

OPINION

on the monographic study
**“Progressives and Conservatives. Temporal Patterns in Bulgarian Literature
From the Late 1940s to the 1970s”**,
by Assoc. Prof. **Boyko Penchev**, Dr
candidate for an academic position “Doctor of Sciences”
in the field of higher education 2.1. Philology (Bulgarian Literature. Contemporary Bulgarian
literature)
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1. *Frames and benchmarks.* – The proposed dissertation consists of 15 chapters, three of which are designated as excursus, i.e. private focuses on more generally posed questions in the previous chapters. Without being specifically marked, the first and the last of them fulfill the framing role of methodological-problematic introduction and concluding summary (although the work begins namely with an active, preteritorial rejection of such conventions).

Several tasks are announced in the opening chapter. The most important among them, along with what is nominally stated in the subtitle of the work, is rehabilitation of the social significance of literature. That is, its significance as a testimony of the historical existence of the social body in all its horizontal-vertical complexity of an organic people (“tribe”) and a modern, institutionally and ideologically formed nation. – It is precisely in the specified period that ideology is a special, fundamental factor.

In a thematic-problematic plan, the dissertation is involved in the increased interest in the social functioning of literature in the era of the so-called People’s Republic and its inevitable interactions with ideology. – But unlike many other studies of this kind, here it is not private cases of control that are interesting to the author, but the large scale of History: the residence of literature in different types of time (in the expression of A. Fol, to be quoted), the slipping away from the eschatological horizon of the linear teleologism inherent in the ideological narrative.

Bakhtin is chosen as a point of departure, although not exactly the Bakhtin who was so important to literary metalanguage in the 1960s and 70s. The *chronotope* is the key category for the study, understood as a point of encounter and confrontation. Here Bakhtin is refined through Kozelek’s conception of historical time as a dynamic tension between a “horizon of expectation” and a “field of experience.” The main rift of the era was constructed precisely through Kozelek – between the large-scale “horizon of expectation” *as pure time* in the literature of the 1950s and the subsequent reduction in the *spatial modus of experience*: the private “inner” experience, but also the collective one, precipitated in the “deep”, extra-historical ancestral memory to which literature turned in the 1960s, secretly suspending the progressiste ideological narrative for History.

Later, in the process of unfolding the plot, other theoretical benchmarks – Lukács, A. van der Broek, E. Jung, T. Mann – will be drawn to support the main research subject: the conservative spasm in the literature of the 1960s and 70s (defined as a specific “conservative revolution” in search of systemic similarities with Weimar Germany, 1919–33).

2. *Native, right and April.* – In the process of its unfolding, the work for a while combines the linear-chronological approach with the thematic-problematic one, following the transition from the 50s to all those subversive actions that will constitute its main subject from a moment later, when the first approach will be abandoned at the expense of the second.

In terms of genre, the interest is almost entirely directed to prose, and to "peasant" ("hollow") prose with roots deep in the collective memory: the most important processes and events radically changing the literary language take place here (while in its "April" neo-avant-garde, poetry, in general, parasitises on the temporal-ideological model inherited from the 1950s, complicating, overturning, travestying it, p. 63).

Having reached its real subject, the study for a long time abandons the temporal vector – the "horizon of expectation" to stop in the "field of experience", which always has its spatial determination (like a "spirit of the place"; or *hollowness*). The situation in Bulgarian fiction during the period of the 60s and 70s was thought out (and constructed!) externally, through a network of horizontal-vertical correlations. Through genealogical-typological sections in depth, to the right-wing "conservative revolution" in Germany and its reflections in the Bulgarian situation during the interwar period ("native and right," according to a classic formula of Ivan Elenkov).

All this is not new territory for Bulgarian humanitarian studies in recent decades; it has its accumulations in the face of a number of researchers – sociologists, historians, literary scholars. But B. Penchev takes his own, superior-synthesizing place in this experience through the scrupulous study/reconstruction of the seemingly paradoxical multiplication of this right-wing project in the literature of modern "April" Bulgaria (the "native–right–April" triad).

