

# BULGARIAN LITERATURE IN SEARCH OF THE MAN OF MODERN TIMES

## THE PAINTER-CREATOR IN TWO HISTORICAL NOVELS

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*This immaculate temple of the Holy Christ's hierarch Nicholas and of the Christ's holy and most glorious martyr Panteleimon was erected from the ground and created with the funds, care and great love of Kaloyan, Sebastokrator, cousin of the Tsar, grandson of Saint Stephen, King of, and was decorated under the Bulgarian Empire under the pious and devout Tsar Constantine Asen in the summer of 1258-59.*

For most of the contemporary Bulgarian readers, these words of praise are yet another evidence of the lasting interest of the writer Fani Popova-Mutafova in history, which is characteristic, in fact, of a number of other authors from the period after 1944. For literary historians, however, it is rather an artistic indication of the conceptual encounter of philosophy, history and literature, found in the heyday of the Bulgarian historical novel. Through the 'animation of history' a literary genre poses to its readers then and now the question of man as creator, and with it the limits of human will.

In fact, in order to achieve clarity on the given topic, we will have to take our observations through a fairly broad temporal context and beyond the strict chronological boundaries of the period - returning to the frescoes of the Boyana Church, its structure and architecture. Two traditions meet here - the old painting tradition, created probably in the era of the First Bulgarian Kingdom, and the tradition of the so-called Palaeologan Renaissance. These two traditions are mixed to harmonize in inseparable unison. Before we get acquainted with those traditions, however, we must explain the peculiarities of the Byzantine painting style to which it belongs. Taking a peek at what has already been done in this area gives rise to respect for such an undertaking.

To this day, it remains inexplicable exactly how, in the difficult economic and military-political situation of the late Byzantine Empire, a new peak of culture and art was reached. At first glance, unexpected, but it turns out to be quite common. A similar dissonance between political decline and cultural prosperity can be felt in Medieval Bulgaria during the 13th-14th centuries. The most remarkable is the heyday of the fine arts, in which the new 'renaissance' beginning is most often seen. The Byzantine style was enriched with new features, and the main tendencies in its development were expressed in the strengthening of the secular elements, the gradual withdrawal from the monumentalism of the previous epochs, and the intensified individualization.

Among the distinctive features of the individual works of the Palaeologan Renaissance we must note the greater mobility in the depiction of human figures, the desire to emphasize their state of mind. The figures' gestures become free, their clothes change and become more detailed. At the same time, the plots in the iconography become more complicated, scenes from the apocryphal literature and Christianized ancient themes enter; and the landscapes are no longer just a background, instead, they suggest certain emotions and feelings. The tones are soft and light (Palaeologan Renaissance... 2014). The interest in man also gave impetus to

the growing practice of painting portraits of rulers, high boyars, ktitors [patrons] and other high officials.

It is well known that the Palaeologan Renaissance had a strong influence on Bulgarian Christian art and painting. Traces of its influence, researchers have found in a large number of the otherwise few preserved church complexes from this period - the churches in Veliko Tarnovo, the Zemen Monastery, the Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo, the church in Boyana (Angelov 2009).

### ***The Boyana Church and its frescoes***

Since the discovery of the frescoes in the small church of the old village of Boyana at the foot of Vitoshka, at the end of the 19th century, their great importance was realized and their study began. In the specialized literature the question of the connection of the frescoes with the Bulgarian cultural heritage is not a controversial one: the Bulgarian inscriptions, the ktitor inscription, the portraits of Sebastokrator Kaloyan and his wife, of the Bulgarian Tsar Constantine Asen Tikh and Tsaritsa Irina Laskarina, the images of the most revered Bulgarian saints - all this points to their inseparable connection with the rule of the Asen dynasty. But who is the painter who created them, where did he come from and where did he master his art?

