

UTOPIAN BULGARIAS: LITERARY PROJECTS AND POLITICS

AVANT-GARDE AND ANARCHISM IN BULGARIA IN THE 1920s.

PART ONE. GEO MILEV AND THE PLAMAK JOURNAL

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I will call the Plamak (Flame) journal the "troll"¹ in the publicity science in the XX century in Bulgaria. There are reasons for that and we are going to discuss them in this discourse, but the main thing we need to know about the journal is that for its short life of one year it provoked such a public interest some of its issues were completely confiscated, it itself was banned for issuing, and its editor – Geo Milev – was sentenced to “one year in prison and a fine amounting BGN 20,000”. (Yanev 2005: 153). A verdict that turned out to be far more disastrous, but let us start from the beginning.

Geo Milev, the editor of the journal, was one of the most significant Bulgarian poets of the 1920s. He was known for standing up for his aesthetic and civil positions and his uncompromising attitude towards the examples/models of Bulgarian as well as world literature. The criticism made him a left-wing poet because of his political views and was canonized "as a senior Bulgarian writer and cultural and ideological figure" by the socialist regime (Nankov 2005).

As a poet, he is known to the students with the Septemvri poem – the educational example of expressionist poetry, to those interested in literature – with his uncompleted poem "Hell", inspired by the work of the same name by Dante Alighieri, and to the deeper readers – with "The Cruel Ring" (the poet's first published collection of poems) as one of many occasions for cultural controversy about modern poetry, further also moved to the pages of the Plamak".

The poetic nature of Geo Milev was only complemented by his even more controversial role as a literary critic and publisher. Brought up from an early age in the printing craft by the respected bookseller and publisher Milyu Kasabov, Geo Milev found ways throughout his life to increase his language skills (he was fluent in English, German and French) as well as his literary viewpoint. Even in moments of dreadful danger he read and worked tirelessly on translations and critical articles.

During the First World War (1916) Geo Milev was enlisted in the army near Dojran and was appointed as an interpreter because of his excellent knowledge of several languages. This was one of the reasons why, after being fatally wounded in the head by an enemy projectile, he was rescued and treated in a German field hospital – in his jacket pocket, they found the book "German Poets" (Yanev 2005: 106-113) by another Bulgarian poet, connoisseur of German culture, Pencho Slaveykov. It is also interesting to note: using his military salaries and the financial support of his father, Geo Milev began the publication of the journal "Vezni" ("Scales") – an important fact because of the aesthetic request he gave in the public space – to publish avant-garde authors (Yanev 2005:113)

Geo Milev's troubles with the authorities came when, in 1924, he began publishing the Plamak journal. It was published in the period 15 Jan 1924 – 11 Jan 1925 in Sofia, and the journal really managed to challenge the society's foundations and norms, as he gave the following request as early as its agenda: „*Plamak will be primarily a journal of criticism, and criticism will not be limited to purely artistic issues but spread also to all significant phenomena of public life.*“ (Plamak 1924)

This definition became the brainchild of all the controversies surrounding the journal, eventually identified as dangerous to the development of society and required its suspension.

¹ In the sense of modern trolling in the net. Geo Milev's (and company's) borderline behavior, often went further over into anonymous texts in the journal, aimed to challenge institutions in such a way they were the ones going over their powers.

'Plamak' totally denied literary tradition in every way possible.

