

## FIGURES OF THE *PRESENT*: URBAN SILHOUETTES

### RUSE, THE OLD HIGH SCHOOL OF MUSIC

#### IMAGES OF THE MODERN MAN IN VESELIN TACHEV'S POETRY OF THE 1960s

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The beginning of this talk will introduce Veselin Tachev. Veselin Tachev is one of the young poets of the 1960s. He was born in the village of Karaisen in the province of Veliko Tarnovo but spent his life in Ruse and then in Shtraklevo, a village in the Ruse province. The poet became popular as part of Ruse's group of poets who called themselves "angry young men".<sup>1</sup> Their poems were well-received, but as literary historians have shown, their poetry was denounced due to reactions in the USSR. In contemporary literary studies, the voices of these poets are often defined as alternative (See the project on constructing the "alternative canon" in Bulgarian literature from the PRB period (People's Republic of Bulgaria) by researchers at New Bulgarian University.) because, in the period before 1989, they remained unheard and rejected. The cry they carried and their idiosyncratic poetics turned out to be too dangerous for the political regime (Doynov 2016c). Because of this, many of the writers had to hide and create the so-called *samizdat* books, which were only read to a select audience. Veselin Tachev is one of these writers from the period who actively engaged in *samizdat* publishing. In addition to his books, he also published those of his friends, namely, Yordan Trendafilov, Ivan Tsanev, Dimitar Vyatovski, Dimitar Gorsov, and others, which shows that writers at home also sought ways to escape censorship as in other countries from the Eastern Bloc (Doynov 2016b: 71).

Although Tachev remains, more or less, outside the scope of critics' attention, his works reveal a note of rebelliousness and *anger*, which aim to show the mood of the Bulgarian urban young men in the 1960s. (see Krasteva 2019) The freedom they "had" turned out to be an illusion because, although the cult of the leader was revoked, censorship remained in practice. Tachev's criticism is not only political but also linked to the peculiarities of the social and cultural milieu in the country from the second half of the twentieth century – the processes of migration between the village and the city that gave rise to one of the biggest identity issues from the 1960s and 1970s since this was not only a movement in space but a new experience of the transition between pre-modern and modern. In fact, the lyrical speaker's voice in Tachev's poetry does not criticise life in the city as such, but the people who are not able to define themselves – they are unable to be citizens because they bring along the habits of their village, connected with traditional views; the characters cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> The poets chose the label themselves – angry young men, inspired by the sudden movement that emerged in Britain – the "Angry Young Men", among whom authors such as John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, John Wain, John Braine, and others (Kroll 1961).

called villagers either because they have already got used to the habits of the city.<sup>2</sup> People are often ironically represented as lost between their pre-modern and modern worldviews; people who turn into consumers in the city because they cannot adopt the ideas of the new age. Veselin Tachev creates grotesque images through the clash between the traditional worldview and the bohemian lifestyle of the modern person. However, before we turn to these images, we must pay attention to the history of some of the texts discussed in this talk.

The focus will fall on the *samizdat* book *40 Drops of Black Blood*, published in 1963, where we will try to identify the image of the citizen. We will, however, refer to the poem “Historical Present” from the volume *Verses* (1964) – a text, which outlines some additional features of the figure of the citizen. In contrast to *Verses*, *40 Drops of Black Blood* is a mysterious book since only a few people knew about its existence at the time of its publication. As Plamen Doynov writes, this *samizdat* book by Veselin Tachev was discovered on 8th September 2016 in the personal archive of Yordan Trendafilov, one of the author’s closest friends in the 1960s. The book has a special status because it has neither been circulated actively nor donated by Tachev to the regional library “Lyuben Karavelov” in Ruse, unlike his other *samizdat* books. In 1963, friends of the poet learned about the existence of *40 Drops of Black Blood*. In addition, Tachev gave recitals of poems from the volume at the literary readings in Ruse from the beginning of the 1960s. Despite this, the book remained “hidden” as if Tachev did not want to make its existence known until 2016 when it appeared as part of the book series *The Unpublished*, published by Kralitsa Mab and New Bulgarian University, and compiled by Plamen Doynov (see Doynov 2016a: 5).

What makes *40 Drops of Black Blood* distinctive is its poetics and ideas, since it shows completion; it is, as Plamen Doynov writes, like an original independent project (Doynov 2016b: 75). It was written when Tachev was only 22 years old and shows the poetical style characteristic of authors writing in the 1960s, including poets like Konstantin Pavlov and Nikolay Kanchev (see Doynov 2016a: 6). The poems of the Ruse-based poet are linked to the *reinvention of free verse and the textual practices of European Modernism*. (Doynov 2016a: 6) The volume consists of 40 poems, each of which Tachev numbered by hand. The sacred number 40 references the 40 days during which it is thought that a man’s soul remains on earth. Tachev’s poems show the loss of the human soul in the *luxury* of city opportunities (See, for example, the ironic poem “Nerves”, Tachev 2016: 25.). This is *the world, seen through the eyes of the new youth of the 1960s* (Doynov 2016b: 77). This is the Self who self-alienates himself and looks at the world through the eyes of different masks. The characters in the author’s works come from the past to turn into characters of the present, who lose themselves somewhere along the way. The characters turn out to be prisoners between two ages, slowly and steadily losing their souls.

