

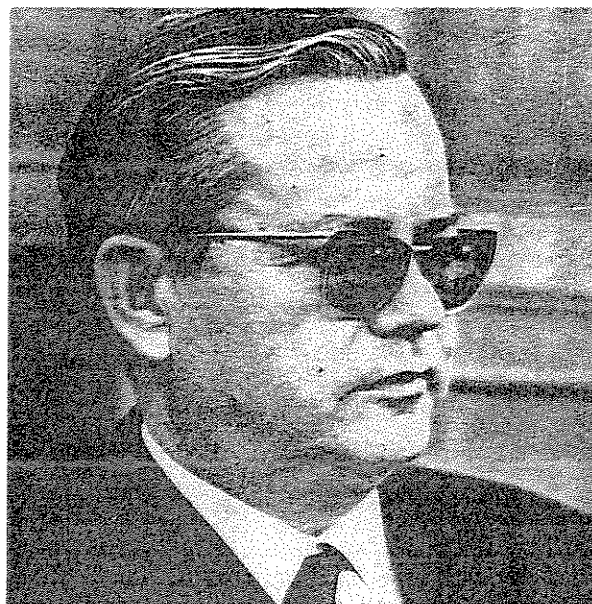
# Blaže Koneski

(19 December 1921 – 7 December 1993)

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It is impossible to imagine postwar Macedonian intellectual life without the contributions of Blaže Koneski. He played a pivotal role in the codification of the standard Macedonian literary language, in the development of modern Macedonian literature, and in the establishment of those institutions that promote an active intellectual community, and he was widely recognized internationally as the leading figure in postwar Macedonian letters. His contributions as a linguist, scholar, and writer fundamentally shaped the development of the Macedonian language and the direction of Macedonian poetry. Critics have tried to assess which aspect of Koneski's work is primary—that of Koneski the wise, cerebral poet, or that of Koneski the linguist, who, reflecting on his writing of *Istorija na makedonskiot jazik* (The History of the Macedonian Language, 1965), writes:

My work was going unexpectedly well. Every morning I went outside after breakfast and across a rapid stream, I set off to a nearby pine grove. There I

found a fallen tree trunk, just right for sitting on, I set my note book on my right knee and wrote. This book of mine was written in the outdoors, in the fresh air, in the clear forest, with the intoxicating smell of grass and pine. I hope that something of this pure beauty has been passed on to it.

Clearly both aspects of Koneski's works are conjoined. It is the poet who endows his scholarly writing with unexpected grace and clarity, while it is the scholar who endows the poetry with historical references and reflection. In all of Koneski's writing it is the place, Macedonia, whose imprint is felt. Koneski is clearly a poet and scholar whose views were shaped by the history, folklore, and people of his country.

Koneski was born on 19 December 1921 in the village of Nebregovo, where he lived until his family moved to the town of Prilep when he was eight years old. In his later work Koneski felt indebted to those early years in the village. In a 1974 interview that Koneski gave to the newspaper *Politika*, he remarked:

What could I have heard then in those 6-7 years in the village? Folk traditions lived strongly, most clearly in songs, stories, legends. That tradition was an inseparable part of life: no event took place without those old folk songs, legends, fables, proverbs.... At home my father's mother, Dunavka, who knew an unbelievable number of songs and stories, gave me special attention. In her lived that inexhaustible folk tradition of story-telling and singing. Those songs and stories of hers undoubtedly created a deep influence on me.

In Prilep Koneski completed elementary school and junior high school, then attended high school from 1934 to 1939 in Kragujevac, Serbia. He began writing poetry when he was ten, and his school poems, written in Serbo-Croatian, were published in 1938. The following year, 1939, Koneski began writing in Macedonian, and that year is considered the start of his literary work. After completing high school Koneski studied languages and literature in Belgrade, completing his studies in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1944. At this time he was a consultant to the Macedonian National Theater in Skopje, and beginning in 1945, he served on the editorial board of the satiric journal *Osten* (Goad). He was soon thrust into prominence through his participation in the committee that codified the Macedonian literary language. Although the youngest member of the commission, Koneski is largely credited with shaping the modern standard language that

## BLAZHE KONESKI

Blaže Koneski was born in 1921, near Pella in Macedonia. He studied language and literature at the philosophical faculties of Belgrade and Sofia universities. After the war, when Macedonia became one of the Republics within the Yugoslav federation and could at last give free expression to its national identity, the establishment of linguistic norms and the setting of literary standards were an essential part of the awakening of national consciousness. Blaže Koneski was the leading figure in creating the Macedonian standard and literary language. Among his many scholarly publications is a Grammar of standard Macedonian and a History of the Macedonian language. He has taught at the Philological Faculty of Skopje University since 1946, and was President of the Macedonian Academy from its foundation until 1975.

