

## THE MUSICAL ELEMENTS IN PASSION OR ALICE'S DEATH AS SOURCES OF NEW MEANINGS

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**Abstract.** The study traces the interrelationships between literature and the musical forms fugue and passion. Significant for the analysis is the information about the personality of Bach and the science of onomastics. I find a connection between the names of the characters of the novel and the great composer. I initiate a new reading of the traditional musical form of passion and the novel by exploring biblical and musical elements, finding that they are deconstructed by the author to create unconventional meanings.

*Keywords:* passion; Bulgarian postmodern novel; Emilia Dvoryanova; fugue novel; biblical elements; musical novel; experimental novel; deconstruction; onomastics

Emilia Dvoryanova is a Bulgarian writer and lecturer, winner of the *Hristo G. Danov Award*, *Ognishte Award* and others. She has got a doctorate in philosophy with a dissertation on *Aesthetic essence of Christianity* (1991). Dvoryanova is the director of the program *Language Culture and Academic Essay* at NBU. She gives lectures on the *Aesthetic Essence of Christianity*, *Creative Writing*, *Story – short narrative forms*, *The novel – history and technique of creation*, *the Word and its experiences*. Dvoryanova is the author of the novels: *The House* (1993), *Passion or the Death of Alice* (1995), *Mrs. G.* (2001), *Earthly Gardens of the Mother of God* (2006), *Concerto for a sentence* (2008), *At the entrance to the sea* (2014), *Peace be with you* (2018), *the short story La Velata* (1998) et al.

The analysis is focused on her novel *Passion or the Death of Alice* (1995)<sup>1</sup>. The object of the research are the musical elements – fugue and passion, to which no special attention is paid by the critics. If they are mentioned, they are seen as an external construct rather than a fundamental one to the literary text. The opinion of the critics is unanimous that Emilia Dvoryanova's novel is “incompatible with other texts of the Bulgarian literary tradition” (Dvoryanova 2005, 260). The analyses of her work so far have focused mainly on women's writing<sup>2</sup>, the political situation in Bulgaria, biblical motives<sup>3</sup> and specific language<sup>4</sup>.

Initially the title itself seems to point us to the genre of crime novel. From the evidence in the first chapter we can assume that it hints at the political opening of Bulgaria in the 90s, when, along with the democratization, began the cultural transfer of Western models. The musical, cultural and biblical layers interact with each other, building the image of a musical-literary world, which strictly keeps its secrets and remains inaccessible to the superficial reader. The intricate plot of a murder gradually unfolds in an unusual story that reveals the many layers of meaning going beyond the criminal framework.

The structure of the novel is a challenge for any reader, due to the initial logical ambiguity<sup>5)</sup>, which discourages any attempt to make causal relationships. Narrative as a meaningful plot in and beyond itself cannot serve in the evaluation of the text<sup>6)</sup>, as the story passes on different levels, embedded in the minds of the characters. It acts rather as a source of meanings that branches off into various thematic centers organized in the structure of the musical work of the fugue.

In Dvoryanova's novel music penetrates at every level, both structurally and semantically; this feature is associated with the certain knowledge and careful *closed reading*, otherwise access to the novel would be “denied”. The title *novel-fugue* automatically excludes the possibility of analysis remaining only in the field of literary theory, so we will pay special attention to the main elements of the fugue, which will pave the way for the complex fabric of the text and the musical form *passion*.

Dvoryanova's text provokes our intellectual potential, requiring careful reading on several levels musically, biblically and most of all expressively and emotionally connected. Therefore, the object of analysis will be the syncretically intertwined multi-layered suggestions in the auditory and visual perceptions of the characters and their interaction. We will try to decipher the change of perspective (the views of the characters) related to the musical interpretations and their intuitive sensations and absolute hearing.

Clarifying the musical terminology helps us in tracing the extent to which the structure of the musical work penetrates the semantic layers of the novel: “there is no sense of music, nothing makes sense, but there is music of meaning” (Dvoryanova 2005, 201). The specific feature of the classical work, which requires depth on the part of the recipient, is clearly expressed with the unfolding of the narrative. It becomes clear that the characters inhabit an intangible world that has its own laws and rules, initially difficult to understand.

Subsequently, they obey the mathematically accurate organization of the musical form: “The fugue begins slowly and methodically. The first voice announces its theme in the initial exhibition – the others enter one after another, enriching the texture from one melodic line to two parts polyphony, three parts polyphony, etc.” (Kerman 2015, 31) and more: “a musical composition in which one or two themes are repeated or imitated by the successive introduction of voices and counterpoint

to the continuous intertwining of the vocal parts.” Improvisations are impossible, we need constant monitoring of the musical thought and understanding of the meanings.

With the help of the theme of the fugue a story no less intriguing than a novel can also be created: the individual parts are the different voices, the introduction of the new voice is a response to the already started musical dialogue and thus the musical narrative develops. That is why this form is suitable for experiments in the literary field and its application in the novel structure leads to new aesthetic and semantic searches.