The poems, chosen from their respective collections of poetry, aim to show the urban world in an ironic way. In this case, we can conclude that the city is a place of opportunities, but the people who appear as lyrical speakers find it difficult to adjust to this space because they carry the attitudes of the past. The characters turn out to be *city villagers* who live and work in a provincial town but always go back to their native villages (see, for example, “Historical Present”). Knowing Veselin Tachev’s biography, as well as the mentioning of toponyms in his

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<sup>2</sup> The person who has gone to the city wants to be the “new” citizen, but they lose their working habits. Ivaylo Dichev writes that the migrant who moved to the city and received an apartment in a panel building with steam heating and a Moskvitch vehicle worked less because the idea of free time had already emerged (Dichev 2005).

works (as is the case with “Historical Present”), we can assume that the city of Ruse is the source of inspiration for the poet.

In fact, as we mentioned earlier, the urban space is not an object of criticism as such but the people who are not completely aware of who they are.

We will begin with the poem “Historical Present” from the volume *Verses* (1964). In the poem, there is a constant movement between city and village, mainly between Ruse and Shtraklevo: *Shtraklevo – Ruse, / Ruse – Shtraklevo. / Five buses / a day.* (Tachev 1964: 24) The constant journey shows the need for man to return to the village, to his native place. On the whole, this was a common practice during communist times since the migrants of the first and second generations had the tendency – especially during times of crisis – to return to their home villages for the weekend, to do agricultural work. (Dichev 2005) This, however, makes their belonging look confusing – they are people whose life is not only physically “divided” between life in the different locales but also emotionally unsteady, as their identity fluctuates between personal and collective past and present:

*They go away as villagers.  
City villagers.  
They come back as  
Village citizens ...  
Such are these people,  
neither were they born in the village nor  
in the city.*

(Tachev 1964: 24)

The lives of villagers from the city of Ruse and village citizens from Ruse pass as they journey between two places. The cumulative repetition in the lines mimics the idea of an everyday routine, which one cannot escape.

The characters in Tachev’s texts “give themselves to” the city and its habits but do not avail themselves of the opportunities it offers them. This emotional and moral system, typical of many of the characters shown in the poems from *40 Drops of Black Blood*, often turns them into grotesque representations. An example of this is found in the poem “A Banal Contrast”, in which the image of *a pathology and autopsy coursebook* is juxtaposed with the images of *an iconostasis* and *a church*. The lyrical speaker is divided between her origins and the person she is “today”. The lyrical speaker’s voice negatively focuses on the speaker’s inner conflict – she is a medical student but listens to the *Sunday Liturgy / with fountains of tears / streaming down her cheeks.* (Tachev 2016: 14) The idea of the “disenchanted world” of Modernity is at the heart of modern medicine. In the text, however, the character’s choice is linked to a big personal transformation, which suggests her bidding farewell to those religious attitudes the past has instilled in her.

In another poem, “Intimate”, the female speaker is again torn between the worldviews of the present and the prejudices of the past. The woman is unable to overcome the prejudices of her *great grandmother—little house, kids, a warm hearth, / a colourful distaff, / a black cat, / a pot of beans...* (Tachev 2016: 30) The lyrical speaker says: *But you still have not shaken off / the prejudices of your great-grandmother ....* (Ibid.) In the end, however, we notice the personal rebellion in understanding the Self – the young poet who is also incapable of forgetting his origins – *The bad thing is / that I, too, still have not shaken off the prejudices of my great grand-father!*. (Ibid.) The past haunts the young despite their attempts to forget it.

The texts discussed thus far provoke the question: Why do we have to make a choice? Why do we have to juxtapose the city and the village, past and present? It seems that people need a stable identity, but instead of opening opportunities, migration limits the person by only offering conformist options – to be integrated, one needs to look like the rest.

Other poems in *40 Drops of Black Blood* link the idea of conformity to the “evolution” of the citizen. In this sense, Plamen Doynov makes the following conclusion:

*The hero in Tachev’s lyrical poetry is modelled on the masses in the Bulgarian provinces, but it would be difficult to identify him as “labouring”. He is rather a type of socialist craftsman who has already begun to taste the pleasures of communism.* (Doynov 2016b: 82)

Corruption in the poems often appears in the images of automobiles, alcohol and pretty women. The figure of the woman is not negatively portrayed, but it is used to evoke the demonic, which attracts the naïve person who wants to be like everyone else – to become a part of the multitudes of “contemporary” citizens. What is interesting about *40 Drops of Black Blood* is that there are a few poems entitled “Rumba Negra”. They are different from one another but act as a peculiar continuation of the city’s grotesque depiction, which turns man into a mindless puppet with no memories. For example, the first “Rumba Negra” poem talks about street dancing, which delights the soul but does not give complete freedom because man turns into a puppet. As every person dances differently, the poems of the same name show a different image of the people who are, nevertheless, united by passion, alcohol, and opium, but also the loss of self. The series of poems “Rumba Negra” gives a collective image of the modern world and what modern people turn into.

In Veselin Tachev’s works, we observe characters in the process of transforming into modern subjects. It is as if all characters want to renounce their past, completely forgotten that they could take advantage of the opportunities of the big city without losing their inherited values. Thus, the “new” subject turns out to be a person with a fragile psyche and unstable identity. This is the citizen who wanders from the village to the city in spatial, but most importantly, ideological terms. In this way, the “new” citizen turns out to be confined in the in-between space of the road, thus representing one of the Bulgarian individual’s biggest identity crises from the second half of the twentieth century.

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