The fact that he is also the finest poet of his generation in Macedonia has remained less well-known outside his country than has his reputation as a scholar. He began writing verse before the war and has published four collections of poems and a book of stories. Most of the poems in his most recent collection, *Notes*, are included in this selection.



ANDRE DEUTSCH  
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BLAZHE KONESKI POEMS

BLAZHE  
KONESKI  
POEMS

TRANSLATED BY  
ANDREW HARVEY &  
ANNE PENNINGTON

*Dust jacket for a 1979 translation of Koneski's poems*

came into official use in the Republic of Macedonia in 1945.

In 1945 his poem "Mostot" (The Bridge) was published. While current opinion is critical of the poem's overly patriotic and declamatory style, a style reminiscent of Vladimir Mayakovsky, the work is recognized as an important contribution to the development of poetry in the immediate postwar era. Koneski himself was never fully satisfied with the poem and revised it several times, publishing it in modified forms in various anthologies of his poetry. The poem, a mosaic comprising seven sections of varying length and meter, is a key example of the socialist aesthetic typical of Macedonian writing from 1945 through the early 1950s. Critics saw in the poem glimpses of the future great poet but recognized that the piece itself is not one of Koneski's great works. Part 6, the longest in the cycle, "Skaznata na stariot majstor" (The Story of the Old Master), is narrated by a father who tells the story of his son, a soldier who died defending the bridge. In the father's call to other young

men to follow the example of his son and rebuild the bridge, Koneski employs the folk motif of a bridge made strong through human sacrifice: "Blood lies in its foundation. And such a structure neither can time destroy nor storm diminish."

Koneski makes frequent references to folk traditions and motifs. Throughout his career he published anthologies of and critical works about Macedonian folk tradition. Koneski's interest in, and debt to, folk lyrics is evident in the form and imagery of his poems, poems that allude to folk heroes, dances, and embroidery. His first anthology of folk stories was published in 1945 and again in 1986 in an expanded edition, serving as a testament to Koneski's lifelong interest in folk tradition. A selection of these folk lyrics was translated into English in 1978 by Andrew Harvey and Anne Pennington under the title *Songs from Macedonia*.

In 1948 Koneski published his first collection of lyric poems, aptly titled *Zemjata i ljubovta* (Land and Love). This collection, like the poem



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"Mostot," belongs to the immediate postwar period in Macedonian literature. Thematically the poems still resonate with references to the war and the rebuilding in its aftermath. In particular one can cite the poems "Teškoto" (The Heavy Dance), "Ilinden ski melodii" (Ilinden Melodies) and "Pesnata" (The Song). The theme of separation, loss, and rejuvenation after the war expressed in the closing stanzas of "Mostot" is echoed in poems such as "Pismo" (Letter), in which a friend composes a letter to his close friend who has died in the war, ending with the verse: "To me you are not dead. In my memory you will live always. And even today I can be your true friend."

Koneski's commitment to his country, his people, and the role of the poet—a theme that recurs throughout his work—is seen in lines such as the following from "Proletna pesna" (Spring Song):

And now when my song ripens,  
I know to whom I'll tell it—  
to my people, who fervently sing,  
who sing in the starry night.

In this first collection it is the poem

"Teškoto" that has received the greatest literary acclaim. The poem, written in 1946, recalls an incident that took place in 1942. In that year the People's Council (Narodni Sobor) was held, and the dance, *teško oro*, was danced without music. Folk motifs, the sound of native instruments, and the dance itself all serve as strong symbols of the tragedy of the Macedonian nation and the centuries of its foreign domination. "Teškoto" is typical of Koneski's use of everyday images to convey universal themes. Love of country is also evident in the frequent allusions to specific locations in Macedonia: Ohrid, Dojran, Karaorman. Koneski's works are rooted in Macedonian soil and tradition. As one critic commented, everywhere in this volume is affirmed Koneski's remark that he always thought of himself as a man who just left the shore of oral poetic tradition.

In 1948 Koneski also published a short work titled "Po povod najnoviot napad na našot jazik" (Answers to the Most Recent Attack on Our Language) and a verse translation of Petar Petrović Njegoš's poem "Gorski vijenac" (The Mountain Wreath). Koneski's ability to combine the work of a linguist, poet, editor, and translator is already evident at this early stage of his career.

During the 1950s Koneski published two more volumes of poetry, *Pesni* (Poems, 1953) and *Vežilka* (Embroideress, 1955); a collection of short stories, *Lože* (Vineyard, 1955); *Gramatika na makedonskiot literaturni jazik* (Grammar of the Macedonian Literary Language, part I, 1952, part II, 1954); and together with Krum Tošev, *Makedonski pravopis so pravopisen rečnik* (Orthographic Dictionary of Macedonian, 1950). At this time Koneski was a member of the Macedonian language department of the University of Kiril and Methody in Skopje, where he later served as chair of the Department of Yugoslav Languages, dean of the Faculty of Philosophy from 1952 to 1953, and rector of the university from 1968 to 1970.

