

Review

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on the dissertation by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boyko Penchev

Progressives and Conservatives. Temporal Patterns in Bulgarian Literature from the Late 1940s to the 1970s

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What we have before us is a work with an impressive volume of about 450 pages which is engaging to read for its unfolding, and also branching, scientific plots, and with apparent ease because of the clarity of its style.

This review intends not to follow the classical approach of presenting the individual chapters of the work, but instead will mainly comment on the work’s specific contributions

I would like to start with the theoretical and methodological chapter. I support with admiration the author’s decision to leave out “heavyweight figures” such as Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur, and share his skepticism “in regard to the stitching of poststructuralist 'theory' to literary study” (p. 15), as this customary “theoretical” approach in contemporary literary studies often limits historical contextual connections, and engages in speculation with both its object of study and its potential readers. I consider as working and well-founded the interdisciplinary paradigm of concepts and approaches constructed by B. Penchev - Mikhail Bakhtin's "chronotope"; the notion-images of the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" from Reinhard Kozelek's essay of the same name; ideology as inevitable for the heteronomous literary field in the totalitarian times and predetermining the necessity to analyze the external "laws", which take away its autonomy; and memory incorporated in the "culture of selective tradition" (after Raymond Williams) .

The second characteristic I would like to note is the temporal three-layeredness of the text. On the one hand, it implicitly shows Boyko Penchev's enduring interest in modernism and the modelling of the Self, lasting for 2 decades, as the present study can be seen as a continuation of the themes and analyses in his postdoctoral thesis. Now the focus is on a different temporal location, this time the objects are the Self and society, and clearly

addressing the "right-wing" counter-modern cultural phenomena of the interwar period, productive of the so-called "April thaw". On the other hand, my own associative reading of the study intertwines a present-day topicality linked to the undermining of liberal values and to an 'enlightened conservatism' which gains momentum, and this conservatism is not necessarily connected to nationalism and patriotism, but instead it is directed backwards in an abstract way, towards the 'primordial' and the 'eternal'. These notions of mine found direct confirmation in the final part, "Figuralisations of Time: An Attempt at Recapitulation," where Penchev, in a single sentence, discreetly and precisely gives reasons why transformed temporal patterns continue to be at the center of public debate even now: "as a reaction against the pressures of a totalizing 'horizon of expectation,' promising a common future that seems increasingly empty" (p. 305). This evoked in my mind Vladimir Sabourin's review of "Bulgarian Modernism: Modelling the Self", which insightfully regards this early book by the author, discussing early twentieth-century modernisms, as "temporally following and compositionally explosively related" to the literary criticism project of the 1990s. In this sense, Boyko Penchev remains true to himself with his priority anthropological interests in the quite different temporal axes of the modern era and their innovative interdisciplinary conceptualization, coupled with his active citizenship, far from essayistic declamation, yet clearly perceivable with the amassing arguments in the upheld ideas.

Thirdly, the work successfully finds its focus - to reveal the conceptual and rhetorical tensions in the ideas of time during three of the four socialist decades. The excluded 1980s is only briefly specified in the conclusion as 'nationalist' (p.307), and only through several novel screenings. On the one hand, this is due to a perceptible reason, since it is subliminally often present in a large part of the text in a comparative and, more precisely, in a comparatively-distinctive way. But on the other hand, it would perhaps be apt to note, right at the beginning of the study, the fact that the first quinquennium of the 1980s heralded the "perestroika", and its second half officially passed under the sign of it - a much sharper (compared to the "unfreezing") delegitimization of the totalitarian political, economic and social system, influencing also the dynamics, the dominance of the two temporal patterning. In order to be fair however, I should say that a statement in this vein can be seen on p. 310, woven into a specific context: the function of post-authoritarianism became anachronistic in the 1980s, due to the relative opening of art.

