

# BULGARIAN LITERATURE IN SEARCH OF THE MAN OF MODERN TIMES

## THE WHITE SPRING OF A UTOPIA

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After the communist regime came to power in 1944, Bulgaria began to work hard to create a new 'modern socialist society', built by the new modern socialist man. This modernization is characterized mainly by forced collectivization, collective agriculture and rapid industrialisation. As a result of the changes in politics, abrupt changes appeared in the economy, culture, society and in the needs of this society. These changes, through which the rapid development of the People's Republic of Bulgaria began, led to the need to restructure the country's population, to intensive and chaotic urbanization, and consequently to an increase in the population of all Bulgarian cities, as well as to the construction of entirely new ones.

In such a socio-political context, the project for the city - *Dimitrovgrad* - of socialist youth appears. The future citizens (residents of the villages of Rakovski, Mariyno and Chernokonevo and the new workers who moved during the construction of the Vulkan factory) themselves choose their city to be named after the 'leader' Georgi Dimitrov - one of the founders of socialism in Bulgaria. In fact, the new city was planned to be an industrial hub in southern Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Communist Party launched intensive propaganda in the media, with the help of literature and journalism. As the construction of the city began, the brigadiers [volunteer workers] were already aware that they were building the 'new city', for the 'new socialist man', in the 'new free times'. This is how some of the first poems dedicated to Dimitrovgrad appeared. They do not carry the height of poetic language and therefore have no aesthetic value, but they contain the pathos with which the 'city of dreams' was being thought and built in the late 1940s:

*Dimitrovgrad Brigadier's Song*  
*Along both banks of Maritsa river*  
*in a straight line brigadiers walk,*  
*a young woman - a pretty brigadier*  
*sings a song about Dimitrovgrad:*

*Wherever you stop and look,*  
*here we build, tier after tier! -*  
*Along Maritza a new city grows*  
*the pride of every brigadier!*

...

*With cheerful Dimitrovgrad heroism,*  
*here and throughout the country,*  
*we are building... building socialism*  
*with a youthful gaze in future bounty...*

(Konyarov: Archive)

From Vaptsarov onwards, the Bulgarian poetic language uses the images of the factory, machines and motors as stable metaphors of the new world. In the poetry inspired by and dedicated to Dimitrovgrad, these images will be heavily used and will gradually become obligatory clichés through which the image puzzle of the utopian city is assembled. As a result, many poems with interconnected poetics, intertwining motifs (the construction of the factory and the city; the pride of work; work and the satisfaction of serving the party), similar images (skeletons, factories, blocks, morning, sun, etc.), identical or similar subject matter (foremen, shock-workers, mechanics, etc.). Like every myth, this one also deals with specific characters and the chronotope, the center of which is the topos of Dimitrovgrad, and respectively there is a very frequent metaphorical coincidence of the images of the morning and the new day. In journalism, on the other hand, the metaphor of the five-year plan as a unit of time is dominant (“the five-year plan for four years”, “with a new profession in the next five-year”, etc.). This also helps to create the notion of a ‘new time’ that is passing in a ‘new way’. The overall ideology seeks to build this notion of newness. It is as if the whole world has been transformed and needs new ways of measuring time and new spaces for the new citizens to inhabit. In literature, these citizens are most often stereotypical images of cheerful workers (the engine-driver; the technician; the turner; the miner; the mechanic) who are building a sort of future, a new world in which hard work and peace will rule hand in hand.

In this atmosphere of renewal, dynamism and enthusiasm, the young Penyo Penev arrives as a brigadier in Dimitrovgrad. He enters the constructions with a notebook, a pen and the full self-awareness of a poet, although he has published only a few works thus far. From the very first moment he arrived in Dimitrovgrad he began to write poems, filled with the exuberant voice of the young builders, with the pathos of the socialist man and with the satisfaction of the workers’ labour. In May 1949, at one of the rallies in which he participated, he was among the officials and had the honor of reciting “his first poem, written in Dimitrovgrad 4000” (Georgiev 1990: 69):

