

REVIEW

by Prof. Albena Vladimirova Hranova, DSc, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy and History, Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"

for the dissertation thesis of Assoc. Prof. Boyko Penchev Penchev, PhD (Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Department of Bulgarian Literature) *"Progressives and Conservatives: Temporal Patterns in Bulgarian Literature from the Late 1940s to the 1970s of the 20th Century"* for the award of the degree of Doctor of Sciences in the field 3. Humanities, professional field 2.1. Philology

The work of Assoc. Prof. Boyko Penchev, PhD *"Progressives and Conservatives: Temporal Patterns in Bulgarian literature from the late 1940s to the 1970s of the 20th Century"* is submitted for public defence for the award of the degree of Doctor of Sciences. All stages of the procedure have been meticulously fulfilled within the legal deadlines and the documentation duly meets the regulatory requirements. The attached abstract expresses in a precise and synthesized form the main objectives, research themes and conclusions of the work. The author's formulation of the contributions is completely correct and entirely appropriate to the given circumstances of the thesis. Also attached are 11 publications on the research topic from the period 2011-2022. The monograph is 365 pages long and contains 15 chapters and an extensive bibliography, and the introductory pages formulate the aim of the study of temporal patterns in the chosen period, *"to trace the historical dynamics of the relation between the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation' in Bulgarian literature of the totalitarian era"* (pp. 12-13). It must be said immediately that the work not only fulfils, but exceeds its stated intention.

The introductory chapter, which deals with the methodological framing of the study, is essentially the author's "resistance to theory," a refusal to apply the great philosophical-theoretical models of time (Heidegger and Ricoeur) because of the *"tendency of philosophical speculation to work with a limited range of decontextualized concepts... the encounter between 'theory' and 'history' is usually fictitious, because 'theory' skims over all the contextual relations of every 'case,' replacing them with its own speculations"* (p. 17). The paragraphs on Bakhtin's concept of "chronotope" are in fact a brief history of the sunset of the productivity of this notion, of which Boyko Penchev takes as working mainly *"... the 'small' chronotopes or chronotopic motifs. These are spatio-temporal weaves that can pass from genre to genre"* (p. 9). Reinhart Koselleck stands most authentically for the main direction of the thesis with his understanding of the "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous" and his ideas of the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation", with modernity formulated as an age in which the gap between the two is constantly widening. It can also be seen with the naked eye that this "resistance to theory" defends contextual reading. In undertaking it, Boyko Penchev (following Foucault) defines his main research tool as *problematizations*: *"To investigate 'problematizations"*

would mean to investigate how and why certain things (in our case meanings) become a problem. 'Problematization' is not a direct consequence, an effect of an objective situation or reality; it occurs thanks to individual intellectual efforts" (p. 3).

Thus problematizations also ensure the plasticity of contexts, their limitations and extensions at the will of interpretation. And it is in the contextual reading that lie all the fine distinctions and compacting approximations between phenomena, discourses and ideas undertaken in this dissertation. The examples of this are innumerable, and only a few of the most striking will be given here in passing for my first reading - on the "little chronotopes" of The Wedding and the Sun in Stalinist lyric and the revelation of a hidden continuity: *"It is precisely these kinds of intimations of progressist discourse that will become crucial in the "young poetry" after the April Plenum"* (Chapter IV, p. 54); on the concept of "epic": *"Paradoxically, the 'epic novel' turns out to be somehow both the most communist prose genre and its literary-critical uses work towards a crypto-conservative vision of man and the world"* (Chapter V, p. 86); on the "Intellectual Poem" syndrome of L. Levchev: *"Unlike in poetry, in prose the type of the intellectual, preserving spirituality in a shabby time, was not so successful, at least until the 1970s... In the prose of the 1960s, the same functional role is played by a completely different social and, consequently, artistic type - the hard, stubborn peasant"* (Chapter VI, p. 126); on the replacement of the old hymn "Bulgaria dear, land of heroes" with "Proud Stara Planina" in 1964: *"... the "new" hymn suppresses the progressive, temporal self-description in favour of the spatial. The change of hymn metonymically represents the profound reorientation from a predominantly temporal to a predominantly spatial discursive framework... This 'spatial turn' would prove to be directly related to the return to the 'native', a fundamental element of the intellectual atmosphere of the Zhivkov era"* (Chapter VII, pp. 131-132); on the comparison between the conservative waves of the 1930s and the 1960s: *"In fact, the critics of the late 1960s read Haytov as the new Yovkov. And not the Yovkov of the older Marxist readings of critics like Peter Pondev, but Yovkov as the "fascist" Vladimir Vassilev saw him in his article "From 1920 to Today" published in Zlatorog, 1933... Vladimir Vassilev's description will be seen multiplied in the perception of Haytov's characters in the late 1960s"* (Chapter IX, pp. 249-250); on the concept of Dionysus: *"To sum up, the concept of Dionysus, which probably originated with Tsvetan Stoyanov, fulfilled many interrelated functions in the thinking of Bulgarian intellectuals and writers in the 1960s and early 1970s... From a purely literary point of view, one Dionysus, that of laughter and carnival, solves the Radichkov problem. The other Dionysus, signifying the ambivalent affirmation of life in death, becomes the instrument for critically dealing with Furnadjiev's "Spring Wind..."* (Chapter XII, p. 304). And many more.

