

“Almost Intimately” of Irina Papancheva

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“Almost Intimately” is an autobiographical short novel full of youthful suffocation and with the desire of the 22-year old Czech language and literature student to understand everything, to live through anything. The main character is to such extent active and drunk by her own youth that she doesn’t have the time to look around, to think, to contemplate life coming over her. The narrative flows so impetuously, busy and melodically that it sounds like a poem and not like a short novel. Her main character is like a string which rings at every touch with life and her only desire is to ring all the time...Enchanting with the charm of the youthful discovery, the book is a light and fascinating read which might make the unsexed reader not to notice its underwater currents. It is a delicate flower which beauty veils the stony soil from which it grew up. And we are amazed by the literary skills of the beginning author to be able to achieve entertainment and depth with such easiness.

But perhaps this is a sign of youth. Of the talented youth.

The chapters are short, fragmentary, impressionistic. The situations, the thoughts and the events run in a breathless tempo. And even before exhausting them completely, the author moves to the next chapter: the main character appears at times at a party, at times in a mehana¹ in Bansko, at other times she is a receptionist in Sunny beach, being completely unable to determine the future developments of her “serious” love with the Rumanian Vintchentso nor knowing how to handle the

¹ Traditional Bulgarian restaurant

Englishman David, who enters the plot in its very beginning. The novel begins and ends with him without them reaching a merger despite the mutual desire. And this relationship is more an unfulfilled dream than unrealized love. In her hustle the heroine experiences a fleeting love (actually pure sexual) affair with a Czech man on the lawn behind the Bachkovo monastery without remorse to his girlfriend. And that makes her feel in harmony with herself. To feel like a woman. Sex is written directly, openly, without hypocritical modesty, but also without the bragging hysteria of the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s, when sexual nonchalance (by the way too theoretical) was imposed everywhere. The main character leads a poor=ordinary student existence, participates in students' protests to change the government of Zhan Videnov but instinctively feels that she is just a "test mouse who runs and runs on a plastic wheel..." and that "The wheel of the history needs its thousands and hundreds of thousands mice to be able to turn". In her rushing youth she feels like a "puppet, driven by a skilled puppeteer". However she doesn't accept this reality as a tragedy but as an objective fact. The thought that the Englishman David cannot understand such a reality passes through her mind because even she doesn't understand it, only feels it.

The novel is composed by 40 short chapters (namely 38, but two of them have an internal division) with an average length of two-three pages. There are no classical techniques to build a fictional character; psychological portraiture and motivation are discarded as unnecessary, the same counts for the causality. Plot turns are not being used at all and if we still get an idea about the main character, the secondary characters are barely hatched and we take their actions for granted, without getting an insight of the grounds of their behavior. And the strangest thing is that this "superficiality" is compelling and we perceive in the "order of things". Moreover it acts upon us with particularly impressive power and a strange "musical philosophy".

Each chapter begins with a carefully chosen motto – by classics, famous poets or completely unknown authors in whose work the author had noticed wisdom and depth. And these quotes give the story more depth, insert it in a broader cultural context, determine the course of thoughts and associations that the reader will lay upon the novel and this fills it with new dimensions, giving birth to the already mentioned “musical philosophy|”. Youth breathless confession becomes a picture of the time the artist recreates in its authenticity, without explaining it.

The picture becomes multidimensional, which are more complex than they appear at first glance.

They are the **sensual dimensions** of a transitional period which the mankind hasn't known in its history. And the author doesn't want at all to grasp this period, she just experiences it and registers it with her oversensitivity. The expression the “the collapse of socialism” is a pathetic sided print to characterise anything.

The time of technology has come. The term “technology of life (!!)” has become commonplace. And we instead of being part of life become part of the technology. But more about this later.