Undoubtedly, we can assume the division of the work into two mutually reinforcing and corresponding parts, Chapters II to V inclusive and Chapters VI to XIV. The first

analyses the dominantly key role of the progressivist-linear model of time in the poetic and critical handling of the doctrine of socialist realism up to 1956, highlighting, however, the complex intersections of the literary field with the realm of power. I would put emphasis on Chapter V, which concludes the assumptive first part of the work but also makes a connection with the second. On the one hand, it offers a new analytical paradigm to the novels of the early 1950s in two directions: through the theme of 'realization' as a teleological projection of ideological time at the level of the individual; and by formulating of certain characteristics of the social-realism version of the model of the Bildungsroman. I would like to note here that the dissertation is innovative even when treating issues that have been overexposed in the public realm, such as the "case of 'Tobacco'". On the other hand, this chapter traces for the first time the complex genealogy of the well-established notion of "epic" novel in the 1970s. The text searches for this notion's interconnections with both the dominant ideological narrative and a tradition of thinking about the novel genre, represented by Thomas Mann and György Lukacs. Also important, because of socialist paradoxicality, is Penchev's observation that the most esteemed scholars of the novel in the 1970s - Nichev and Zhechev – often quote Bakhtin, but in fact (especially the latter) implicitly follow Lukacs's thought model. The work highlights the common points in the positions of Nichev and Zhechev, but also distinguishes them by noting Zhechev's nuanced notion of the epic, which has a different genesis and signifies "a sense of the world in its totality and indissolubility." This is what leads to the subversive emergence of another temporal pattern, characterized by some cyclicity - an idea deriving from the communist progressivist narrative and illustrating the "new conservatism" whose construction began in the mid-1960s. The author's final productive summary is: "The 'epic' turns out to be a critical concept that can participate in the formation of both the 'official' and the 'alternative' canon of the Bulgarian novel" (p. 95).

This statement is a smooth transition to the second part of the work. Broadly speaking, this part follows the transformations of the two temporal models in the period after the April Plenum of 1956. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is entirely innovative, especially from Chapter VIII to the end. Certainly, this is primarily due to the very well found problematisation, which lead to positive interconnected consequences. Building on this late-Foucauldian notion, Penchev emphasizes that neither the problem, nor the selection of names, texts, and strategies are immanent consequences of the historical context or situation. It is the subjective quotient that opens up the possibility of a new, different discourse. The study makes no claim to "comprehensiveness" and "panoramic view" to the literary and critical production of the stated relatively long period, yet it does create an idea of the broadness and

the detail of processes both in the culture of the Peoples Republic of Bulgaria (PRB) and their connections with the culture in the USSR and interwar Europe, especially in Germany. In this regard, the author is aware of the insufficiency of long-lasting critical positions towards the literature of the period and purposefully enhances the constructedness of the research "subject", and as a result we have before us an interpretatively innovative large-scale research project, fragmentarily encompassing a multitude of cultural-historical "native" and "foreign" phenomena and solving a very big conceptual puzzle, self-sufficient in its cogency and completeness, but also conversing with scholarly positions established today as authoritative and often perceived as the only ones.

Saying the latter, I have to clarify that this does not imply a totalizing monolithicity either of the point of view to the objects in the study or of radically shifting metatextual theses. This consistent line in the study of discursive (dis)integrations, of the liminality of phenomena and their shifts, successfully found and summarised, but also built upon, with the semi-authorial notion of 'post-authotonism' introduced post facto, in Chapter XVI. The newly coined term with the prefix is undoubtedly a find, as it indicates not only a temporal distance from nineteenth-century Russian thought, but also from the interwar European and Bulgarian "right-wing" context, stripping away the political "fascist" connotations of the central term for the text, "conservative revolution," operating from Chapter VIII onward. The post-authotonism of the socialist era, unlike that of the 1930s, which rejected also the East with its Bolshevized Marxism, focused primarily against the threat from the West with its alienation, loss of tradition and memory. This secured it support from the official ideological apparatus, which simultaneously "failed to see" in him the pre-war anti-modern "fascist" projections. Thus, post-authotonism with its ambiguous orientation towards key oppositions "official - oppositional", "conformism - dissidence", "borrowed - authentic", "traditional - modern", "archaic - innovative" turns out to be vividly functional for the whole scientific text even without its conceptual availability. And its introduction clearly explains the delineated boundaries of the phenomena and the manner of their reception by the author. This generalizing and building-up insight is also found through the introduction of the English-language term, used in contemporary studies of nationalism and national cultures, which however also enables the identification in relation to the nationalism of our last socialist decade. According to Penchev, post-authotonism "awakens to new life two important types of cultural energy that give vitality to national culture" - "the will to appearance" and "the will to eternity" (p. 309). Last but not least, the anti-progressive temporality of Bulgarian post-authotonism is a bridge too wide, across which rehabilitated European philosophical and