The theme of the unknown master of frescoes in Boyana is often depicted in Bulgarian novels. The novels of F. Popova-Mutafova and Stoyan Zagorchinov are emblematic of this direction and this is the reason why they are the topic of the current talk, which through the eyes of *Posledniyat Asenovets. Boyanskiyat maystor* [The Last of the Asen Dynasty. The Master from Boyana] and *Praznik v Boyana* [Celebration in Boyana] tries to take a peek into the image of the painter in the Middle Ages, to mark the zones of harmony, the territories of proximity and distance of the narrative technique of two types of textuality from the mid-twentieth century.

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The texts of Fani Popova-Mutafova go a long way until they reach their readers (Popova-Mutafova 2009: 5-7). In 1943 Popova-Mutafova wrote her novel *Posledniyat Asenovets. Boyanskiyat maystor* [The Last of the Asen Dynasty. The Master from Boyana]. The author is meticulously dedicated in terms of historical objectivity and cannot take liberties in recreating the era and in the depiction of her characters. *Praznik v Boyana* [Celebration in Boyana] was published seven years later by Stoyan Zagorchinov. The novel is the final creative act of St. Zagorchinov's long-term interest in the frescoes of the Boyana Church and their unknown creator. Peter Dinekov, one of the first researchers on the work of Stoyan Zagorchinov, notes the particularly skillful historical accuracy in the fictional vision of his 'romanologia' [novelology]: "*Zagorchinov has researched the era excellently, he has traced religious unrest and rebellious Bulgarians and has managed to penetrate not only the high, but also the low layers of society*" (Dinekov 1932: 11).

In this sense, the proximity between Fani Popova-Mutafova and Stoyan Zagorchinov in a purely creative aspect is natural - they operate with the same plot-building components: "*factual events from Bulgarian history from the second half of the 13th century; a character who has to paint the newly built Boyana monastery; the painter, who strives to transcend tradition and to make the images in the frescoes unique.*" In both novels, the mission of the painter-creator is given from up above; therefore, it should not be used self-servingly and arbitrarily. The artist must infuse his art with a higher meaning. Painters are characters that belong to the metaphorical road - the road as a creative path that builds the artist.

However, the imagery is significantly different. While Fani Popova-Mutafova focuses mostly on palace life of the Bulgarian Middle Ages, St. Zagorchinov focuses on the life of the common people, giving a broader picture of people's life during the era, by depicting the

lower strata of society, the heretical movements and spiritual impulses of the times. Starting from this difference, the two novels actually outline the different types of concepts for this historical period in Bulgarian literature.

The painter in *Posledniyat Asenovets. Boyanskiyat maystor* [The Last of the Asen Dynasty. The Master from Boyana] is presented with scanty details as “*Master Dobril*” from Dragizhevo, who was the first student of Master Dragan, “*to whom he foretold a glorious future*” (Popova-Mutafova 2009: 16), who is “*the young artist with long curly hair and dark pupils that blackened like a field three times plowed. Many beckoning smiles weaved an enchanted circle around the handsome young man[...]*” (Popova-Mutafova 2009: 17). The very first chapter of *Posledniyat Asenovets. Boyanskiyat maystor* introduces the main character, Dobril, as well as all of the characters in the novel. The plot is lively, with a number of intriguing situations and deviations. It is widely known that the underaged heir of Tsar Ivan Asen II, Tsar Kaliman ruled with a regent’s council headed by Sebastokrator Alexander, who “*was ready day and night to give his life for him [...]*” (Popova-Mutafova 2009: 27). Sebastokrator Alexander managed to rule faithfully Bulgaria, but the insidious actions of the Byzantine princess Irina removed him from power.

Master Dobril’s path to painting the frescoes in Boyana is long and painful, and his image is strewn with romantic and enlightenment features. He is also a man with unceasing spiritual potential, who faces a turning point in his life and all of this gradually turns him into man of the modern time. Because the joys of life Dobril experiences, in a purely human aspect, are instantaneous and when they do come, they are quickly banished, abducted and irretrievably lost.

