TSVETAN STOYANOV AND THE 1960s DISPUTE ABOUT THE 'SPIRIT OF THE PLACE'

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It would not be possible to provide proper historical perspective to the narrative of the People's Republic of Bulgaria's cultural paradigm without the 'micro-narratives' which, on one hand, caused the collapse of socialist realism dogmatics, and on the other, gave rise to novel 'highlights' that would, in the late 1980s, be even classified as the regime's 'achievements'.

One of those mid-1960s disputes would still linger for quite some time in the following decades – the dispute about the 'valley' (that is, the 'local') vs the 'global' within the Bulgarian context. This was a debate strikingly different from the Party-controlled discussions in the People's Republic of Bulgaria on the 'proletariat' and the 'revolutionary' vs the dismal bourgeois past. It was not a discussion hosted by the Party-controlled Writers' Union or the Communist Party Central Committee. It was, instead, a debate maintained within the most sophisticated group of intellectuals at the time (Tsvetan Stoyanov, Toncho Zhechev, Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev, Zdravko Petrov, etc.) and it was a debate indicative of the 1960s generation quest. A dozen years later that debate would lead to further developments, including the assumption that the national was construed as part of socialist realism. That novel trend achieved wide recognition when Lyudmila Zhivkova became a very influential opinion maker in the mid-1970s especially given the context of the celebrations of '1,300 years of Bulgaria'[1]. That trend became the new norm in all spheres of culture, including theatre.

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So what kind of debate was it as it went on without any sanction by the authorities? Following the 1956 thaw, the communist ideology messages began losing ground and the defenders of the 'national' (such as Georgi Dzhagarov) began to gain prominence, asking questions such as: 'who are we?', 'where are we?', 'what threatens our identity?'[2].

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1 A year-long series of events honouring the 1300th anniversary of the foundation of the Bulgarian state. – Editor's note.

2 Penchev, Boiko. Progresisti i konservatori. Sofiya, 2023, pp.164–227.

Literary critic Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev initiated the debate in his article *National Tradition and Innovation*[3], published in 1964 in Septemvri Magazine, vol. 11. According to another literary critic, Toncho Zhechev, Kuyumdzhiev raised the issue of the 'Bulgarian identity' in an 'extreme, poignant and critical way'. In his article Kuyumdzhiev stated: 'Artistic talent is not only national, it is even regional, connected to its 'own valley.''

Toncho Zhechev went on to elucidate on these propositions in his article *Ivo Andrić and the End of a Ghost* (1964)[4], further developing them in his paper *National Identity and Literary Development*, delivered at a Writers' Union theoretical conference at the end of 1965.[5] It seems (according to Antoaneta Voynikova's testimony) that Toncho Zhechev was this concept's principle writer because he discussed in length the 'valley thinking', the domineering 'local', which to him appeared to be what the 'savage mind' was for Claude Lévi-Strauss. Zdravko Petrov would join the debate more than once, as evident in his *Untimely Reflections*[6].

Literary critic and translator Tsvetan Stoyanov's response was his article *On 'The "Spirit of the Place"'* (1965).[7] The dispute was not an easy one – not just the one held with the die-hard dogmatists, but even the debate with like-minded people who had opted for the 'local' over the 'universal'. The dispute had also been preceded by Tsvetan Stoyanov's concept of 'world literature', which he had elaborated on in a number of articles in Narodna Kultura Newspaper, in

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3 Citation from: Kuyumdzhiev, Krastyo. Profili v cherno i bialo. Sofiya: Bulgarski pisatel, 1966, pp. 5–57.

4 Republished in: Zhechev, Toncho. Istoria i literature. Sofiya, 1982, pp. 349–362. The text about Ivo Andrić may have been read as a report earlier and it may have preceded Kuyumdzhiev's huge study.

5 A report further developed in an extensive article published in: Istoria i literatura, pp. 416–468.

6 Petrov, Zdravko. Lichnosti i sadbi. Sofiya, 1970, 307–308. 'One of our writers (Tsvetan Stoyanov? – author's note) irresponsibly refers to everything related to the technical civilization and its contradictions as populist romance. It seems that this writer does not take into account the imminent threat posed on art, as in certain situations art is beginning to lose its local colour... International influences, especially following models typical of weary cultures, have always been detrimental... Otherwise, this country will end up being some spiritual Switzerland of reserved aloofness and blathering in several European languages.'

