original poem and most associated with pagan folk traditions. The pagan ritual of chasing away of winter and the celebration of the new year has been transformed in the Macedonian folk tradition into a Christian religious ritual. This ritual takes place on New Year’s Eve according to the old (Julian) calendar and on St. Basil’s day. According to the local folk tradition, on the days between Christ’s birth and his baptism evil spirits walk around the earth, and the cross is helpless in protecting the people. To chase away the evil spirits, groups of mainly young men, lead by an older man, dress as animals wearing animal masks and call themselves “babari”. Depending on the local tradition, in each group there is usually a man dressed as a “bride”, a groom, an old man, and a priest. At one point the old man dies, he is then revived by the priest, signaling the end of the evil days. They go from house to house, beating drums, bells, make lot of noise and perform the same ritual - they bless the house, after which they are rewarded by the hosts. The death of a babar in the ritual is inevitable. According to the pagan folk tradition, when two groups of babars meet each other, a battle ensues until the leader of one or the other group dies.

On the structural level the poem is composed in three different styles reflecting three narrative voices. On one level is the voice of the narrator who describes what happens as the ritual progresses:

“The babars were walking in front of their shadows,
as the smoke walked in front of the fire
the bells around their waists were ringing
and behind them dripped the over-blossomed brightness”

The poet's voice is followed by the voice of the babars who sing the ritual songs as they go from house to house, chasing away evil spirits. The third voice is the voice of the lamenter as he laments the death of the babar, and blames him for his death:

“Why were you looking for clouds behind clouds
 why did you have to go meet the babars from the other side?
 You were looking for it and you found a cold stab under your arms,
 and you knew: there is no meeting without one dying.”

Andreevski's poetry turns to the mythical Macedonian space as a source for metaphors to represent something that is universal for that culture. It is safe to say that his poems don't communicate very well with contemporary Macedonian readers because those readers do not possess the memory of the cultural traditions and mythical past of Andreevski's subjects. This is probably also the reason why Andreevski's poetry is difficult to translate in other languages and has not gained readership in countries other than in the Balkans, where similar traditions are shared.

The title of Andreevski's first novel *Pirej* refers to a type of weed that is difficult to destroy; it sets out roots and comes alive as soon as it touches the ground. The weed in the novel becomes a metaphor for the two main characters, Jon and Velika, and by analogy for the Macedonian people as they live through cataclysmic events over which they have no control – the Balkan wars and World Wars I and II. In an interview about the novel Andreevski says:

“I like *Pirej* because it describes the fate of the Macedonian people. When I talk with the grandmothers of Velestovo, everything reminds me of *Pirej*... I am very sad that the Macedonian people are so good, that they suffer so much, and that they are satisfied by so little, they live so well with so little.”

The story of the two characters parallels the history of Macedonia during the same period. The aim of the novel, however, is not to reconstruct historical events, but rather to follow the two main characters in their constant conflict with death. The main narration is left to the two main characters, who by telling their own stories they tell the story of that period. The novel begins with Velika's funeral, which takes place sometime during World War II under Bulgarian

occupation. Velika's son Roden, who has been living abroad, has come back to the village to attend his mother's funeral. During the funeral ritual the priest asks for a list of names of deceased relatives of the person being buried. As the names are read, Velika's husband, who died many years earlier, is not mentioned. The explanation is that Velika was not on good terms with her husband before he died, and before she died she had left instructions that she did not want his name mentioned, nor did she want to be buried next to him. At the end of the funeral Roden asks Duko Vendija, one of the villagers who was very close to both parents, to tell him the reason for the discord between his parents, and why Velika did not want to be buried next to her husband. Duko replies that he will tell him their story as each one of them had told it to him, and as he remembers it himself. Roden has no memory of his father, he was born on the same day that his father died. Having lived abroad for many years, he knows very little about his mother as well. This is the motivation for the rest of the narrative.

The narrative structure of the novel is framed by four narrative voices: the author, Duko Vendija, Velika, and Jon, and each one narrates events as they experienced them from their own perspective. The author's voice frames the narration with the first and last chapter of the novel. In the first chapter the narrator describes in detail Velika's funeral and provides authentic descriptions of the specific religious and folk rituals associated with a funeral, including verbatim quotation of the service performed by the priest. The funeral ends around noon, and the telling of the story begins. The narrative time takes place sometime during World War II when the village is occupied by Bulgarian soldiers. The narrator's voice returns in the last chapter, which takes place at around sunset on the same day, as Duko's stories about Roden's parents end. Duko's voice as a narrator merges with the voices of Jon and Velika in his "re-telling" their stories. Each of their stories is told in the first person, which makes it difficult to distinguish their voices from Duko's voice.