It is known that the exposition is written according to certain logical rules, following the tradition according to which the fugue is one of the strictest compositional forms. The genius who brought it to an unsurpassed level of virtuosity is Johann Sebastian Bach and his music is described as “mathematical” or “pure” (absolute). I find similarities not only between the structure of fugue and novel, but also on an onomastic level.

The obvious connection between the characteristics of Sebastian and the real personality of the composer is logically woven into the canvas of the novel.

There is another important pattern leading to the composer's personality – the names in the novel: Io (the maid), H.<sup>7)</sup> (the inspector) and Sebastian (the tenant) refer us to the initials of Johann Sebastian Bach.

The characters are deconstructed on an onomastic level and on a level of a certain human peculiarities. The distinction unfolds on the basis of the opposition of the characters' linements: for example, Io owns the ability to sense the reality and we can perceive it as a connection to the “materialistic” descriptions of the novel, also, there is a significant resemblance between the genius composer Bach and the character Sebastian: the pianist in the novel is gifted with absolute hearing and the role of a demiurge: he creates the fugue that controls the lives of the other characters. Sebastian represents simultaneously Bach's alterego and a hologram with no physical density.

Inspector H. is the guardian of the material and the rational, he analyzes facts in order to reach the revelation. Eventually he manages to move from the material to the musical, unlike Io, who doesn't make any progress in her beliefs.

The relationships formed between the different characters are based on counterpointing. For example, the voices of Inspector H. and Sebastian are opposed on several levels. The law enforcement officer wants to find Alice's killer and has no idea what the murder is about, his “voice” is non-musical, the word “fugue” does not bring him any information. He does not understand the “art of counterpoint”, does not distinguish between the figures of St. Peter and St. John the Baptist. Going through his passions, he realizes that the visual world of matter, which he knows, is collapsing. Later H. began to miss the Sebastians' unconventional point of view: H. “... had judged this man the day before as a crazy person, and perhaps it was

because no normal person would have dared to talk like that, but so much time had passed since then and so much more ..." (Dvoryanova 2005, 168). Sebastian understands the spirit of life and with the help of small clues helps him to find out the truth. Without "unconditionally subordinating his hearing to the canon" (Dvoryanova 2005, 165), he could not reveal the essence of the mystery.

At the beginning of the novel it is mentioned that an atheist is "... one who cannot play Bach... and one who cannot listen to him" (Dvoryanova 2005, 3) H. is already enlightened in the art of the fugue, he hears and understands the divine music.

In his reality any conception of being was refuted, the laws to which he was accustomed to obey have been replaced. H. managed to "outwit the fugue" and overcome the limitations of his own mind. At the beginning, as we have already mentioned, he received the information through causal links, the voices in the novel represented definite perceptions (auditory, visual, mental) rather than setting full-blooded characters. They develop a dominant sense, which never mind how much they have cultivated and complemented, proves eventually how easily human receptors can be manipulated. H. expands his perceptions and eventually comes to the realization that he is a "part of a game" having nothing in common with the real life.

After the insights, he questions the existence of the world of the fugue and his own role in the story: "Do not believe, everything is a bluff" (Dvoryanova 2005, 206). H. realizes that the music world is not his familiar world where the truth is reached only with the help of the ratio.

The inspector is the only one who "learns" to be musical, he overcomes his own limitations to reach new knowledge not only about the music world, but also about himself. In this sense, Dvoryanova's text denies the quick truth, requires silence and concentration, encourages a search for one's own limits. It shows how destructive can be the restrictions of personality, renunciation of the material reality and life in the "ideal" own world. We can assume that the return to the classical form of the fugue is an appeal to self-insight, awareness of important values and preservation of the human in the era of postmodern chaos of convex mirrors.

To the complex musical context is added another challenge for the reader's intelligence and ability to solve riddles of the biblical stories. They do not have to seek quick effects, but a deep knowledge of the ancient texts and at the same time a reflection on each biblical character mentioned in the novel: Elizabeth, Zechariah, John the Baptist and others.

The intersection between the Bible and the music is mentioned in the title: *Passion*. In terms of the meaning, Dvoryanova's novel compiles the two Gospels, mentioning biblical characters from both passions but each with its own distinctive features: Elisaveta is old, pregnant with John the Baptist: "And blessed is she who has believed, because she will the words of the Lord came to pass"

(Luke 1:42, 45). Thus, literary and musical narrative are intertwined with the help of the biblical canon. An example of this are the objects (figures) in the house, which are an important part of the semantic center of the novel, they live together with the inhabitants, each of them has a specific place corresponding to their place in the musical work. The novel mentions two sets of figures: original (they have been moved from house to house for generations) and imitations made by Alice's lover, Joseph. This correlation refers us again to the structure of the fugue, which functions on the principle of imitations, and to the mirror image of the musical work.

The examination of each object, which is connected with the prototype (the original), is necessary for the construction of the musical: "The knowledge connected to the idea of the mirrors expresses the dichotomies lower – higher, sacred – profane, complete – partial. Hence its functional duality and contrast. Its positive function is to offer the image of the Divine, the ideal, the eternal, the truth, and its negative function is to present images of the material, i.e. of the transient and the meaningless." (Protohristova 2010, 433).