7 Stoyanov, Tsvetan. Sachinenia v dva toma. Tom 1. Sofiya, 1988, pp. 188–193.

an attempt to outline the 'cultural task' of the following decades – mapping the literary works whose absence in Bulgarian would have been detrimental to our culture (from Antiquity, through Romanticism to contemporary times)[8].

That discussion took a number of unexpected turns; it would either get like-minded people together or it would cause a rift among them until 'dogmatists' intervened to unsurprisingly rephrase the discussion and put an end to it in their own way. That is why it makes sense – even today – to come to terms with both arguments.

TONCHO ZHECHEV'S 'VALLEY THESIS' AND KRASTYO KUYUMDZHIEV'S 'PRAISE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE'

It is worth mentioning that Kuyumdzhiev's article began with an 'ideological overture', referencing a Todor Zhivkov's[9] speech set to defame stakeholders in culture and denounce 'certain critics' who claimed that 'national distinctions are about to disappear to give way to a single world culture'. In that same speech Zhivkov personally mentioned Tsvetan Stoyanov as one of those 'critics', which led to Stoyanov's becoming an 'ideological heavy fire' target, with the secret police 'paying special attention' (that is, they tapped his phone and went on to put him in compromising situations to deliberately undermine him). On the other hand, Zhivkov's criticism openly situated Tsvetan Stoyanov as the 'leader of modernism'. Zhivkov also insisted that the clash between the national and the universal would be resolved not by applying administrative measures, but by following 'the comprehensive development of all national communist cultures, of their ever greater cohesion and becoming as one.' The term 'national communist cultures' was certainly an oxymoron.

But let's return to Kuyumdzhiev and his conviction that 'culture can be created only on the foundation of national tradition, within the framework of the national language, self-awareness, etc.' Moreover, he argued that 'to imagine that the national mindset and psychology are not something stable, permanent and extremely conservative means that we have no idea what we are dealing with.'[10]

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8 Stoyanov, Tsvetan. Izostavame v izdavaneto na svetovnata klasika. – In: Op. cit., pp. 246–263.

9 Todor Zhivkov was first secretary of the ruling Bulgarian Communist Party's Central Committee (1954–89), premier of Bulgaria (1962–1971) and chairman of the state council of the country (1971–89). – Editor's note.

10 Kuyumdzhiev, Krastyo. Op. cit., p. 11.

To make his point, Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev used the 'Brahmin's parable' in his huge article and he claimed that it all started with the well-known wisdom that we should always take the good wherever found, but without losing our identity. That's why, he went on arguing, there was nothing in Hristo Botev's[11] songs that didn't come from the romance of freedom fighters, from folk life and ideas that was not fully Bulgarian.

Kuyumdzhiev exemplified his ideas with the story about the Brahmin who let himself sail the seas, losing his place in his caste as a result. And that's because 'the thin web of convention, prejudice and backward tradition that holds together the traditional Brahmin would not stand a gust of fresh air.'[12] That was Kuyumdzhiev's persistent analogy – he claimed that the Brahmin's fate would not be of any interest to us unless we asked ourselves what would happen to Bulgarian poetry and our national art in general if it were to become internationalised. Then it would for sure lose its national identity, being severed from the roots of its existence, losing touch with its tradition, since our national identity was the result of that tradition. The question was to what extent the Bulgarian (just like the Brahmin) could resist the international gust of air?

It came as a surprise that his thesis was embraced by dogmatists such as Ivan Burin and even by Georgi Karaslavov. It was gradually gaining ground, bound to become the latest 'ideological norm'. Kuyumdzhiev himself shared the story that once Ivan Burin had heard that some young poets were eager to succumb to 'existentialism' and 'intellectualism', he angrily started to shout, quoting a Bulgarian folk song: 'We do not give Yana away to Turkish faith!' There was also a dispute about poetry and free verse, yet, as Kuyumdzhiev wrote: 'Ivan Burin vaguely felt that we were rather presumptuously abandoning a tradition without being prepared for something newer. And he was right about it. Tradition is made up of ancient lineage, the noble blood of art; these are the conventions created, the rites sanctified by time, the stories handed down from one generation to another'.[13]

It was quite a paradox to observe 'young conservatives' join the 'dogmatists' camp', which perhaps should not surprise us today.

