

# BULGARIAN LITERATURE IN SEARCH OF THE MAN OF MODERN TIMES

## NON-CANONICAL CHARMS. THE POETS OF PLOVDIV FROM THE LAST DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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We do not really know this town, before we know its poets. Verse is the only mediator which translates and renders into words the first indescribable sensations that come from ascending high above, from not being able to comprehend the river, from the stupefaction we feel in the face of the past and time in general. The special spiritual atmosphere of Plovdiv is palpable without knowing anything about it, without suspecting the reasons behind it, even before we have heard the names that are part of the building blocks that make up the city. Meandering about and taking the city in, here, where *where the days are long and the life is short*, we begin to form that special feeling towards the cosmos of the city. We lie to ourselves that no one else can appreciate the façades, the streets, the *wrecks of life* the way that we do. An entertaining thought which turns everything around us into the most captivating place we could ever be.

In today's urbanised world most people believe that it is entirely in their power to change their city. The modern person adapts their environment to themselves, which could be perfectly fine. There's even a movement following this idea, called Placemaking – which is basically 'making' the place, interfering with the urban environment aesthetically, creatively, even in smaller ways that apply to ordinary everyday matters. People today are becoming ever more certain that the place belongs to them and it has to correspond to their lifestyle, that the city needs to provide the necessary conditions, so that they can reach their goals, goals set by that same world. People are active actors, while the city is tired and constant. The place is the backdrop which requires an upgrade.

At the same time a city seems to be spiritually resistant to any attempts of interference with its original rhythm of life. Plovdiv is unchanged by time. It is as though it has preserved some primordial existential states but at the same time the city does not raise walls, not in the least, in fact, it builds bridges between epochs and cultures. To reach these conclusions, however, first and foremost we need to have a look around the streets of Plovdiv, where poetry is already expecting our gaze.

**Beauty is always here, it is only the eyes that are late.**

How are we born in Plovdiv? Perhaps this is the more important question – how, not when. Time here is of the essence and we might be referring to it more often than necessary. We are born in this city in the midst of the remains of civilisations past, in the midst of the ruins of empires that had ruled the world once. We trip over the past and walk over the years. Every day we pass by what once was, and once has melted into history. And we make our first steps in the backdrop of the past and ever since we are children this quaint quality of time is in us, giving out a knock every now and again from the inside, whispering about some old things.

*The past does not exist!... And in us uncontrollable matter  
Finds a way and incessantly buffets the shores.*

*Brute force is what is needed, to pick  
Out of so many past lives  
The only one  
My own.<sup>1</sup>*

The great Plovdiv poet Yordan Velchev sighs in his poem “Roman Stadium,” part of his debut poetry collection in 1979, and confirms the insignificance that we feel in this city, bashing against the past that is constantly there, surrounding us. Being does not begin with the birth of and it definitely does not end with the death of the lyrical hero. We are constantly forced to prove the importance of our own significance in the context of the infinite time in which we live. This brings to the fore one of the most tragic points that had been torturing the poets of Plovdiv for decades whenever they ventured to explain the world around them. In other of his poetic texts Yordan Velchev is *delighted* by all the things that the ordinary person does not notice in the urban environment. For Velchev these things are a very significant existential detail and a way into comprehending the world and time that are located between a couple of hills and a river. The river (“that does not care how deep it is; where all of our provincial happiness lies, as people who are born to remain on her shores”), the façades (“their shared feeling of misunderstood stoics; their faces, hacked away by the axes of the winds, see everything”), the chimneys (“old-timer witnesses of entire households and their descendants, of births and deaths, where again this autumn the fire had started here and there to build the stairs of its hypothetical ascension”). But the existential gaze is not always marked by a tragical note:

*At times I am all-consumed by joy  
That resembles thought. I grow numb  
From everything around me  
That radiates thoughtful gleams.  
What is thinking? Is it not the interaction  
In which our soul collects  
Trepidations in the form of a city  
And a plain? And nothing else...*