The musical existence of the characters in the novel is constructed in a similar way: mirror opposites of the ideal – the music and its elements are reflected in the material – the house and the objects. The two parts are looking for an intersection, because they cannot build a complete world on their own, because just as every element in the joint is mathematically calculated, so every object in this house has a specific place. In this sense, the biblical references in the novel do not remain at the level of a symbol, but rather continue to challenge the existence of ready-made truths.

In her interview with Kalin Yanakiev, Emilia Dvoryanova says that the use of religious realities provokes feelings, opens one's own horizons and infinitely facilitates the author, but, paradoxically, in most cases the super-significant units "fall into the field of the trivial."<sup>8)</sup> The biblical references in a new way interpret the complex relationships between the perception that have already been discussed: thought, hearing, and vision, from which many meanings are born.

On the other hand, we find an important starting point for analysis, namely the assimilation of Bach's musical works. In the past, *Matheus Passion* was performed in a reduced volume, delicately, gently, so that the listener could calm down and focus all his attention on the exquisite music of the work. In his diary Bach notes that he made this decision but did not explain it. We can assume that in this way the composer urges the listener to calm down in order to reach the essence of music and speech, and neutralize the noisy effect. This type of listening would be difficult for a modern music lover, accustomed to strong bass, high tones and loud sometimes meaningless lyrics of songs. Perhaps this is exactly the effect Dvoryanova aimed at "denying" the mass culture and challenging the reader's mind.

Similar to Bach's *passion*, the novel needs an in-depth and insightful reading. Just as the subtle vibrational frequencies of eternal music have urged the listener

to be more careful, so Dvoryanova's text opposes "the ignorance that befalls us all the time" (Dvoryanova 2005, 166) and seeking the quick truth. The fugue novel cannot be read quickly and at the same time in depth, it requires silence and an active reading position.

*Passion or the Death of Alice* also interacts with *The Art of the Fugue*, in which Bach reveals how the tools and techniques for writing polyphonic works are interconnected. In the preface to the *Art of fugue* we read: „Part of the essential conception of the fugue is the way in which voices that the fingers can feel to be individual and distinct are heard as part of an inseparable harmony. The confusion of vertical and horizontal movement is one of the delights of the fugue.” (Joseph Kerman, 20). This “confusion” in question can be seen as the already mentioned confusion of the perception: each of the characters has his own truth, which they defend, until the polygamy occurs, and it requires a search for an intersection, so that the fugue (the fictional world) can exist. The musical order has its own regularities: the mutually exclusive symbols complement each other, the matter is counterpointed with the musical perceptions, just as the visual and thought processes are opposed to the auditory ones. In summary, we can say that these processes can be understood as the age-old desire of the written word to discover new knowledge beyond its parameters, namely in music, which in many cases complements and enriches it.<sup>9)</sup>

On the other hand, the physical perceptions of the characters are counterpointed and at the same time complement the sacred functions of the musical form passion and the desire to rise above the material world. We are impressed by the way all the elements of the literary work are complemented by the musical work in a coordinate system. In the novel the literary and the musical fields intersect where the auditory, visual and mental perceptions of the characters create complex paired worlds. These semantic centers are divided into countless meanings and ideas so that they can be refracted through the reader's experience, separated from the known and, like mitosis, continue their division by creating literary meanings with the DNA of the modern times.

## NOTES

1. The present research is part of a separate chapter of a dissertation on the topic: “Music and the novel from the end of the XX century and the beginning of the XXI century (problems of euphrasy and time)” with scientific supervisor Prof. Cleo Protohristova.
2. For example: Milena Kirova's *Studios: Text of the Modern: Passion or the Death of Alice*. La Valeta (259 – 286), Z. Garkova: *The Postmodern Pleasant Woman of Emilia Dvoryanova* (163 – 176)

3. Alain Santacrou: Passion or the Death of Alice (for the book by Emilia Dvoryanova), See: Alex McElroy: Concerto for Sentence: An Exploration of the Musico-Erotic by Emiliya Dvoryanova, N. Krasteva Emilia Dvoryanova The Bitterness of the Universe (199 – 206)
4. A. Licheva Emilia, Language and Music (214 – 218), M. Bodakov On the Other Side of the Language (210 – 214).
5. This type of “intellectual game” with the reader's mind is known from the novels of Alain Robb-Grie and the other representatives of the so-called “new novel”.
6. This is the definition of Marie Vrina-Nikolov, see: portal Kultura: When the word is the perfect lover
7. In Cyrillic, the letter X is equivalent to the Latin H. For the study, it is important that the name of the inspector remains H. because these initials also strengthen the reader's perception of the anonymity of the character.
8. See: <https://kultura.bg/web/%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80-%D1%81-%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B4%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%8F%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0/> <https://kultura.bg/web/%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80-%D1%81-%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%8F-%>
9. One of the many examples of this is the opera, which combines recitative and musical composition.

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