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11 Hristo Botev (1848–1876) was a Bulgarian revolutionary and poet, a key figure in the Bulgarian National Revival. – Editor's note.

12 Kuyumdzhiev, Krastyo. Op. cit., p. 13.

13 Kuyumdzhiev, Krastyo. Op. cit., p. 20.

Toncho Zhechev presented his arguments in a far more subtle manner, starting with Ivo Andrić. He believed that Andrić had poked fun at Visegrad's provincial chronicler, teaching him a 'lesson in being European and a lesson in loyalty to tradition' (the novel in question was *The Bridge on the Drina*)[14]. And he went on claiming that was the reason why Andrić could be our role model – 'equally alien to both nationalistic fanatism and national nihilism'. And the most curious thing – Zhechev saw a striking resemblance between Andrić and the Bulgarian writer Lyuben Karavelov, not only because Karavelov contributed to the formation of Serbian realistic fiction while he was living in Serbia. Zhechev went even further to argue that Karavelov had even more advantages over Andrić. 'For the international reader, Karavelov paints such a vivid and detailed portrait of the Bulgarian and the Bulgarians, yet Andrić fails to do that for the Bosnians. What helps Karavelov is the primordial power of language, the pristine topics and characters, the wild freshness of patriarchal morals.'[15] In short, Zhechev argued that writers who were creatively the happiest wrote not in terms of the highly critical, but whose spontaneous and organic creative consciousness remained rather unaffected. That is, Hristo Botev, Ivan Vazov, Petko Slaveikov, Elin Pelin. Zhechev argued that the rest of our classic writers ranked 'secondary'.

Thus, according to Toncho Zhechev's proposition, **the best examples of Bulgarian literature are related to the short story, the memoir and the feuilleton** – with concrete observation and immediate response (the other forms, **including drama**, came 'secondary' and remained within the scope of ideas of the enlightenment in the history of our culture').

In conclusion, Toncho Zhechev saw the earliest version of our interaction with other cultures and 'our wars with ghosts' (culture wars) in Karavelov's *Bulgarians of Old Time* and he chose two meaningful quotes:

Uncle Liben: the expression of the caricature-Slavophile point of view: 'the Muscovites, whatever they take hold of, they wouldn't let go. And the English are such fools as no other. An Englishman comes into the shop to buy bread and cheese and you cannot understand a single word he says. He tells you one thing and you give him soothing else instead! And do you know that most English people are also mute just like the Germans!'.

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[14] Zhechev, Toncho. Istoria i literature., Sofiya, 1982, p. 349.

[15] Zhechev, Toncho. Ibidem, p. 352.

And the 'modern' caricature-European point of view of Hadji Gencho's: 'They are – he says – enlightened and educated people; they also speak Turkish, and that's why you must give them only what is new – let it be Turkish, let it be Greek, let it be Gypsy, as long as it is new'.[16]

In other words, the 'new' is not worth it since it is bad. One of the 'ghosts of Bulgarian culture'.

TSVETAN STOYANOV'S ARGUMENTATION

The gist of it was initially outlined in his article 'Bulgarian, truly Bulgarian' (1963). Many things are worth mentioning, including Rabindranath Tagore's motto: 'People who need to get excited when they talk about their country, they love their excitement more than their country.'[17]

Hardly can we imagine a more provocative beginning.

What came next was: 'what is the national, what do we mean by the national?' – a question asked also as a result of the dispute over poetry and free verse. What is the national and how does it relate to contemporary life? Then he made the inevitable 'anti-Stalin' reference and his thought 'national in form, socialist in content', calling it 'cult thinking', which killed it all with insulting clarity.