*Expand,*  
*square!*  
*Stand back,*  
*buildings!*  
*Hey,*  
*skies, –*  
*expand*  
*your chest further!*  
*The first brigadier shift is passing –*  
*4000*  
*determined youth!*  
*4000*  
*young Guardsmen are marching –*  
*persistent, eager,*  
*cheerful builders*  
*of Dimitrovgrad!*

In this poem, it is as if the whole world is called to see the coming laborer brigadiers working for the sake of the new world. After the rally, the poem 4000 was published in the newspaper *Mlada Gvardia* [Young Guard] (issue of May 4, 1949) and was reprinted in one of

the labor collections, published in the same year. The high pathos and the specific rhythm, reminiscent of a recitative, make the works of P. Penev are easy to remember and they become emblematic for manifestations and parades. From this moment on his mature and productive poetic years began. This would be the origin of the thesis that Dimitrovgrad produced the poet Penyo Penev. The ode *Za komunizma* [On Communism] was published in the most influential literary newspaper of its time - the weekly *Literaturen Front* [Literary Front].

In the autumn of 1956, the poet's first collection of poems was published: *Dobro utro, hora!* [Good morning, people!]. In his book *Poetat s vatenkata* [Poet With the Quilted Workcoat], Lyuben Georgiev tells the story that accompanies its publication: "*It was published in 1500 copies [...] it was published in the same number of copies in which all sorts of unremarkable little books with poetizations of the meadows and sunsets over Koprivshitsa were published. And this was unfair*" (Georgiev 1990: 314). The collection of poems fully meets the requirements of the high literature of its time. The lyrical persona in it praises Dimitrovgrad and totalitarian construction with the clear idea that he himself is part of the creation of a new history. The poetic expression has already overcome the imitative models of the Soviet poet Mayakovsky and the Bulgarian Nikola Vaptsarov - and has become innovative and individual. In the opening poem of the collection, the lyrical speaker already declares the basis from which he creates - as a part of the people, as a builder and only then as a poet. The image of the creating poet, of the poet building a new existence from its absolute beginning, returns to the genesis of the world, creating the allusion to the Absolute creator. In the poem, however, his word is not as valuable as the new real world he builds:

### ***ONE OF THE PEOPLE I AM***

*I dream  
not of glory  
and easy ways,  
But a quilted jacket  
for winter days.  
In glory eternal  
forever  
stand  
Everything build  
here  
by my hand!<sup>1</sup>*

With this collection of poems, Penyo Penev not only fulfills his duty as a socialist poet, but also sets completely new poetic possibilities for the "aesthetics of the bright communist future". His admirers are among the builders themselves, among the young enthusiastic brigadiers, and many of them know his major works by heart. As a believer in the bright future, the poet poeticizes the world around him as he dreams it, regardless of what happens around him. Critics, however, do not take too kindly to him, but neither do they seem to attack him too much. It is more accurate to say that the critics do not particularly notice him. This stone cold lack of understanding lays the foundation for the process in which P. Penev will gradually replace the rose-tinted glasses of the proletarian poet with a lyrical

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<sup>1</sup> The poems of Penyo Penev cited here are taken from the website *Slovoto* (Penev 2020). This poem is translated by Peter Tempest in *Anthology of Bulgarian Poetry* (Tempest 1980).

endoscope with which he will analyse social reality. The sincere youthful pathos with which the poet constructed his early works is greatly diminished. The eager for equality and justice figure, who accepts the communist ideal as his inner creed, begins to see the rotten cracks in the construction of socialist reality. Satirical works appear, elegiac tones begin to sound in his poems, and the motif of inner-intimate experiences becomes more frequent.

All this tension, however, turned out to be a driving force for new poetic dimensions in his work. Penyo Penev replaced the grand, triumphant tone with a more minor and melancholic poetry, which proved to be much more successful. The great disillusionment with a false ideal gave birth to wonderful poems, which, however, turned out to be too alien and completely out of place in the context of socialist realism. Emblematic in this respect are the verse “Each has his own path”. Particularly vivid is the absolute reversal of the worldview of the lyrical persona in the poem *A Tiny Kitchen In Blue Dusk*:

A tiny kitchen in blue dusk half-begun  
A white curtain the window spans  
Behind it – tiny bottles of glass  
and a penicillin prescription half-done  
A little boy in the cradle gasps –  
My feverish two-week old son...

