

OPINION

for the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boyko Penchev

on the topic:

“Progressives and Conservatives.

Temporal Patterns in Bulgarian Literature from the Late 1940s to the 1970s”

for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Science"

in the professional field 2.1. "Philology"

(Bulgarian Literature. Contemporary Bulgarian Literature)

Reviewer: Prof. Dr. Habil. Ivan Stankov

The dissertation work of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boyko Penchev ranks among a rapidly growing type of studies in the last fifteen years, devoted to the literature of the Bulgarian socialist period. Together with the broad program of the New Bulgarian Studies Department at the New Bulgarian University "The Literature of the People's Republic of Bulgaria", along with several other monographs on the period, Boyko Penchev's work comes to show how untenable was the scholarly consensus established immediately after the changes of 1989 that the literature of the Iron Decade of the 1950s must be "forgotten". The dissertation confirms that the processes and phenomena of the period under study are as complex to decipher, systematise and make sense of as any other stage in the development of the national culture.

I am convinced that this will be the book by Boyko Penchev that will show to the literary community his research qualities to the fullest extent. Let me first highlight two more general features of the exposition. Firstly, the author's demonstrated ability to read closely and see the full picture. Among the philosophical, literary-historical, and literary-theoretical trajectories of thought, Boyko Penchev's interpretative and analytical skills shine equally. His approach is as if he holds a magnifying glass over characters and phrases of key importance to the topic of research. This applies not only to fictional texts but also to the process of making sense of the accumulation of metatexts by different authors. Penchev displays an almost criminological passion in discovering the specific ways different ideas have fluctuated between European, Russian, and Bulgarian theoretical thought.

Second, although selectivity and reduction of artistic material are inevitable in a research of this kind, the dissertation deals with a vast amount of concrete texts from artistic and critical practice without limitation of genre—from poetry, short and epic prose, heavy critical and literary-historical studies, to small but important articles from literary periodicals, frequently returning to journals and publications of the interwar period in Bulgaria and abroad. The aim of this strategy is not only to broaden the area of study but also to highlight the main ideas that reflect the conflict between the progressivist and conservative tendencies. Taking into account the over-ideologization of culture during the socialist decades, the dissertation necessarily pays attention to the political programmatic texts and the ideological documents with a specific orientation towards creative activity. But everything was done thoughtfully and in moderation. Although the title states a time range from the 1940s to the 1970s, the dissertation focuses mostly on the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s facing each other as being more clear-cut, more explicit, and more rewarding in terms of the issues discussed.

The dissertation also faces a happy challenge. Preoccupied with debating temporal patterns in different authors, texts, and decades, the dissertation itself constructs a temporal model for literary processuality itself. Although in the concluding section the author rejects any possible attempt to literalize, simplify, and universalize the progressivist-conservative model, such temptation will inevitably arise with every reading of the dissertation, and there is, in fact, nothing wrong with that if done with the necessary precaution. The work gives new aesthetic names to the two decades, linking them in a causal chain, corroborating them evidently with artistic and critical texts, and ultimately historicizing them into a vivid literary-historical picture that, in my humble opinion, would also fulfil very successfully purely didactic tasks in the university, and maybe even in the high school education. The two decades, so alienated from one another, are brought together in this work organically with the logic of the progressive-conservative construction.

In this dissertation, the fictional, critical and philosophical texts are organically integrated, complement each other, read off each other, enrich each other, create logical or unexpected contexts for each other, and in their totality build an intriguing, suspenseful and, let me admit, masterful literary-historical prose, through which the body of the national literary process of the 1950s and 1960s becomes visible. Turned against each other, the decades become much clearer. Works like this build on the self-knowledge of the Bulgarian

culture of the second half of the twentieth century and thus provide a better understanding of the cultural processes in the new century.

I'm glad to see the careful reading of the critical texts of Tsv. Stoyanov, T. Zhechev, Kr. Kuyumdzhiev, and St. Iliev, as well as a number of other literary critics of that time, in the labyrinths of research, and I highly appreciate the subtle tracing of their ideas, inspired either by Nietzsche through T. Mann or directly from Bakhtin and Soviet literary studies of those years. The "renaming" of "impressionist criticism" of the 1960s, whose previous designation was purely formalistic, shifts the emphasis to the content and ideas of "conservatism". The final notion of "autochthonism" brings additional important nuances to the understanding of the process. I am also very satisfied with the major role outlined by Assoc. Prof. Boiko Penchev for the writer Vasil Popov in the transformational processes of the 1960s. I'd like to see also Yordan Valchev with his collection of stories "We Were Born Dragons" as a topic of the research, but the inevitable incompleteness of the list of authors and works is stated clearly from the very beginning of the study.

I also admire the use of the theoretical toolkit that builds on the notions of "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation", developed by Koselleck, as well as the wonderful idea of the "spatialization" of the past in the conservative mindset as an attempt to circumvent and counter the overtemporalization of the 1950s progressivist framework. This vantage point determines the impetus for delving into the spatio-temporal characteristics of works, authors, and decades. Also, it conditions the successful cutbacks into the conservatism of the 1920s and 1930s in search of genealogical or typological similarities between the processes of these distant decades.

I have two questions for Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boyko Penchev, which are directly related to the problems discussed in the thesis. Alongside the problem of intellectualism in the poetry and prose of the 1960s, which is duly developed in the thesis, the question of artistic conventionality as an important characteristic of the artistic practice of the authors under discussion has been much discussed in operative criticism during this decade. As we know, the conventionality (or fictionality) of the work was the target of the orthodox defenders of ideology for a long time. My question is: how does the opposition between the "full-bloodedness" and "conventionality" of the characters relate to the oppositions outlined in the thesis?

And now for the second question. In what relation to the problems investigated in this thesis is the question of the liberation of characters from positive and negative schematization in the 1960s? In regard to Moravia's *Chocharka* Popov declares that the understanding of literature as a conflict between positive and negative characters is "primitive". In his writings and those of Radichkov in the 1960s, the habit of attributing "positive" and "negative" signs to the characters was overcome, and as far as these two writers are one of the main characters in the critical "plots" of the dissertation, maybe that problem should also be addressed.

In the study of Assoc. Prof. Boyko Penchev we see no cracks, no conceptual gaps, or internal contradictions. It displays all the positive qualities of its author: theoretical and literary-historical excellence, freedom and combinativeness in handling the material, depth of thought, academic wit.

I will vote with conviction for awarding to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Boyko Penchev the scientific title "Doctor of Sciences".

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