

# UTOPIAN BULGARIAS: LITERATURE PROJECTS AND POLITICS

## PENCHO SLAVEYKOV. THE ISLAND AS AN ABSENT STATE

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Pencho Slaveykov was born in the town of Tryavna in 1866. He was part of the bright and multi-child family of Irina and Petko Slaveykov. His interest in literature was related precisely to the personality of the father. Thanks to his rich work, trips, translations Pencho Slaveykov was formed as an erudite person. What physically distinguished Pencho from his other peers was his early tragic clash with fate. The notable 1884 left a lasting imprint for the rest of his life. He himself noted the freezing of the Maritsa River made him a poet (see also Kirova 2018: 49).

In a series of difficult years related to the disease, Pencho Slaveykov often traveled for treatment abroad. During this time, he read many foreign authors, and this helped not only his development, but also his mental struggle with obstacles.

In 1892, when he was studying philosophy in Leipzig, he set before himself the task of expanding his worldview and therefore attended selected classes. Through them, he gained more knowledge of aesthetics, became very interested in German literature and poets he started translating. He is mainly influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, Heinrich Heine, Arthur Schopenhauer, Johan Goethe, Henrik Ibsen.

Pencho Slaveykov played an important role in the development of modernist Bulgarian literature. His work varied, but as a writer he was often misunderstood by readers and critics. Nevertheless, he did not give up because he strived to achieve perfection. He repeatedly identified himself as a high priest and a messiah in literature.

As a member of the Misal (Thought) circle of literature followers, he became a symbol of early Bulgarian modernism. His anthology "On the Island of the Blessed" (1910) was radically new to the Bulgarian literature, the anthology being a very interesting literary project: mystification of an entire national literature.

Pencho Slaveykov seems to paint the Bulgarian reality in an indirect way. The book presents nineteen poets heteronyms of the author himself (Ivo Dolia, Dore Gruda), of people close to him (Silva Mara, Stamen Rosita, Boyko Razdiala, Borre Vihor) or of authors he was in conflict with (Velko Meruda, Neno Vecher). The places they originate from were represented by the toponyms invented by the author (Artagna, Oveilves, Antwart), and the space they inhabit is limited in cultural institutions. The book combines the model of anthology with the principle of mystification. On the one hand, there is clearly an attempt at auto-anthology with a series of selected works by Slaveykov himself attributed to non-existent authors. To the poems in each of them he adds fictional biographies, referring to specific Bulgarian ways of living. Already in the foreword, it becomes clear Pencho Slaveykov's intention is to present himself as a foreigner, acting as a translator/interpreter to poets who live on the Isle of Blessed. By means of irony, he shows his dissatisfaction with literature in his days, as it seems to be slow in growth; dissatisfaction with the fact he printed another anthology in 1904, accepted and evaluated abroad, while it remained unnoticed in Bulgaria. As an "*interpreter*," Slaveykov created his own mysterious labyrinth only the blessed would pass through and reveal. Mystification is exactly that – a game of cover. That's why the identity game is at the heart of anthology.

The cult of eternal, and immortality in art dominate in Pencho Slaveykov's works (Kirova 2018: 78). It is in his work the mythologema about the Isle of Blessed – occurring as of ancient times – is present. Starting with the Sumerio-Acadian myth of the flood and the character Ziusudra, we go through Homer's "Odyssey," and it comes down to warriors like Achilles and King Arthur (Nedelchev 1987: 35-36). The fictional Isle of Blessed presents a utopian place where writers and artists bliss in the atmosphere of idyllic nature. It's a place where culture doesn't thrive.

With sociological precision and with its inherent spirit, the translator characterizes the current reality by way too lowering labels for island institutions. In it, we meet descriptions of the Society against media (newspapers at that time), founded by Chevdar Podrumche; The University of Anwart, where sages "*dry plums on the moonlight*" (Slaveykov 1958: 220); The literary society – "*a menagerie for legal and philological animals and the only suckers on the Isle of Blessed*" (Ibid., p. 226); The central state meteorological station in Artagna, etc. We must also not forget the blank figure of publicity. Parody gestures are a blow against undifferentiated culture. The figure of the teacher is representative of such a culture, at least according to Kitan Dozhd: "*The teacher is a Bookworm following the book only, a co-operative farmer, a socialist, a dodret...*" (Ibid., 52) Teaching not only reflects the state's authority, nurturing belonging to society; it also encompasses the almost fully readable audience. Thus, cultural institutions seem marginally absent on the Isle of Blessed. Moreover, the absence of the state itself is evident.

The only cultural center that stands outside this parodial order is the theater. Slaveykov "*sees theatre as a mediator of the transformation of the people into a nation*" (Danova 2016: 183). He wants to rename it National and give the state the financial responsibility to it. Thus, the theater will become a well-organized institution other than the accidental existence of the Display Stage from the Bulgarian National Revival period.

"On the Isle of Blessed" can be considered as an artistic realization of the literary platform of the Misal circle where its important center is precisely the Europeanisation of Bulgarian literature. Despite the persisting insistence of the Misal Circle authors of literature as an art should be separated from life, Slaveykov saw its emancipation through its inseparable relationship with it.

The only two actual figures in the anthology are Ivan Vazov and Pencho Slaveykov himself (Danova 2016: 166). The two authors had a long-running conflict. The core of their clash was the opposition between "*young*" and "*old*," namely the Misal Circle against Vazov. The participants in the Misal Circle did not recognize him as a folk poet, as they did not accept the domestic realism he kept using. As modernists, their task was to change Bulgarian literature. There are numerous written attacks between the two sides, from articles and individual works to the creation of mystifications and harsh statements.

To Pencho Slaveykov, anthology is a way to express his dissatisfaction with the status of the state and the culture he resides in, but also an attempt to put himself at the center of a national literature. His constant hypostasis is the creator/author, although he changes his masks with every heteronym. Mystification could not function as a critique of culture without attaching the narrative to realities of modernity.

In this sense, "On the Isle of Blessed" is an experimental book soaked in self-irony. The author, cocky at the center of imagined national literature, demonstrated his explicit dissatisfaction with its condition. Modern culture is a task of the present. Thus, this book, written at the end of Slaveykov's life, with an ingesting for Bulgarian literature joyfulness, bliss and joking, may actually be a sad-wise mapping of an absent state.

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