The world is still unknown to him,  
But in his first week already  
This tiny, sickly little baby  
Knew aches, and famine, and diseases grim  
From the cradle, unsteady  
his young life by prescription begins...

How sad and stormy is the world!  
How terrible, at a crossroads curled  
By prescription to be living your life!

Will it help him recover today  
Suffer through, subdue the pain  
Will the cradle tomorrow still sway  
Will it...?<sup>2</sup>

The cheerful, noisy ambience of the construction site is replaced by the impoverished, intimate space of the home, and the proud workers who plan for the next five years - with a sick child whose survival is uncertain. The most baffling aspect of this poem is that it is included in the collection *Kogato se nalivaha osnovite* [When the Foundations Were Poured]. That is why, although removed in tone and expression from the poet’s earliest works, *A Tiny Kitchen In Blue Dusk* can also be seen as a kind of continuation of the brigade lyrics. In this cycle, however, the foundations of the new world are not being built in equality, happiness and virtue, but at the cost of hardship, poverty and innocent sacrifice, at the cost of individual human existence.

Almost a year after the release of *Dobro utro, hora!* [Good morning, people!] the Young Writer's Office organized a “Discussion on the Poetry of the Young”, in which Penyo

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by Velian Pandeliev from the BlazingBulgaria blog

<<https://blazingbulgaria.wordpress.com/2012/09/25/penyo-penev-poet-profile/#more-1115>>.

Penev expressed a desire to read his own paper. This report would prove fatal to his career as a socialist poet. The poet provokes the audience by clearly stating his disagreement with the falsity and ideological control imposed on poetry in the country. In 2000, in his study *Za edin nesastoyal se esteticheski skandal* [On a Failed Aesthetic Scandal], Georgi Yanev revealed the whole situation around this participation of Penyo Penev (Yanev 2000). Yanev carefully compares the poet's report from the 1950s with the article *Poeziyata na mladite* [The Poetry of the Young] by the Bulgarian avantgardist Geo Milev from the 1920s. The resemblance is not just obvious. Geo Milev's article was deliberately rewritten by Penyo Penev in order to discredit contemporary young poets in an 'expressionist' way. Even more shocking is the poem recited by P. Penev, seamlessly compiled by five separate works by five different young authors present in the hall. With this particular act P. Penev issues a verdict on the poetry of his contemporaries: it is repetitive, impersonal, unexperienced poetry, ie. bad poetry and even non-poetry. Having once begun to provoke his audience, the poet goes to the extreme, ending his statement with the assertion that poets cannot write because they are left hungry.

After the discussion, Penyo Penev became marginalized. He was exiled to Tutrakan to publish the widely circulated newspaper *Dobrudzhanska дума* [Dobrudzha word]. In it he published some of the works that reflected the dramatic circumstances of his personal life. These are works in which a strong individualism, a sense of misunderstanding and rejection would emerge, and high levels of tragedy would find poetic expression. These are the poems from the cycle *Vseki svoya pateka si ima* [Everyone has their own path], poems that are completely unnecessary for socialist literature. For writing and publishing them he needed to give explanations. This furthered his exclusion from literary circles. He is increasingly refused publication, deliberately delayed in the publication of his second book, and more and more attempts are made to put him on the 'right track'.

In the summer of 1958 he was sent for treatment to a psycho-neurological clinic, from where, with much effort and solicitation, he was moved to the former royal palace in Borovets. The so-called vacation was in fact a forced cure for the poet's unrelenting melancholy, because of which his friends were so deeply worried about him taking his own life. Most often in memoirs Penev's negative moods are spoken of as a disease from which the Union of Bulgarian Writers tries to cure him, cutting him off from addictions such as cigarettes and alcohol and keeping him away from his beloved Dimitrovgrad. By doing so, the 'responsible' persons in the Union rather try to punish him for his willfulness in writing the cycle *Vseki svoya pateka si ima* [Everyone has their own path] and his speech in the "DiscusThis did not inhibit his desire to write; on the contrary, it was during this period that he produced his extremely powerful poem, *Dni na proverka* [Days of Inspection], but it too was neglected by official literary authorities and remained disseminated only by himself. The publishing houses shun any author who deviates from the tenets of socialist realism. Penyo Penev's personal and financial problems are growing: "*The expectations of the young but sufficiently popular and recognized poet are not justified. Probably he felt used and undeservedly neglected [...] He ended his life, he was tired of being "homeless, unemployed, unloved". End of story. The legend comes next.*" (Angelova 2001: 101).