To this must be added the series of contextual reconstructions that the dissertation successfully achieves and argues for. For example, the question of the extraordinary importance of Thomas Mann in Toncho Zhechev's critical language - Thomas Mann being *"in the 1960s the main legal channel through which the conceptual legacy of 'philosophy of life' and Nietzsche re-entered intellectual life"* (p. 92). The entry of Nietzsche in general, but also the various Bulgarian critical discursive devices for silencing his name, is one of the important refrains of the dissertation: *"It is as if the Nietzschean origin of the 'primitive' is being consciously ignored and unconsciously displaced"* (p. 245); *"In fact, in those years Dionysus and the 'Dionysian' are almost always used without reference to Nietzsche... The philosophical origin of the concept is carefully erased"* (p. 294). There is a similar plot about Giambattista Vico's uses of critical language and the conclusion that *"in quoting Vico, Zhechev is actually quoting Lifshitz"* (p. 195); or *"In the end, it turns out that Bulgarian scholars investigating the novel in their texts of the 1970s regularly cite Bakhtin but actually follow Lukács's thought pattern without mentioning him"* (p. 104). In general, the keen attention to whom and how Bulgarian criticism of the period quotes runs throughout the dissertation and even leads to important textual observations that aim, as the author puts it, *"to uncover a discursive context that has for some reason turned out to be hidden"* (p. 197).

By the will of contextual reading, the philosophical theory of the patterns of time is reduced; but their history is expanded. This happens not only literally, in the way the study breaks its stated boundaries in the title and retrospectively maps the Bulgarian context of the conservative turn of the 1930s; it also clarifies for the Bulgarian reader the main ideas of the so-called "conservative revolution" in Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, but these expansions remain within the framework of classical literary and cultural history. But the core of the dissertation, covering the study of the 1960s and 1970s, shows an asymmetry with the subject of literary history, and its main protagonist becomes not literature but critical ideography. In doing so, the study expands the history again because it also fits into newer interdisciplinary scholarly fields such as the History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and Conceptual History. If the first two are implicit in the dissertation through its very choice of a predominant subject, the conceptual history is not only an expression of scholarly self-reflection but also a thematized refrain of the study. (Boyko Penchev again does not explicate a theoretical choice, but it is evident that he avoids the model of Reinhart Koselleck, who sees the history of concepts in the border call between social history and historical semantics, with the dense account of the concept manifesting its historical ambiguity; more recently, developments on concepts here converge with Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School, which draws on pragmatist philosophy of language and speech act theory with a primary focus on the uses of the concept and the intentionality of utterance, as well as Canguilhem and Foucault's demand for attention to the

social environments that elaborate and enforce the concept.) In this respect, the dissertation deploys a whole chain of pragmatist histories of concepts, both in their substantive form and in the form of "key epithets," as Boyko Penchev calls them - *objectivism, new, contemporary, modern/modernization, epic, Alexandrian, primitive, carnivalesque, Dionysian, pagan*; to these we must add numerous emphases on oppositional conceptual pairs such as "old-new", "modernity-past", etc. , as well as clusters of interrelated concepts in the critical discourse of the decades under study, such as *the native, the eternal, wholeness, harmoniousness, myth*, etc., and the achievement of a critical conceptual vocabulary of Radichkov's reception in the 1960s in Chapter XI. These observations have very strong interdisciplinary potential, because the vocabulary of the history of literary-critical concepts from the 1940s to the 1970s inscribed in this dissertation can be used as a ready repository, comparable to contextual readings of concepts in other humanities and social sciences and in other social languages in general.