Jon's and Velika's stories tell of events that take place many years earlier, mainly during World War I. At that time Macedonia was part of Serbia, and Jon is drafted to fight in the Serbian army against Bulgaria and Germany. Velika is left at home to take care of their five children. In dealing with the problem of the first World War, Jon's narrative also raises questions about national identity and justification for the war. He is drafted by an army that is the current occupier of his village, he is fighting against an army that may have been, or might later be the occupier of the same village. Neither army, neither country recognizes his identity as a

Macedonian. He must change his last name into the language of the occupying country each time his land is occupied by another country. As the form of one's last name is an identifying marker of one's national identity, Jon's question regarding his identity is reflected in the question he asks a fellow Serb villager: "can a horse become a bull simply by changing its name, like they changed my last name?" The presence of Bulgarian soldiers at Velika's funeral during World War II also indicates that the question of national identity has yet to be resolved. In the first chapter a young man asks, "What country will come after this one... who will come..., when these folks leave?"

Both Balkan wars were fought over Macedonia, and each warring country claimed ownership of Macedonia on the ground that each shared national identity with Macedonia. This is how Jon explains to a Serb comrade the national differences among the warring countries in the Balkans: "At one time, in the old time we were all the same shit, the same cow pie. Then, a cart came by and with its wheels cut the pie in two. Another cart came and cut the pie again. And so other carts came and cut the pie, and from one cow pie we became many cow pies, a whole bunch of shit. I saw them all here, and we all smell the same."

The senselessness and irony of the war, where a brother is asked to kill a brother is illustrated when Jon asks his commanding officer to give him leave so that he can see his children. The officer tells him that he will give him leave only if he can manage to capture a Bulgarian soldier. Jon captures one, but realizes that the man he has captured is his own brother. His brother was coming from America via Bulgaria and was mobilized by the Bulgarian army. When Jon returns from the front he realizes that he is only a tool in the hands of those on whose side he is recruited to fight at the moment. He is devastated by the death of all his children while he was away, he becomes resigned and takes to drinking. He dies drunk at the same time as his wife Velika is giving birth to their last and only surviving child, Roden. He dies angry at his wife for not giving him one last drink.

Velika represents an example and symbol of the traditional view of the Macedonian woman, one who conquers all obstacles against all odds. While her husband is fighting a senseless war, she fights against hunger, disease, dishonesty, for the welfare of her five children, but at the end all her children dies, her husband has become an alcoholic, he dies and she is left all alone, "Now I am a tree without any branches, pruned." The events in her life are motivated by rituals, premonitions, superstitions, interpretation of dreams, fortunetelling and by a slew of other folk

beliefs. Like Solzhenitsyn's Matryona in "Matryona's Home," she expresses her attitude toward her suffering and consoles herself with proverbs and folk expressions, which is the only language that can express her reality in a manner that she can understand: "When a woman marries, she becomes a field."; "Man is like a silo, he can take everything that's thrown his way." The weed *pirej* is an appropriate metaphor for Velika's will to survive. You can dig it, you can cut, but you can never destroy it.

The subject matter in the novel *Nebeska Timjanovna* follows chronologically the events narrated in *Pirej*. The novel deals with the Greek civil war, when a large contingent of Macedonian partisans were fighting on the side of the Greek communists, many of whom after the war ended up in prisons in Albania and in the Soviet Union. The story is told in the first person. It begins in 1940 and it follows the character for the next fifteen years, when the most tragic events in the life take place. She experiences her first love and the pain of separation from the lover, she falls in love with another man with whom she has a child, two years later her lover dies and her child Ivan is taken to Czechoslovakia. She is tried by the Greek communist party and is given an eight year sentence in a prison camp in Siberia. The only bright spot in her life is her love for her son Ivan. She falls in love again with her first love Mihailo, but nothing comes of it because he has decided to stay in the Soviet Union. After her sentence is over she returns to Skopje and looks to be reunited with her son.

Nebeska is in the same absurd situation as Jon in the previous novel. She has no control of what is happening to her, she is fighting for ideological causes that are not of her choosing in a war where friends and enemies are not easily identifiable. Her fate and the fate of others like her is best expressed in one of her folk observations: "The head has rolled on the ground, and the body is still running. Man runs without his head, and the head watches him and wonders."

The novel *Skakulci* and the play "*Vreme za peenje*" take place during the years immediately after World War II, the period of collectivization and immediately after. As in the previous novels, the main characters are from rural areas, they have no control of the large political and social forces that are shaping their world and which are the cause of the changes in the village. The village is forced to go through social reconstruction and adopt ideologies that at times are at odds with the traditional culture. The complete decline of village life in the face of modern outside influences is depicted in *Posleednite selani* (The Last Villagers), Andreevski's last "village" novel.

Andreevski's most recent novel, *Tunel*, is his only novel that does not deal with the past or with the village. The novel is set in the present and in an urban setting. Andreevski describes the difficulty in writing the novel in this way: "In creating the novel I had problems that I did not have before. For the first time I did not have concrete prototypes, all of the characters and situations were created in my imagination."

The recent publication of a six volume anthology of his works speaks to the fact that Andreevski remains a widely read, major figure in Macedonian literature. His last novel *Tunel* and the recent collection of essays titled *Segašno minato vreme* (Present Past Tense), which deal with contemporary literary and political issues, are good indication that perhaps his future works will move in the direction of the present, the urban and the familiar.

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