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**Mirosław Michalak, Konteksty kulturowe
średniowiecznego eposu irańskiego *Garšāspnāme*
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The phenomenon of new Persian epic poetry initiated by Ferdawsi's *Šāhnāme* is intellectually fascinating picture of how the great civilisation survives historical turbulences, how the elements of the past are romanticised and employed in building a new view, blended with the elements of the current world. This leads to somehow eclectic works of literature which, by glorifying mythical past, emphasise the spiritual strength of the contemporary culture. The epic literature provides significant information about the *Zeitgeist* of its creation but also about the *Volksgeist*. The epic poetry transfers the views of the past and shapes the future. It states what the people who created the poems believed about their past but that identified their present and postulated future behaviours.

Epic poetry is of great importance for any attempt to reconstruct elements of literary culture of the predecessors, especially if these did not have a written form or the written form hardly survived. This is especially valid when it comes to studies of the early New Persian epics. Although precise reconstruction of ancient texts within mediaeval poems or attribution of some of them as clearly belonging to any particular era in the past does not seem convincing and reveals more of scholar expectations than actual literature, the balanced, wide and un-biased research is able to contextualise the narrative elements within their historical layers and evolutionary streams. This is achieved in the perfect way by Mirosław Michalak in his book "Konteksty kulturowe średniowiecznego eposu irańskiego *Garšāspnāme* i ich źródła" regarding Iranian epic *Garšāspnāme* written by Asadi of Tus (Tusi). In fact, Michalak's work could be treated as methodological example of the process and the analytical principles applied there could (and in opinion of the present author they should) easily find usage in working on other literary material or even be extended to research of iconography. Naturally,

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such methodological finesse could be achieved because of the complexity of the text of *Garšāspnāme* where the layers of contexts would not allow examination with less refined instruments.

The book is divided into four parts. The first of them, “Introduction”, first covers the necessary, mainly linguistic, technicalities resulting from working on a New Persian text which requires comparison with the sources in Avestan, Old Persian or Arabic (to name the most important and frequent ones), clarification of nomenclature and state of research on *Garšāspnāme* are also provided there. Far more important and intriguing from these obligatory elements of academic work, are methodological principles assumed by Michalak. His approach is focused on the cultural contexts, perceiving the literary work in structural perspective, as representation of the set of repetitive forms or motifs available in particular time and place. A poet, in such perspective, would be a vehicle to convey the cultural content of his environment, and the research should focus on them rather individual features or originality of the creation. The approach does not aim in denial of individual genius or in diminishing the role of talent. Michalak in many places reveals admiration for the poetic skill of Asadi of Tus and expresses opinions of his poetic superiority over the authors of other post-ferdawsian New Persian epics. The point is that the focus on individual writer is not an analytical tool and only examination of structural orders and separate motifs allows actual comparative study with defined categories. Michalak’s methodology is characterised by clarity and objectivism. In order to grasp the contexts, Michalak defines the narrative orders, which are the larger structures or planes in which the detailed contexts are revealed. This allows definition of particular elements and their comparison within proper narrative strings/traditions/currents.

Second part of the book “Characteristics of the work” provides the ground for further, actual, analyse. Firstly, Michalak presents biography and works of Asadi of Tus positioning him in political, cultural and intellectual environments of eleventh century Iran. Further, Michalak discusses poetic form of the poem and presents the story of Garšāsp. Next, the basic narrative orders are defined which will govern analysis and will direct the discussion of detailed aspects of the poem. The “heroic-mythical order” is full of depictions of the battles and heroic deeds and is dominated by the references to earlier Iranian epic, definitely rooted in pre-Islamic beliefs or mythologies. The “relation-descriptive order” relates to the stories of travelling to the far lands and is filled by the references to the travel stories of varied level of reflection of actual realia. Michalak again reveals methodological prudence and avoids almost natural, instinctive, temptation of comparing the stories with geographical facts known to twenty-first century scholar. Instead, Michalak diligently decides to firstly compare the narratives in *Garšāspnāme* with known stories and only at the later stage attempting rationalisation or juxtaposition with actual realia. Such rationalising temptation does not appear in “heroic-mythical order”, where the narratives for obvious reasons cannot relate to any observed reality, however must be fitted into

certain materiality, legible for the readers of Asadi's poem. One might sense a not stated assumption that the first and the most natural inspiration for the narratives are existing stories, and the stories are other stories' natural environment, just as works of art, rather than nature, are primal environment of iconography. The principle of comparison of intrinsic qualities within their essential 'ecology', before reaching any 'natural' explanations is the feature of properly carried iconographic and literature studies. The methodological relation between Michalak's approach towards literature can be compared with study of art also in the sense of separate treatment of narrative orders which would reflect compositional formulae and narrative details corresponding visual 'props'.