literary traditions are returning, those that the official Marxist-Leninist doctrine has tried to completely erase - from Nietzsche, to names from Soviet "dissident" literary studies in the scope from Mikhail Lifshitz to M. Bakhtin, through the "revisionist" Djord Lukacs, to Gianbattista Vico, whose *New Science* is, as Penchev says, "the prototype of all future critiques of the rational foundations of Enlightenment progressivism and the linear conception of social time" (p. 181).

Particularly innovative in B. Penchev's study is the construction of a new vision of the humanity under socialism, important in our current intersectionality, where the humanity is in tension between its present and the voices of the past. The vision of the complexity of human identity is rehabilitated through the introduction of specific, non-traditional forms of memory about the individual and collective past. This happens in two ways. The first is through the punctual exploration of the semantic and discursive functions of key terms in the vocabulary of period literary criticism, such as "valley" and "Philistinism" (in chapters VI, VII), "primitive" (in chapter IX), "grotesque" and "myth" (in chapter XI), "Dionysian" (in chapter XII), "paganism" (in chapter XIII), etc. And the second way is through their use in the proposed innovative readings of a number of key works of N. Haytov, V. Popov, Y. Radichkov, which intricately deal with temporal issues. Here I cannot help but emphasize the touching on the important discussion around *Wild Tales* in 1973-4, which is also an almost blank research field except for the presentative article "'Wild Tales' in *Bulgarian Literary Criticism* by Vladimir Yanev. B. Penchev position is that it "began as a 'replay' of the polemics on the primitive of the second half of the 1960s...and gradually moved onto the methodology of literary-historical research" (p. 219). In line with my own academic interests, I would have enjoyed, for example, another excursus in the exposition on this issue, which would have unfolded the writer's perspective on two oppositional key figures in our intellectual and philological life in the 1970s who, as the text suggests, can also be seen as projective to the liberal-conservative debate.

B. Penchev defines for the first time, of course, through the conceptuality of his research, the polar differences between the two most representative writers - "root searchers": Haytov and Popov. The dissertation devotes the entirety of Chapter XI to Radichkov, "The Unpacking of Radichkov: Grotesque, Myth, Carnival," which traces the critical implications of the writer's incorporation into the socialist canon through the introduction into the critical vocabulary of Bakhtin's notions of "grotesque," "myth," and "carnival," born out of the sense that time in Radichkov's world was radically alien to the linear model of Marxist-Leninist ideology. B. Penchev stresses that the great Bakhtinian reading of Radichkov, showing the

very rapid synchronic receptive acquiring of the Russian philosopher and cultural theorist in our country in the late 1960s, was undertaken by Krustyoy Kuyumdzhiev in two of his articles in the early 1970s. They radically changed the very understanding of history, introducing a grand binary scheme in which the gradual-step-by-step course of historical development was replaced by the opposition of two typological worldviews - patriarchal and modern. The continuation of the critical dialogue between Kuyumdzhiev and Todor Pavlov, who "challenges" and refutes, but without practical artistic consequences, Kuyumdzhiev's Marxist hereticism in his article "Revolution is not a turmoil, it is not a paradox" (1972), is emblematic of another essential feature of the study consideration. Not only here, but in many other places, the dissertation reaches back to the critical debates of the 1960s and 1970s, which are another serious barometer of the socio-cultural situation. The case under review is indicative of two things in parallel: the broad scholarly territories of the study and its detailed intentionality, as it demonstrates, on the one hand, the specifics of the loosened situation of the censorship in the time of "developed socialism", but on the other hand, the reorientation of values towards the "native" in opposition to liberal cosmopolitanism and universalism.