One of the big questions that Boyko Penchev's dissertation raises in the current of relations between "progressives" and "conservatives" is that of semantic and even stylistic interactions and distinctions between "modernity", "modernism" and "traditionalism". Even if the author explicitly refuses to enter the debate around "modernity" and "modernism" (and, as we know, modernism can emit counter-modern messages, and the Stalinist "modern" cannot in the least give rise to modernism), right at the beginning of the dissertation the author points out the following situation: *"In the 1960s, however, a reversal took place and the rift between ideological postulates and literary production became more and more visible, which (especially in the face of authors such as Yordan Radichkov and Vasil Popov) radically cut the 'horizon of expectation' from the artistic world and closed it into the 'space of experience'. In fact, this essentially conservative, "reactionary" gesture gave rise to some of the most modern in style literary texts in contemporary Bulgarian literature"* (p. 13). The text then goes on to explore the conceptual layering of "modern" and "modernization" in their political and critical usages, and again encounters the antagonists of its title in the following question:

"Particularly interesting is the resurrection of a concept characteristic of postwar modernism, around which fierce polemics quickly flared in the 1960s. What does "primitive" (and the derivative adjective "primitive") mean in the critical vocabulary of this period?"(p. 227). These observations suggest that through the antagonism of modernism and conservatism, there are exchanges of concepts and styles between them, despite the reversals of semantics and values.

But here is something else. It is obvious that modernism and counter-modern tendencies stand differently in the focus of Bulgarian literary studies. Implicitly and instinctively in the Bulgarian cultural milieu, tradition is thought of as the norm and its refutations as deviations. This is why modernism is more visible, more dissectable in its role as a "deviation" - working on the different

stages and the different "isms" of Bulgarian modernism is a long-standing preoccupation of literary criticism (as are the frequent formulations like "the author is a modernist, but he is more a romantic than a symbolist", which do not take into account the fact that both are phenomena of modernity, but of the two only symbolism is a phenomenon of modernism).

Unlike modernism, tradition seems to be a monolithic phenomenon at the point of the "native," the "primordial," the "roots" – terms-metonymies and terms-metaphors, replete with the same essentialist arguments, despite their different figurative construction. The "magma" wholeness of tradition seems to defy articulation; it simply *is* - as if it were eternally existing and periodically returning to correct the aberrations of modernity, its distinct returns being its only historical manifestations. It is against the background of the unproblematic conservative tradition that Boyko Penchev triggered his problematisations. That is why I dare to claim that „Progressives and Conservatives: temporal patterns in Bulgarian literature from the late 1940s to the 1970s of the 20th Century” is the first Bulgarian work of literary criticism that makes a productive attempt at systematic rationalisation of the incarnations of the conservative tradition - and in this is his undoubtedly great contribution. Particularly important is the distinction between autochthonism and nationalism made in the final chapter. Without expanding on its strong merits, I will only note that literary scholarship's instinctive habit argues for the importance of the distinction - no one has yet declared Yovkov's works and those of Fanny Popova-Mutafova to be literary related phenomena, if both belong unquestioningly to the interwar conservative wave; the same is true of Fanny Popova-Mutafova's reprints in the 1960s and “Wild Tales”, despite the fact that they both fit into the new conservatism of the 1960s. This is why my urgent recommendation to Boyko Penchev is the writing of a next monograph, which would unpack and clarify the incarnations of Bulgarian conservatism from the 19th century until today (and it seems to me quite logical to make this recommendation to the author of one of the important critical texts of the 1990s – “The Countermodern Botev”).

Finally, I have the following question. On the one hand, the study thinks of the inter-war period as the *"golden time of Bulgarian autochthonism"* (p. 340) and places the "post-" in relation to it in predicating the term to the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, for the conservative wave of the 1960s and 1970s, the study argues that rootedness in the eternity of space *"is only thinkable as a private experience of an aesthetic order"* (p. 147); that *"the Bulgarian 'conservative revolution' of the 1960s unfolded not as a project for an achievable world but as an intellectual utopia"* (p. 179); that *"the Bulgarian 'conservative revolution' of the 1960s was an individualist 'practice of the self' rather than a collectivist project, although the 'traditional world' and 'organic community' were an important part of its conceptual repertoire"* (p. 347). Does this mean that givens such as the

privateness of aesthetic experience, the lack of a project of an achievable world, and the absence of a collectivist project also apply reciprocally to 1930s autochthonism?

Having said all of the above, I would like to express to the esteemed scientific jury my high appreciation of the academic qualities and contributions of the dissertation "*Progressives and Conservatives: temporal patterns in Bulgarian literature from the late 1940s to the 1970s of the twentieth century*" and confidently declare my positive vote in favour of awarding the degree of Doctor of Philological Sciences to Assoc. Prof. Boyko Penchev, PhD.

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Prof. Albena Hranova, DSc