Fani Popova-Mutafova seeks to portray the not always visible forces driving the spiritual growth of the painter. To achieve this, she sends her hero to the unknown lands of the Tatars, to the hostile Nicaea, to the “*Queen of Cities*”, and to a dungeon. In days of loneliness, of severe moral vicissitudes, the artist constantly looks into his soul, tries to understand himself in order to understand others, and gradually develops his own style of canonical representation. It was in the dungeon when the symbiosis between the image of the Holy Mother and Sebastokrator Desislava crystallized, and behind Kaloyan’s image the image of Christ Chalkites from the bronze door of the Chalke Palace, began to appear. It was the road that created the painter Dobril - the power of talent prevails over the suffering and the unfulfilled longing, and through these features Dobril bears the symbolism of the modern enduring and resilient man.

*New blood rushed into his veins: thirsty, young. Visions surrounded him: huge angel wings fluttered in snowy silver radiance, soft colours blended in wondrous combinations, lutes softly played a melodic song. Dobril was happy. It was as if he had been born again. He could create again.* (Popova-Mutafova 2009: 136).

At the same time Fani Popova continues the development of the plot in Boyana. The historical figures, with whom the novel is densely populated, are polar opposites - patriots and traitors. We are amazed by the in-depth research made by the author, through which we are immersed in the spirit of the times, the way of life, the social and the political struggles of the era. The last pages of the novel are full of tension and marked by destiny. Kaliman, Alexander and Kaloyan - the last of the Asen Dynasty die, but Dobril is alive and has fulfilled his work - with the completion of the Boyana fresco, he becomes the main character of the novel. The author chose to end her story in this way - with the church built and the icons painted. The image of Kalyan is immortalized with the iconography of the Boyana master: “*there, through the power of inspiration and the mastery of the hand, the ktitors were to be remembered for all times[...]*” (Popova-Mutafova 2009: 223).

The focal point in *Praznik v Boyana* [Celebration in Boyana] is undoubtedly the genius of the young painter Ilia. Even in the first chapters of the novel his image is fully complete, stemming from his life's purpose - the painting of the Boyana Church. The novel begins with the classic plot line - by presenting us with an ordinary day in the Middle Ages. The language and the setting are stylized in the spirit of the historical time - 1295. To be remembered for future generations, Kaloyan, the Sebastokrator of Sredets, built a new church in the vicinity of Boyana, whose frescoes are to be painted. The painter's virtues amount to something more important than their sum - to the universal conviction that Ilia is the most suitable for the forthcoming work. This is the reason why Ilia's self-assessment is not intrusive and irritating - what he himself says is already known and it is what all would say about him: "[...] *[he] could do what was assigned to him better than anyone else*" (Zagorchinov 2006: 25).

In the construction of the protagonist, as in *Posledniyat Asenovets. Boyanskiyat maystor* [The Last of the Asen Dynasty. The Master from Boyana], two narrative perspectives are clearly observed: everyday-biographical and historical-evaluative. Unlike Fani Popova-Mutafova, St. Zagorchinov is more circumstantial, more liberated in his imagination, thus the biographical perspective prevails. But biographical perspective is bound with the historical perspective, and in the relationship between the two, the artistic interpretation of the Boyana Master is born; the novel emarks on two different paths to its reader. One layer alludes to iconic images and plots, to biblical notions of holiness); in it usually everything changes its meaning and form, the icons become 'secular' and 'human'; the painter's audacity to take on someone else's task and faith in his own creative power somehow naturally leads to the notions of the modern man of the times. The second layer is the layer of medieval everyday life, where everything is planned and clear, but at the same time - depressing and uniform.

The novel continues with a flashback sequence, which shows *the path* the young man takes in order to become master Ilia - his work with the monks and the first steps in the craft with master Dragan. Chapters 17 and 18 "Testing the Hand and the Heart" and "At Theohar's on Bread and Water" respectively, for the first time reveal the audacity of the painter Ilia in the public square of little Boyana. The faces in the frescoes are full of excitement (not only for the protagonist) dedicated to testing the new trends created by the bold hand of the painter. The interference of the Sebastokrator Desislava justifies the new trends' right to exist and at the same time unlocks a new style of painting. It is not by chance that Zagorchinov makes Theohar say what has long been in the hearts of the people of Boyana and what was unspoken so far. The prison warder is a traditional figure of fear in the domestic life and at the same time he is also the symbol of indisputable and bitter truth, devoid of prejudice: "*The painters from Sredets envy you and are sorry that you will take money from the Sevastokrator ... The Sevastokrator himself sees that you made nothing so that you can lie here[...]*" (Zagorchinov 2006: 150). After trying everything to paint the ktitor's inscriptions, the painter Kalistrat realizes his endeavor was destined to fail from the beginning and goes back to Sredets, where supposedly he is to be treated.