The author doesn't dash into sociological reflections and explanations. With an artist's sensibility, rather than a seismograph, she manages to deliver the new essences in a **tangible** way. There are foreboding feelings about technology - a topic that will grow with summed force in her novel "Annabel". But these “feelings” already have their lines in this novel. Her friend, the Czech Helena shares: “I feel so good in these Eastern countries. In the first years after the fall of the Iron Curtain we traveled avidly through Europe... hungry for its healthy, uninfected with totalitarianism spirit (...)today they seem to me so similar in their order and refinement (...)While here I find much more authenticity and warmth.” “Perhaps,

but for me all these countries are still terra incognita and their perfection attracts me like a magnet” replies the main character and “stuffs six peppers in a jar”.

This dialogue takes place when two young girls make winter preserves (not really a European tradition). And this is remarkable. But there is another such episode (my favorite): “...Helena, Scot and I are visiting a friend of them, a British diplomat, who, along with two more Britons, is boiling apricot rakia in the backyard of his luxurious house in Boyana.. I can not help smiling at the childish excitement with which the British fuss about the cauldron of rakia under the guidance of an experienced Bulgarian master of rakia making. They had planned this ritual and prepared for it for weeks.

Apart from us, two US businessmen with their wives, one of whom is Bulgarian, a journalist from Scott’s newspaper and an Italian female photographer, having arrived to Bulgaria in relation to her work, are sitting around a table on the porch and are tasting the freshly boiled strong rakia.

The main character-author had never dealt with “patriarchal” activities such as making preserves and boiling rakia but her artist intuition suggests her that a deeper dimension of tradition and morality is hidden in their insignificance. That people gather around the distiller the way they gathered around the fire-place because of the human contact and not because of the rakia. You can gather around the fire but not around the heating or the underfloor heating. In this episode Helena offers to the heroine to go to Prague. This is prompted by the appearance of David in the company of a charming Serbian woman. This episode is significant also for another reason – it is built on the laws of dramaturgy. By this moment the action has been fragmentary staccato of thoughts, stories and observations, and now for the first

time many characters have gathered at one place and how it all will continue depends on the development of the situation and their relations. The main character decides to go to Prague – on one hand to visit the city which is for now the only personification of the “wide world” and, on the other hand, to be saved by her own jealousy and disappointment.

The values, which we would call socialistic, are distant, estranged and unknown to Irina Papancheva. And not, as one might think, for ideological reasons and reluctance to get to know them, but because the society still under the socialism imperceptibly evolved and they lost their actuality already during the childhood of her generation.

The positive (or negative) value of socialism was a problem of the generation of her parents, who did not notice when the world expanded (and globalised), as if they did not want to understand that no Berlin wall could stop the enlargement from west to east and back. For Irina Papancheva’s generation the “the enlargement” was evidence. The local, regional and national values turned out to be smaller than reality. Technology could not be stopped, it turned out to be stronger than any ideology. So our small Bulgaria had already become a modest but international centre in which the main character lived “her serious relationship” with the Rumanian Vintchentso, her friend Helena is Czech, her trip to Bansko is in the company of the American Michael and the French woman Anette, David is English and has a girl-friend who is a Serbian artist (who is the “rival” of the main character) and the action in the novel begins in an attic, where the birthday of the 30-year old editor-in-chief of the first English newspaper in Bulgaria, which appeared in the 90ies, is being celebrated.

And this party has gathered mostly young journalists from different nationalities. The action takes place in within Bulgaria but the relationships between people have crossed the boundaries of this frame. And if we are still discussing whether to enter NATO or the European Union and the words “common European values” could be heard everywhere, incandescing the passions of the older generation, to the young generation these questions do not exist. Their decision was understood by itself. The question was how they will realise their lives in practice in the given realities. While for the older generation these were new realities, for the younger it was granted – the only reality they knew as they had grown up in it.