Ivan Teofilov is among the first names that come to mind when we talk about the poets of Plovdiv. Making his debut in 1963 with the collection of poems called *The sky and all stars*, and followed by *Amphitheatre* (1968) and *A city on top of cities* (1976), Ivan Teofilov takes his rightful place as a poet in whose work Plovdiv is not simply the backdrop for the suffering of the lyrical hero, Plovdiv is a way to look at the world, a way of understanding things, even a protagonist in its own right. The poet was a stranger to the literary norm back then, the so-called socialist realism. Towards the end of the 50’s and throughout the 60’s of the XX-th century in literature as well as in poetry some cracks and underwater currents began to form in the ‘edifice’ of socialist realism. Authors rejected the regime in a few different ways: through style, linguistic choices, use of charged double meaning on social topics (*Poems* (1965) by Konstantin Pavlov) and by the far more categorical refusal of taking any part in the socialist reality and the obsession with an independent and universal individuality, which were the foundation of the debut collection of poems by Ivan Teofilov – *The sky and all stars* (1963). As expected, any creative endeavour that did not comply with the norms of socialist realism, received some form of punishment. Whether that was to be torn to shreds and rejected by the contemporary critics; the manuscript would be published or duly forgotten in the desk drawer of some state publishing

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<sup>1</sup> All excerpts from poems have been translated as such for the purposes of this essay.

house, preventing the author from making a living and making them think twice about writing anything that would never see the light of day ever again.

Even in the early poetry of Ivan Teofilov we find one of the favourite topics of the poets of Plovdiv – time. Inside the borders of this antique and Mediterranean place, where Teofilov's work was born, the feel of time is different. As Lora Shumkova writes “in Filibe<sup>2</sup> time flows a bit differently. In this city, where every other stone is a historical landmark, it feels as though history had never happened. It never happens.” It is precisely this time ‘that never happens’ that is the key to decoding Teofilov's poetry. Time and the city, located on the crossroads between the East and the West – in an original multi-layered cultural and spiritual environment, have a special relationship in the collection of poems from the 60's. “But this is what time is like here./ And I love this sweet time, which sounds nothing like lightning/ and there's nowhere to get it.” Having layered in the memory of the past all human experience and tension, time is now fully harmonized. The past and the city are symbolically identically loaded images – both express the limits of content and meanings that begin to appear to the lyrical hero in the small details of the city and everyday life. Three arcs. A tiny thing. The whole world./ Flavia. Ulpia. Trimontium. Such names!/. . . / Hills. Three arcs. A tiny thing. The whole world./ A book of knowledge. A centre of storms./ A key. A foundation./ A storehouse. Wrecks of life,/ bound to another life, unique and constant./ A life of stone, of wind, of roses, of vines,/ . . . / of grains of barley, of stone and wind. . . (“Hills”) Through this blur of the unique and constant mirage Ivan Teofilov's poetry is born.

In the 60's the literary life of Plovdiv benefited from some consequences of the decentralisation of culture. The decade is often associated with the establishment of the state publishing house Hristo G. Danov, which plays a major role in the development of the authors and editors of Plovdiv. In the 70's and 80's it gained popularity due to some very brave publishing practices. It was in the 60's that the literary almanac, the reputable forerunner about culture, literature and opinion journalism *Trakia*, appeared. The Society of Plovdiv Writers as well as the establishment of philological studies at the Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv were also catalysts for the formation of a bright literary community. Part of this inertia were the literary clubs and seminars that schooled a lot of names that made their mark in the 70's, 80's, and 90's of the XX-th century. Against this backdrop a whole generation of modern poets was formed in Plovdiv, some of whom are Peter Anastasov, Ivan Vylev, Vasil Urumov, Kirkor Papazyan, Alexander Banderov, Nikolai Zayakov, Ivan Nikolov.