*Pesni* (Poems) appeared in 1953. These lyric poems belong to the so-called intimate phase in Macedonian poetry that began in the early part of the decade as writers began to seek themes beyond the war experience. This collection was hailed by the critics for its simple style, which nonetheless conveyed an intimate sense of the Macedonian land, legends, and humanity seeking its place within historical events. These poems have in common with his earlier work frequent references to the landscape. Once again the poems belong in Macedonia. Not only are there po-

ems set in specific locations, such as "Skopje," "Kalemegdan," and "The Kumanovo Bend," but there are also poems titled "Rž" (Rye), "Mak" (Poppy), and "Pčenica" (Grain). In this collection, too, are several dialogue poems such as "Srebda so Žinzifov" (Meeting with Žinzifov), "Raku-vanje" (Handshake), and "Racin and Nedelkovski." Through these poems Koneski seeks a continuity with earlier Macedonian writers. Both here and in his later poetic works Koneski successfully marries old motifs with new poetic forms and rejuvenates old folkloric genres by merging them with the present. One of Koneski's great contributions here and elsewhere is the recognition of his debt as a Macedonian writer to folk tradition while revitalizing that tradition through contemporary genres. Koneski has been praised for his poems about children, which possess an intimate and delicate understanding of the relationship between grown-up and child. This ability to treat personal themes without excessive sentimentality is evident in the poem of this collection dedicated to his daughter, "Igra co dete" (Game with a Child).

While Koneski was composing his own poetic works in the early 1950s, he also published many translations into Macedonian of world literature, including the poems of Heinrich Heine, "Lirsko intermeco" (Lyrical Intermezzo), published in Macedonian in 1952; Shakespeare's "Otelo" (Othello), published in 1953; and the poetry of Aleksander Blok, with whom Koneski felt a special affinity, as is evident in his own cycle of poems, (To the Unknown), which appeared in *Pesni*. Other nonpoetic works that appeared during this period include the second edition of *Makedonska literatura vo 19 vek* (Macedonian Literature in the Nineteenth Century, 1950)—a short overview and texts—and a volume of stories by the nineteenth-century folklorist Marko Cepenkov, *Skazni i storenija* (Stories and Other Works), edited by Koneski and published in 1954.

Two significant works appeared in 1955: *Lozje*, a volume of short stories, and *Vezilka*, a collection of poems. *Lozje* is recognized by critics as a major contribution to Macedonian fiction. While the stories do not have the grace of the poems and the compositions are of unequal quality, their publication marked a turn away from socialist realism and war themes and turned the focus on to the lives of ordinary people. Each of the ten stories captures the pathos of everyday disappointments: a young painter not represented in an exhibit, a child's hope for a pair of new shoes dashed when he again receives second-

hand ones, the death of a family member. The collection expanded the thematic possibilities of Macedonian prose, which had, prior to its appearance, focused on the war and postwar patriotism. Critics believe that *Lozje* not only remains one of the most successful works in the development of Macedonian prose but is even more powerful when read in a contemporary context. This collection of Koneski's stories remains a seminal contribution to postwar Macedonian writing and it seems today, perhaps, more relevant and readable than when it first appeared.

*Vezilka*, the collection of poems that first appeared in 1955 and again in an expanded edition in 1961, solidified Koneski's growing stature as the leading poet of the postwar generation. In this volume, two of the main thematic motifs of Koneski's verse are developed further: the use of external landscape to express inner emotion and the use of Macedonian myths and legends to connect Macedonians with their past. The intertwining of such legends with the present is evident from the opening stanzas of the title poem "Vezilka":

Embroideress, tell how the  
simple and strict Macedonian song is born.  
From the heart which  
carries on a nighttime monologue  
in sleepless excitement?  
Pull two threads from the heart,  
the one black and the other red,  
The one awakens terrible sorrows,  
the other longing both bright and insatiable.