Weeks after the poet's death, the poem *Dni na proverka* [Days of Inspection] was published. For it and for the collection of *Stihotvorenia* [Poems] he received posthumously the highest literary award of socialist Bulgaria - Dimitrov Prize, but only three years after his death. The proposal came from M. Ivanov and Iv. Rusev and was supported by dozens of reviews from all over the country. How did this award come about?!

Many of the poet's contemporaries understood his suicide as a 'political protest', so the regime tried to erase the memory of him. The poet is barely talked about in the cultural circles, and at first glance, the excitement surrounding his suicide quickly subsides. Only the

local newspaper *Dimitrovgradska Pravda* [Dimitrovgrad Justice] dedicated a special edition to him, and in the 1960s his second book was published. Indeed, he was highly esteemed in his lifetime by the public, who began to look to him more and more after his death. The poem *Dni na proverka* [Days of Inspection] was received with unexpectedly high interest, and his previous works seemed to be rediscovered. Faced with the force of growing interest, the authorities had no choice but to harness the talent by ritually worshipping it. Penyo Penev's death provides the party with a tremendous opportunity to modify and repurpose his image according to its needs - using the same algorithm with which the authorities created the mythical Dimitrovgrad, just as authoritarian communism operates in any situation of ideological difference.

Penyo Penev's works began to be republished more frequently, but his poems from the Dimitrovgrad period were the most popular. Critics label him 'the poet with the quilted workcoat', 'the stoker-intellectual', 'the herald of the epoch' not because this version of the lyrical self pervades his entire body of work, but because the socialist reality needs precisely such an author. The press all over the country explodes with publications about Penyo Penev. There are numerous memoirs, poems dedicated to the poet, biographical and critical articles. However, the materials do not represent anything new or different from his life and work. On the contrary, they are completely identical in their meaning, ideas and information. Regardless of which newspaper, which author, and which year the article appeared, it always reiterated two main points - the poet's life, devoted to the construction and building of the new time, and his verse, which poeticized the brigadiers and their work. The booming voice that hailed the urbanisation of Bulgaria, elevated the first socialist city into a cult, and energised the crowds at the festive parades - it was this voice that would define Penyo Penev for decades to come. These socio-political circumstances create the extremely persistent image of P. Penev as "the herald of the epoch". This is also stated in the final sentence of his dossier at the Union of Bulgarian Writers: "His entire body of work is linked to our socialist construction" (Doynov 2009: 213). From this point on, the myth of Penyo Penev would prove irrevocably linked to the myth of Dimitrovgrad, even when it was not the topos of the experiences in his poetry.

For 50 years, every spring in the beginning of May, the national "Dimitrovgrad Days of Poetry" are held, which are also connected with the personality of the author. However, all this commemoration revives Penyo Penev mainly in his role of the "the poet with the quilted workcoat", who wove the construction of Dimitrovgrad into his songs. Those first poems, full of exultation and daydreams, seem to erase the voluminous tradition of brigadier's poems that preceded him chronologically as an author, and at the same time they place in the background all those verses in which the poet confesses his inner soul and specifies the problems of the newly emerging world. To this day, and probably it will always be so, when speaking of brigadier lyrics, we will first point to the brilliant recitative of Penyo Penev, who elevated the biggest industrial project of the Communist Party - the city of Dimitrovgrad.

It was not until the 1990s that critics would first look in depth at the cycle *Vseki svoya pateka si ima* [Everyone has their own path] and the poem *Dni na proverka* [Days of Inspection]. The satire would never be highlighted because of its focus on topics currently unfamiliar, but which directly discredits the status quo of ideology. And the intimate poetry of P. Penev seems doomed to remain eternally marginal, only as a background for bringing out biographical notes about the poet's life. Very often it is in these works that the keys to an adequate and complete interpretation of the author lie. They could tell us about the springtime utopia of a whole generation of young Bulgarians and its painful disintegration.

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