The selection of critical articles followed Geo Milev's unique approach – everything had to be elaborated to perfection. In the issues we observe a systematicity unknown to the publicity science in Bulgaria during these years (even for "Misal" – the journal committed to the autonomy of literature). "Plamak" was issued regularly, even in the moments of printing delays and despite the complex elements for workmanship, each issue followed a specific theme – issue 2 of 15 Feb 1924 was issued in honor of Lenin's death and accompanied by a two-color portrait of him (a feature too expensive for those years). By the way, Geo Milev published the journal using the highest possible printing materials and had numerous color images in most issues. In issue 4, released on Apr 25, we observe texts (literature, translated, and critical) dedicated in one form or another to Jesus Christ. As we can guess, the choice of theme here was not random – it was consistent with the Christian holiday of Easter. But whatever was published in the Plamak Journal, it had a clear function – to provide readers with information, fiction and arguments (literary and social criticism) to support the inseparable relationship between art and life. This distinctive feature made the journal not only left oriented, because at this time there was another left media. It made it entirely political, subject to a single point of view. Unlike the other journal published by Geo Milev – "Vezni", there was no place here for "Vazdishki" ("Sighs") (by Ivan Mirchev), but for "Trud" ("Labour", by Ivan Bunin) and "Vik za pravda" ("Cry for Righteousness", by Lady Wilde). The titles show a clear desire to model poetry in the service of living life.

'Plamak' unequivocally attacked all functioning forms of authority

Masked behind the annotation a "monthly periodical for art and culture", the journal went against the state, the Church and the intelligentsia. Such resistance to the three pillars of statehood carried the nature of an anarchist rebellion.

There is also the infamous but anonymous article "Light shone in the dark", condemning in general the poet's silence before the people's tragedy, and the reason for writing the article are the cruel suppresses of the September uprising.

The patience of the institutions was over and the snare was tightened for the journal after the articles "Police Criticism", "State and Church" and "Theatrical Attempts" were printed, as those found a place in not anyone, but in the dreadful for Geo Milev issue #7-8 from November 1924, where the Septemvri poem was also published. The issue was confiscated and Geo Milev's lawsuits as publisher of the journal were launched.

The governing power has no interest in showing mercy because of the apparent rebellion and disregard for the authorities. Neither did the Bulgarian Orthodox Church – because of the unceremonious questioning of all its participation in public affairs: the not without interest Macedonian liberation case (a political issue, even today), the personal attack on the Bishop of Vidin Neophyte, not to mention the accusation the church was an *"assisting institute of the state"*. Against the background of all aforesaid, the critical report "Theatrical Attempts" or the poem "Septemvri" looked pale on the occasion of concern. But they just looked so. Everyone familiar with Geo Milev's ideas knew: to Milev, "the poet acquires his true vocation: to be first and foremost and only Man". A man in the midst of a people." "Septemvri", besides being a purely political act, is de facto Milev's renounce from the mutual poetic silence. Such a role is seen in "Theatrical Attempts", where Vladimir Vasilev as director of the National Theatre was accused of the most serious intellectual crime – according to Geo Milev: *"Mr. Director feels the calling time placed on him; he must give the people plays that bring them away from the dreadful reality, bring them into the world of "beauty", where one's soul can forget the horror of their reality, where consciousness falls asleep and does not hear the battle calls of time"*. (Milev 1924: 251)

"Plamak" revised the idea of anonymity

It was done explicitly. If Pencho Slaveykov, Vladimir Vasilev or Konstantin Galabov used anonymity in the field of literary intrigue or literary play, then Geo Milev used it as a

public weapon. Thus, at least we would liken it now and through the prism of the recent historical past, when anonymous articles set the tone of public thought (in the Bulgarian reality, a suitable example would be the Prime Minister from 1950 to 1956 Valko Chervenkov), and through the prism of the present, when anonymity fights the status quo with conspiracy theories. It's a weapon because it was the catalyst of public processes without a stated willingness to bear the consequences for what it says. There is no way we pass (and we do not want) that in the context of the 1920s to speak or write respectively is dangerous. That's why, and as implied, the most shocking articles of "Plamak" were published signed by the editorial board. They also came up with the most provocative names ("Light shone in the dark", "Police Criticism"). Now, we argue about the authorship of "Light shone in the dark" – whether it was written by one of the greatest anarchists in Bulgaria – Georgi Sheytanov, or by Geo Milev himself, but there is no real difference.