And then Tsvetan Stoyanov struck his first blow: 'there are still authors such as Nikolay Staykov – and maybe others, maybe better writers – who continue to search for the national using hackneyed language. For them, 'being Bulgarian' is an embellishment – 'heavy eyebrows', 'heavy golden wheat', 'skies like exuberant lilac', 'crickets with gadulkas', etc.[18]

That is why Stoyanov made it clear that he preferred Konstantin Pavlov's work, Stefan Tsanev's and Lubomir Levchev's, because he believed they tried to express homeland in general, homeland through today's homeland. 'For me, this is Bulgarian, truly Bulgarian,' Tsvetan Stoyanov wrote. 'Achieving it is very difficult, it requires trial and error with no guarantees.' And he asked in turn: 'Whitman, Eluard, Brecht, Neruda, Hikmet, Quasimodo, are they foreign? And what principle do you use to separate them? – apart from left-wing ideology, of course.'[19]

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16 Zhechev, Toncho. Op. cit., pp. 361–362.

17 Stoyanov, Tsvetan. Sachinenia v dva toma. Tom 1. Sofiya, 1988, p. 180.

18 Ibidem, p. 181.

19 Ibidem, p. 185.

He further elaborated on his ideas in his article *On 'The Spirit of the Place'* (1965)[20]. Should Bulgarian culture remain a 'dance valley' – a hotchpotch of folk dancing and national costumes – a kind of cultural Balkantourist? Or – just like prominent writers from the region – Bulgarian culture may be strong enough to share 'its achievements' to the world, yet still within the 'spirit of the place'? So that it could follow 'another path, a more difficult one, where the regional remains invisible and provides local colour and a vibe, without ever being the subject of art. It is most likely that more than one of our literary generations will fail on that path.'[21]

That's the reason why Stoyanov redefined the concept of 'regionality'. For him, Aleko Konstantinov[22] was easy to understand even 'without his Svishtov spiritual aristocracy' (Toncho Zhechev's words in the Literary Front Newspaper).

Tsvetan Stoyanov insisted that Svishtov was never Aleko's one and only sacred topic. He went even further, claiming that 'Aleko Konstanitinov is the most non-regional writer', adding that Aleko would not in the least resemble the sophisticated Brahmin mentioned by Kuyumdzhiev.

'Aleko is the road taken, the Bulgarian literature's traveller. No one has ever travelled any further from their 'place'. Why would Aleko make Uncle Ganyo travel the world otherwise? He maintained that it had been Aleko who had indeed provided Bulgarian culture with the broadest geographical coordinates, 'his choice of destinations the wildest'. Aleko sent the Bulgarian to Prague, Vienna, Petersburg and Niagara Falls[23].

Hence, Tsvetan Stoyanov argued that being 'Bulgarian' was being 'regional', though not in terms of relief or climate, but to the extent it had absorbed the historical. He went even further to point out that even Toncho Zhechev was not able to comprehend 'the valley as a monad'. On the contrary, he added, the valley was what 'people and humanity' were made up of[24]. Then he shared a number of

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20 Ibidem, pp. 188–193.

21 Ibidem, p. 188.

22 Aleko Konstantinov (1863–1897) was a Bulgarian writer and satirist, best known for his character Uncle Ganyo, one of the most popular characters in Bulgarian fiction, as well as for his travel book 'To Chicago and Back' describing his visit to the United States in order to see the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. He was born in the Danube River town of Svishtov. – Editor's note.

23 Stoyanov, Tsvetan. Ibidem, 189.

24 Ibidem, 189.

examples: Alberto Moravia was 'built of Roman bricks', Steinbeck was inseparable from California, but was Kafka just the Prague ghetto? Was Kukush formative for Smirnensky? Thomas Mann went back to Lübeck, but what was the 'regional' for Brecht? Proust was a Parisian author. What about Saint-Exupéry? Could we say that the cockpit was his 'region'? Who is the 'genius of the place' in Stendhal's work? And which part of Shakespeare explains Stratford-upon-Avon to us?

Even then, in the 1960s, Tsvetan Stoyanov made a point that all disputes about what constituted being Bulgarian should be about something huge, convoluted and complicated which we ultimately descended from. Sad and pathetic, that's how Stoyanov called claims that we could not astound Europe with innovation, or claims that ideas and forms came only from Europe, and all we could do was just bring some Balkan-Bulgarian flavour to it. Because such claims would really turn us into a 'cultural Balkantourist'. And culture was not a circus show, no one there really wanted to astound and amaze anyone.

Tsvetan Stoyanov argued that both directions were truly Bulgarian and we should not refute one for the sake of the other. That is the reason why this debate is still relevant today.

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