I remember how when I read “Almost Intimately” for the first time I realised how hopelessly backward is our generation (the one of her parents). This small, in terms of volume, book made me feel and understand, not with reason but with every cell, that the time is now different. And David says to the main character when they first met: “For now I like Bulgaria” and she replies: “Bulgaria is a prison from which I want to escape”, I adopted this dialogue beyond any ideological clichés. I adopted it as a rush to the breath of the world and I realised that we are living in time when the whole world belongs to everyone. I have to admit that the word “prison” shocked (and stung) me. I was brought up in patriotism and I know that whatever that home is primarily native home and then everything else (even prison). But this word contained a new assessment of the values of patriotism, nationalism, love to one’s country, which few found to be natural, but which in the modern times are parted in the wider world of cosmopolitanism. The topic of cosmopolitanism is key for Papancheva’s next major piece (“Annabel”) but for now it appeared as an artistic presentiment.

Not only the reality, thoughts and feelings are described. An object of description is also the method of constructing the work like watching reality being simultaneously described both inside and outside.

Here is how the second chapter begins: “Even when I was little I used to think of myself in the third person singular. I have been doing it ever since. One part of me participates in the action, another one – ascertains, registers, analyses, experiments, makes it more visual...” That is how the writer-heroine acts – we see simultaneously the author and her artistic incarnation in character, as we are merging and dividing these images, but we see that this structural merger and division of the main character with the author hides an internal philosophical charge. This duality of associations becomes a method of perceiving for the reader and they also begin to “register, experiment and make it more aesthetic” i.e. turning in. Particularly typical is the technique which I will call “future in the past” and which, in my opinion, is the culmination of the novel. The author is imminent to describe her stay in Prague after having accepted the proposal of Helena to go there.

And while she is wondering how to describe this stay from a few years ago, Helena herself is contacting her in ICQ and urges her to pay her a visit. Helena no longer lives in Sofia, she has become a mother and has returned permanently to Prague. And here the author abandons all rules and chronology, dumps all literature (or literary pose), but instead brings in a documentary transcript of their conversation, grabs the bus and leaves. She dumps any literature and goes to enjoy the company of her friend and “her sun Pavel”. This way she leaves the literary tense of the old time events but by going to Prague she happens to be in the future of these events. Some exceptional artist intuition suggests her to include these episodes in the short novel although she destroys the literary canons. Suddenly the narrative goes beyond

its framework and principles. Any regulatory aesthetics would stigmatise such an approach and an exceptional creative freedom is needed for an artistic decision of the sort. But this way artistic expression and reality start living together. Immediately after this stay the author describes her previous stay in Prague.

Two visits to the same favorite place served in reverse chronological order, coming from different coordinate systems intertwine. This interlacing has important artistic-philosophical implications - from now on the visit to Prague is perceived by two layers of time. It infused the character with dreaming for the future and at the same time with nostalgia of the past, like in a modern sculpture of Arhipenko in which the contra-volumes and the emptiness of space are just as important as traditional volumes which yields its viewer an idea of the human body even when the body itself is missing and modeled by external forms around the body - so they see things both inside and outside. And what magic it is to come out of the schemes and to describe simultaneously both future and past. And if it was not the right rhythm, this approach would have been like a patch on the elegant dress of the work but now it is hiding in the engaging narrative and quietly chuckles from its little corner without worries whether they will be spotted by the reader or not.

An exceptional achievement of this musical philosophy.

The poem-novel is divided into three parts. Part I – “David”, part II – “Almost” and part III – “Prague”. The first and the third parts are the intimate dreams of the main character for love in this vast world, the second part – “Almost” – is sensual tactility of the world, which is wide and beautiful but not perfect. The action began at a journalistic party, where for the heroine everything is imminent, full of infinite possibilities, and ends in her student room in the hostel, after returning from

Prague, where she finds a farewell letter from David. Throughout the novel she lived so intensely as if life will do for her. In fact it barely begun. Only the student years are ending. She fulfilled one dream – Prague while the other one – David: “...I slowly fold back the sheet, put it in the envelope and smile lightly, and very, very quietly”

The studentship is over but life goes on.