The text under discussion, as we have seen from the above, has a real stake in the analysis of texts by critics, some of whose names have already been mentioned, such as Boyan Nichev, Toncho Zhechev, Krustyoy Kuyumdzhiev, but also Stoyan Karolev, Tsvetan Stoyanov, Minko Nikolov, Zdravko Petrov, Stoyan Iliev, Simeon Sultanov, Alexander Spiridonov, whose concepts and interpretations also turned out to be an important part of the ideological exchange during the period under study. Moreover, only five of these figures are the subject of the only current larger project with the subject of literary criticism - that of the Institute of Literature at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences headed by Assoc. Prof. Alexandra Antonova. The contribution of the study is deepened by the revelation of unsuspected rich intertextual connections between the critical texts of Toncho Zhechev and Krustyoy Kuyumdzhiev with interwar Bulgarian philosophers such as Spyridon Kazandzhiev and Yanko Yanev, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, with German intellectuals associated with the so called Conservative Revolution of the 1930s - Thomas Mann, Arthur Moeller van den Broek, Edgar Julius Jung, Ludwig Klages. The significance of the broad intertextual network in the study not only shows the Europeanness of Bulgarian socialist culture, but is also a prove of a majour textual mechanism - the turning to the past and its experience, even in periods bent on its erasure. The expansion of the intertextual network between critical texts and fiction, which, however, are also thoughtfully selected, reaches the

neglected novel by Vasil Popov, *The Time of the Hero* from 1968, and the essayistic, also not so popular text by T. Zhechev from 1983 *The History and Theories of a Pygmalion*.

It is not possible, for subjective reasons, to omit the contribution of the discussed work with its critical centering on the metatexts of Zhechev and Kuyumdzhiev. Both critics have been the subjects of my own study as key representatives of the "impressionist critique" that, in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, created a kind of "unfreezing" in official critical discourse. In the reviewed study, as Penchev's writes, they reached a "profoundly personalistic self-realization through the words" (p. 311). One more thing: the dissertation conceptualizes them as the most active "conservative revolutionaries," but specifies that they are not such all the time. It would be interesting see the arguments in support of this thesis as well, perhaps elsewhere, for the sake of balancing the subjective choices and objectivist officialdom of the two critics in scholarly life during the period under review.

As a separate contribution, which I would say without exaggeration is worth to be the theme of a separate postdoctoral thesis, I would highlight the analysis of the critical receptions of the writers Nikolai Haitov, Vasil Popov, Yordan Radichkov and Yordan Yovkov. It is the change in critical discourses for these authors that is obvious sign of difference in public perceptual horizons. In this case, they register the changing temporal patterns in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s, and in the case with Yovkov they show a cyclicity, returning to the 1930s and relevant to the late 1960s with the rediscovered notion of "classic" as the embodiment of a naturally holistic "timeless" value worldview.

Finally, I would like to note the roles of the three excursions in the work under discussion. The seeming deviations from the conceptual thread actually complement and enrich it. For me the strongest example in this respect is the last XIV chapter, "Eroticism under Socialism". According to B. Penchev, this taboo topic of metatextual socialist discourse, even after the "April Breeze," turns out to be so dangerous because it is irreducible to a common, social time. The author typologizes four "channels" through which eroticism enters contemporary Bulgarian literature - through the works of Emilian Stanev, Anton Donchev, Bogomil Raynov and Pavel Vezhinov. B. Penchev draws the accurate, ambivalent conclusion that "in the literature of socialist times the erotic appears as a by-product of the pursuit of some 'higher' ideological or philosophical task" (p. 301) - as the attainment of metaphysical truths or "spirituality" as such. This last example is evidence of B. Penchev's enduring and systematic ability to read the facts of our socialist culture in their complexity and ambiguity, which is precisely the kind of reading it still needs.

On the basis of the fulfilled requirements set out in the current Regulations on the conditions and procedure for the acquiring of scientific degrees and titles and taking into account the specifically pointed out academic merits of the research, I propose the esteemed jury to award the degree of Doctor of Science to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boyko Penchev.

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