As a city which fostered great creative energy and taking into account all cultural factors just listed, in the 60's, 70's, 80's, and 90's Plovdiv helped shape some similar but oftentimes quite different generations of poets. Haphazardly, some ran in the same circles, others worked together or frequented the same clubs and societies, yet there were also those who did not seem to share any of the characteristics of their contemporaries. If we have a closer look at their writing, we shall see strikingly different and original ways of perceiving the world, stylistic devices, and poetic figures. We could not begin to grasp the vast diversity of themes, motifs, and imagery that were employed in the Plovdiv lyric poetry.

This label should be taken as provisional. One prominent characteristic of socialist realism was the localization of authors who were deemed inconvenient to the regime by region. These authors were forced to choose a different line of work, such as the cinema, television, the theatre, or were labeled as a poet of Plovdiv, even though their work made them both national and international poets. The government did this in an attempt to minimize the scale of the authors' impact by setting boundaries around their work and limiting it to Plovdiv. This, however, was not without certain benefits. It actually made possible the formation of local

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<sup>2</sup> from Turkish, after Philip II of Macedon conquered the city in the 4th century BCE, meaning "Philip's Town".  
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cultural centres, which incited major creative changes in literary life, as well as in theatre, music, and painting.

In the 70's, Georgi Raychevski, Ivan Nikolov, and Bozhana Apostolova made a name for themselves. In the same decade (1979) Dobromir Tonev wrote his debut "Beleg ot podkova"<sup>3</sup>, for which he was awarded the National Debut Prize. In the 80's Plovdiv boasted all the necessary conditions for a thriving literary atmosphere: community reading rooms, museums, a university, a reputable publishing house, media coverage in the face of magazines, newspapers, radio, and television. A few of the notable debuts of the 80's belong to Veselin Sariiev, Sofia Nestorova, Ivan Strandzhev, Nedyalko Slavov, Alexander Sekulov and Anton Baev. The decade was marked by very important poetic works by Todor Chonov as well.

Dobromir Tonev is one of the names without which Bulgarian literature could not be fully understood. His persona left a brightly glowing ember in the memory of every one who knew him. Born in Yambol, he created his wide literary world in Plovdiv. Dobromir Tonev was among those that influenced the Bulgarian poetic generation of the 80's the most. The 'seventh hill' was created by the poet Alexander Sekulov and the artist Atanas Hranov as a symbol of ascension. It represents verse in stone as part of the cobblestone square near the Roman stadium. It is there we read the estimable lines by Dobromir Tonev:

*Why am I surprised, I know not –  
Nothing more than death.  
I will be one with the linden scent forever,  
I will go up, then I will go down with the rain.*

*I will go up, then I will go down with the rain,  
I will clothe and feed the tree.  
Nothing more than death.  
Nothing more than life.*

The coming apart of the existential condition – one of the most important themes of Bulgarian lyric poetry in the 90's of the XX-th century, is very much part of Dobromir Tonev's work. One of his most famous pieces – the poem "Blue equilibrium" – is a kind of requiem for a long forgotten, more beautiful version of the self. This version, even if it is in the past, buried under many layers of past, will continue to be beckoned to help the ever more tragic current self. The duality is a consequence of the game time plays and its coming together and its balance between the two is only possible when the future and past do not matter anymore – "Give me your hand and for as long as I am – I will walk you back."

For the living – the memory of the city's short  
Like an archeologist's shovel.  
As if the dead will do our work for us.  
As if to be alive is not history.

In the very end of the 80's, Alexander Sekulov made his debut with his collection of poems. Barely 24 years old, he walked on the literary stage with the poem "Plovdiv," which starts like this:

*In this city everything has already come to pass.*

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<sup>3</sup> Literal translation 'Horseshoe trace'. TN

*At night the dead scream from mosques and churches  
Then wake up with red eyes from all their staring,  
So very lonely and forever dead.*

The final two lines of the poem build the tragic conception of Plovdiv as a place at a crossroads of not only cultures and epochs, but also of the inner human consciousness. A city with hidden meanings, which at the same time draws us in and traps us in its timelessness, but also sometimes makes us run, when running away is actually impossible.

*And I reach the man,  
Bound to go dumb, to leave,  
In this city – impossible to live in,  
In this city of coming back.*

#### **References:**

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