Insofar as this is a problem that I have also touched upon, I would add with regard to the German "right-wing project" of the 1930s that here the figure of the "second" Heidegger, as the higher philosophical abbreviation of the phenomenon, is strongest, central, in my opinion. Especially because he makes the direct connection with the emergence of modern ecological ideas in the 60s and 70s, which are the broadest background of the events in Bulgarian literature at that time, too. Boyko Penchev based his approximations on other, more private, though no less representative figures, mainly A. van der Broek, Lukács, and T. Mann. Through the latter one, Nietzsche will also be partially attracted – not without an "internal" reason, insofar as the both ones are not simply present actively, although not always clearly, in the argumentation of the Bulgarian "conservative revolution" in the 60s and 70s; there is also linguistic sympathy: the tendency towards essayism against the structuralist wave in Bulgarian literary studies during this period – a conflict that has more than just linguistic dimensions. (And this, it seems to me, is another – namely *linguistic* – possibility in the grand collision between modernity and counter-modernity.)

3. *The language and its metalanguages.* – The nominal subject of the study, as the title indicates, is Bulgarian literature. But Bulgarian literature is understood here in a broad sense – as a "naïve" artistic body, but not less – and even more in some sense – in its meta-linguistic self-awareness, too: literary meta-language as the most direct transmission between literature and "pure" ideology. – How, through this language, ideology, on the one hand, "domesticates" heterogeneous elements such as the primitive and the myth, and how, on the other hand, they are integrated into a central position, transsubstantiating *from within* the essence of its own recipient in a negative way.

The great achievement of this research is the precise restoration of the difficult way in which Bulgarian literature – in its capacity as a language articulating the inner life of a collective Self – creates its own metalanguage to describe/express a fractured, highly traumatic situation in the collective Bulgarian being in the boiling pot of modern History around the middle of the twentieth century.

The entire spectrum of the era's confronting metalanguages is covered. But the attention is not so much to the extreme, pole positions, but to the separation of semitones and nuances, to the fine oscillations in the articulation. The study builds and argues its theses by

scrupulously dis-layering the ideological discourse – from official party documents (an important component in the literary field, points of direct ideological sanction) to the slyly playing language of “high” publicism during the period (Tsv. Stoyanov), which undermines, explodes the language of the official ideology “from within,” without formally leaving its framework. The least interesting thing in this battle is the snarling of the orthodox ideologues – secondary figures in the plot, rather operetta than odious (Todor Pavlov, Kolevsky, Lyuben Georgiev, Al. Spiridonov, Ch. Dobrev, the inevitable Ivan Spasov) – anachronisms, overtaken at that time even of his own cause. The polyphony reigning at the opposite pole, all the clamor in the “modern” camp, is relevant; there the pot boils, there new things are born, including by melting old ones... This is where the deep rifts dissolve, here the real battles between “youngs” and “olds,” “archaists” and “innovators,” “classics” and “moderns,” “westerners” and “soilers,” “revolutionaries” and “progressives,” modernists and counter-modernists. This is where the *current* ideological sanction is at work, not opposite, not the primitive dogmatism of the trilobites of previous geological epochs. This is the place where some private critical dramas flare up, which have not escaped attention, such as that of Minko Nikolov, for example, who seems to change his glasses when he turns his gaze to the seething nearest to him, failing to notice the same phenomena that insightfully salutes in Western literature at the time.

This is the place where – slowly and difficulty – a radical change is being made in the language of literature and in literature itself as a language.

4. *In conclusions.* – So, a major process in Bulgarian literature was researched/constructed during this period. Namely, the difficult way in which the critical metalanguage (III level) assimilates the new literary realities (II), in itself an articulation of new social realities (I), of new thrillings and new dramas in the collective Bulgarian soul, for another (last) way lost between the ages.

In its concluding summary, the study re-enters the broad road of History to recapitulate a major turning point in literature – turning back, to the roots. But not as elementary, ignorant conservatism, but as serial (regenerating) immersion in “eternal,” suprahistorical values under the pressure of a totalizing “horizon of expectation,” promising a future that seems increasingly empty (p. 339). Transformation of historical teleologism into “eternity,” the complex entanglement of primitiveness and intellectualism, of modernity and counter-modernity.

In conclusion, I also, for my part, to state: before us is the most in-depth, broadly contextualizing and, at the same time, precise in its concrete analyses, study of this extremely important collision in modern Bulgarian literature in the 20th century. But also a study of the way in which the collective Bulgarian “soul” – In the face of literature, through it – deals with the ghosts of modernity.

The persuasive way in which the research plot is developed gives us reasons for unreserved support in the administrative horizon of the procedure. That is, the author, Assoc. Dr. Boyko Penchev, should be awarded the pleaded scientific degree “Doctor of Sciences.”

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