Some critics, for example, Georgi Stardelov in *Portreti i Profili* (Portraits and Profiles, 1987) and *Odzemanje na silata* (Breaking of Strength, 1990), consider this collection of poems to be a turning point in postwar Macedonian poetry not only for the new poetic tendencies of the 1950s but as one of the most significant contributions during the last thirty years. In particular, the cycle of poems "Sterna," which appeared in the expanded second edition, is viewed as one of Koneski's masterworks. The poems in the cycle, "Odzemanje na silata," "Sterna," and "Markov monastir" (Prince Marko's Church), treat motifs presented in folktales, but they do so here in a powerful, modern poetic form with imagery that is menacing and insistent. Andrew Harvey and Anne Pennington, in their introduction to *Žapisi* (Notes, 1974), write:

As a writer in Macedonian Koneski has the privilege to inherit a rich folk tradition and to inherit



this with the kind of immediacy which a Western writer, brought up in a more urban culture and one that has almost completely lost touch with its rural past, finds difficult to comprehend. . . . he takes an old figure and an old story and uses both in a thoroughly modern way; in both "Sterna" and "Prince Marko's Church" he achieves, with quick force, what other modern Europeans have been far more prolix about—a representation of the moral and intellectual plight of the modern artist.

The decade of the 1960s was an active one for Koneski as both a scholar and linguist. Between the years 1961 and 1965 Koneski was president of the Union of Yugoslav Writers. In addition to being appointed a corresponding member of the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1962, the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1963, and the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1968, Koneski also became the president of the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences at its founding in 1967, a position he held until 1975.

The first volume of the three-volume Macedonian dictionary, *Rečnik na makedonskiot jazik*, edited by Koneski, appeared in 1962. The second volume was published in 1965, and the third in 1966. This dictionary of the Macedonian language, with Serbo-Croatian glosses, was republished in one volume in 1986. At the time of this reprinting it was noted that, although the Macedonian lexicon has been greatly enriched since the 1960s, this dictionary, with its seventy thousand entries, remains an unsurpassed reference work.

In his collection of prose sketches, *Dnevnik po mnogu godini* (A Diary of Many Years, 1988), Koneski includes a sketch on the 1963 Skopje earthquake. This personal account relates how Koneski, then working on his book on the historical phonology of Macedonian and planning a trip to South America, learned of the earthquake and made his journey back to Macedonia. Together with descriptions of the harsh realities of the tragedy and his personal loss, Koneski also mentions how the files for the Macedonian dictionary were saved and how the university community regrouped. It is a tribute to the spirit of the scholars working in Skopje that so much was produced in the early part of that decade as the city was rebuilt around them.

*Istorija na makedonskiot jazik* (The History of the Macedonian Language) was published in 1965. This work, too, has been widely hailed as a major contribution not only to Macedonian studies but more broadly to the general literature on the history and development of the Slavic languages.

After a decade in which Koneski's major

work was outside the field of poetry he published a new collection of poems, *Zapisi*, in 1974. Thematically this small collection of poems is connected to his earlier works: the poems treat themes of love, country, and parting. The reappearance of Koneski as poet met with critical success. Many poems in this collection were later translated into English in the collection *Poems* by Harvey and Pennington. This collection was followed by the collection *Stari i novi pesne* (Old and New Poems), in 1979.

In the 1980s Koneski again turned his talents again to poetry. The publication of a second jubilee edition of Koneski's collected works, *Izbrana dela vo sedum knigi* (Selected Works in Seven Volumes, 1981), was followed by the publication in the late 1980s of six volumes of poetry and the collection of prose sketches *Dnevnik po mnogu godini*, published in 1988. The latest volumes of Koneski's poetry, *Češmite* (The Fountains, 1987), *Poslanie* (Epistle, 1987), *Crkva* (Church, 1988), *Zlatovrv* (Golden Summit, 1989), and *Seizmograf* (1989), are intensely personal and reflective poems on aging, love, and Macedonia. While little criticism has yet been written on these, there is little doubt that many of these poems will prove to be some of the most significant of the poet's career.

Koneski's multifaceted role in Macedonian letters is widely recognized. For those who know Koneski mainly through his linguistic work, his poetry is often startling in its transparency and delicacy, coupled with its bitterness and power. Through his poetry Koneski has set himself firmly in the place, Macedonia, as one voice among the long history of Macedonian voices; yet his work transcends the small borders of the Republic of Macedonia. The opening poem in *Crkva*, when related to the period of destruction in the former republics of Yugoslavia, helps convey how intimately one may be touched by the loss of those places intimate in our memories:

May that hour be damned when they told me  
that the church in Nebregovo was destroyed!  
It was as if then a thousand laments keened  
in me as if from a dark underground they had  
emerged.

Koneski died on 7 December 1993, leaving behind the legacy of a pioneer and widely acknowledged as one of the most important writers in Macedonian literature. The following poem "Vo parkot" (In the Park), from the collection *Zlatovrv* (1989), typifies the personal nature of Koneski's later poems:

Wait for me until I return.  
Find a good place to sit down.  
Conversation isn't important.  
We could just sit quietly.  
It is still warm,  
Though the sun is setting.  
It is still light,  
Though the darkness comes.

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