Further Michalak discusses possible influence of historical conditions on the poem and relations between the formal means, and the nomenclature, and the narrative orders.

The third part "The cultural contexts of *Garšāspnāme* and their sources" contains the actual analysis of the content of the poem, in an (definitely successful) attempt of their contextualisation. At first, Michalak discusses Garšāsp himself, his mythological origins. Extremely interesting is an analysis of the relations between Garšāsp and Zahhāk where unambiguity of polarisation of the characters in the Iranian traditions is made relative. The discussion of the relation of the proponent with other Iranian heroes is in itself a study of the heroic figure in Iranian epic, however made out from particular perspective. When continuing with the 'relation-descriptive order', Michalak rightfully starts with discussion of the post-hellenistic stories of Alexander, well embedded in Iranian imagery. Later Michalak proceeds with the detailed examination of the stories contained the 'relation-descriptive order' with the literary sources which might affect Asadi's world view. Michalak seems perfectly aware that it were mainly the stories that affected the pictured exotic and distant lands in *Garšāspnāme* and their relation with the actual places or phenomena is of secondary importance, as the poem would not become any source for any reconstruction of actual historical events, nor would it serve to build opinions about historical South-East Asia or China. At best, it may provide information about common beliefs regarding far lands in Iran pre-dating the Mongol invasion. In this way, the 'kernel of truth' in the 'relation-descriptive order' of *Garšāspnāme* is of little, if any, meaning. What seems of great importance is the place of ancient myths and geographic (pseudo-geographic?) exotica for Iranian imagery. It seems far too obvious that the comparison of wonderful places described in *Garšāspnāme* would not leave much of real sites, of which even less could be positively identified in terms of distances and correct placement. Michalak's approach in these terms is correctly historical, it remains focused on literary sources and avoids naive rationalisations. Michalak correctly treats the existence of the source as the historical fact in terms of history of literature or development of imagery. Asadi's poem played specific function and employment of

mythical or exotic elements served particular purpose which did not include description of actual events or places.

The fourth part summaries what was written and postulates the directions of further studies on *Garšāspnāme*. It must be stated that Michalak placed the bar high for his potential followers. He suggests that the relation of the poem with the legends of Alexander and other early Iranian mythical traits should be further developed. Michalak also proposes to study comparisons with the exotica from Arabic legendary stories and to research further actual geographies of *Garšāspnāme*. The latter postulate seems unjustified as the action of the poem does not run in real time and space and the geographical names are rather recognisable slogans or hash-tags than actual geographical data.

Apparent reference to *seppuku* would be a great example here. Even if study of Japanese culture confirmed that ritual in ninth-tenth century Japan, situating it in China shows that Asadi had in mind a strange habit in an undefined place on the eastern verges of the world, which, for him meant China. It is questionable whether, in itself, *Garšāspnāme* could be treated as a source on early history or the origins of Japanese *seppuku*. On the other hand, it seems clear that apparently undefined Chinese site of Koga refers to ancient Kucha/Kuqa and the geographic names regarding China in *Garšāspnāme* refer mainly to the eastern parts of so-called Silk Road or Xinjiang and not actual China.

Michalak's book value lies in its sound methodological approach and bringing closer to European readers relatively less known Iranian poem. One of its strengths is thorough analysis of ancient Iranian motifs and comparison with current, mediaeval geographic lore or imagery which proves Michalak's extensive erudition. What seems inadequately explained is the special role of *Garšāspnāme* among the spin-offs of *Šāhnāme*. It is well possible that the exceptional position of Asadi's poem attributed by Michalak lies in its formal qualities, understanding of which requires knowledge of Persian. Although it is clear that the authors of the *Šāhnāme* spin-offs did not reconcile them in terms of chronologies and geographies, they seem to share the imaged world and comparative study of *Garšāspnāme* in this group would be natural extension of Michalak's great work.

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