Perhaps contrary to expectations, but in fact the ideas of the Boyana ruler overlap with those of the young painter. This observation is confirmed after a close examination of Kaloyan's character. From the very beginning, he makes his expectations clear: "*There is only one thing I want from him: when it comes time to put some holy men on the wall, let him know that I do not like to see neither hermits nor monks. I would rather prefer those who fought with a sword and a spear in their hands like warriors, because I am a soldier myself!*" (Zagorchinov 2006: 23). And further: "*Both in real life and here on the walls of this temple, I want to see bright and intelligent eyes. I want to see the faces of real men.*" (Zagorchinov 2006: 23).

According to Eastern Orthodox tradition, the life of the icon painter must follow the same rules as the life of the priest. Painters are forbidden to paint secular scenes because they are not allowed to abuse their divine ability to bring life to the image (Miteva 2001: 14). The words of the hermit Gabriel are emblematic in this direction: “*The earth is a valley of sorrow, the sky is a halo. Do not confuse the earthly with the heavenly, do not liken the people to saints, nor the saints - to people!*” (Zagorchinov 2006: 180).

Already proclaimed a master, Ilia is forgiven by his own master, by the Sebastokrator and the boyars in Sredets. The novel ends with the completion of the frescoes in which Master Ilia incorporates images of the ordinary people around him, of the locals, of the people who live during that time in the spiritual world of the saints, in the iconostasis of the church:

*Instead of dividing one from the other, he united them in the same images, animated and stirred by human feelings and emotions common to all. Nothing earthly could embitter any one - so it seemed to Ilia; and he was not afraid to give the faces of the saints the same expressions that the men from Boyana had. His faith was sincere and came straight from the heart, and so was the faith of the men who lived in Boyana themselves.* (Zagorchinov 2006: 173)

In the last pages of the novel Stoyan Zagorchinov writes about the possibility that an icon can change human behavior. For instance, the case of Stanyo the helper, who becomes the inspiration for the image of the executioner from the scene “The Massacre of the Innocents at Andriake”. After this, something changes in him. “*Something changed in me when I saw Ilia’s painting in the church, that executioner who looks like me[...]*” (Zagorchinov 2006: 215).

In both novels we come across characters who, although in a qualitatively different way and provoked by different circumstances, endure a number of trials to reach the freedom of artistic expression that allows them to create the frescoes of the Boyana Church. Ilia makes an unrivaled debut, and master Dobril’s painting style is infused with the experience and wisdom gathered for more than a decade. Despite this difference, the two characters are placed in a similar situation - for the first time ever they create iconography outside the established canon. Through this context, the interest that both novels have (in the use of the gift of iconography and modernity) can be explained; because lasting universal human deeds are important for history.

*Kingdoms rose and fell. Names gleamed in the light of glory and sank into the dust of oblivion. Only the Divine inspiration remained forever which turned the mortal into immortality...* (Kasabova 2000: 71).

In the novels *Posledniyat Asenovets. Boyanskiyat maystor* [*The Last of the Asen Dynasty. The Master from Boyana*] and *Praznik v Boyana* [*Celebration in Boyana*] the image of the painter grows from a fictional character into a figure symbolic of the transition between two epochs in Bulgarian history. The tasks that the mysterious Boyana Master sets and fulfills are the tasks of the Bulgarian journey from the Middle Ages to modernity. It is this interpretation that makes the film *Boyanskiyat maystor* [Boyana Master] created in 1981, based on the novel by Stoyan Zagorchinov, into one of the most beloved Bulgarian historical films.

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