For the art of avant-garde, authorship in itself was not a strict independent closed art system associated with an artist's name, but has always been open to the approval and critique by the others, to possible voices it has been easily identified with. Perhaps that was also why Geo Milev did not find it was a big issue he had loaned many words/phrases in his poetry, as critics call this "plagiarism". There is also no formal difference because Geo Milev unambiguously stated who should be responsible for the publications in a periodical and seemed to sign his unofficial death sentence himself:

Responsibility in the Zlatorog journal is carried by its editor, and not the collaborators separately. It is a self-interpreted fact. (Milev 1924: 251)

That's how it happened. After being called to the regional police department, Geo Milev disappeared without trace. His remains were found in the 1950s in a collective grave near Sofia. Until then, his entire family did not receive any information about where he might be found.

"Plamak" unambiguously contributed to the spread and development of anarcho-communism in Bulgaria

Indicative in itself is the cooperation of Georgi Sheytanov, referred to in the above the case, since Sheytanov himself was undoubtedly one of the most prominent and persecuted anarchists – accused and tried for numerous illegal acts, including the biggest terrorist act in Bulgaria – the attack in the Church of St. Kral (now "Sveta Nedelya") in 1925.

"Plamak" printed a significant number of his articles. In addition to the article of controversial authorship "Light shone in the dark" in issue 1, we read the "Art and Man" article in issue 2 by Georgi Vasilev (Vasilev was the anarchist's father's name nor surname). That's how he named himself in most of his articles in the journal. It is important to note they (7 in total, not counting those of controversial authorship) often found top readable position in the Criticism column, except only for the "Kropotkin's Ethics" reviews in issue 4, "Anarchism" and "Psychology of the Anarchist" in issue 5, as well as the "Flag of the Era" in issue 11. Taking into consideration the arguments presented for the precision of Geo Milev in the construction of each issue, we can agree their presence at the beginning of the column put an ideological focus on the issues.

More interestingly, it is in issue 2 (dedicated to Lenin's death) the "Art and Man" article tackled the issue of socio-ethical systems, yet it did not skip the "Russian experience" as conceptually flawed:

The socialist ideal did not come as an expression of a spiritual evolution already achieved by the masses, and by virtue of this, the performance/accomplishment of socialism was not directly undertaken by the labourers, yet it remained in the hands of a handful of its adepts and functionaries. (Vasilev 1924: 62)

Unquestionably, on the conceptual level, the article "Beginning" in issue 4 continued the pursue of spiritual searches of one's personality (including the topic of art and literature), but through the eyes of Marx's dialectic materialism: *When we begin with the "eternal images" of Plato, the "absolute spirit" of Hegel, with Kant's "things in ourselves" and we get to the neometaphysics of Remke and Bergson – we face the superstition of our distant ancestors,*

behind the philosophical legacy of which the image of political reaction peeks out. (Vasilev 1924a: 135)

In the disastrous issue #7-8, dedicated to the first anniversary of the September Uprising, we also note Sheytanov's presence as an author (columnist) – having an article (entitled: Light and Freedom) placed on the forefront of the issue, defining the uprising as a "sign" and inciting readers to revive the fight: *"In today's transitional and harsh time – in the twelfth hour, the awakened ones must be on guard"* (Vasilev 1924b: 234).

The direction of Sheytanov's articles is clear – not always so vocally, but always clear is the message of revolution. In the latest issue, the calls gain density through the philosophical explanation/justification: *"Right are those who defend themselves. And they're fighting. If in their battle people also resort to violence, let the oppressors be asked, what would they do..."* (Vasilev 1925: 26).

Just because of the adoption of the so-called "Law against Anarchists" as early as 1907, solely and only the reason described in the last thesis was sufficient for "Plamak" to be confiscated and hold someone legally liable for the contents of the articles. What made the "Plamak" the earliest publication "troll" however was precisely the homogeneity of the described phenomena.

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