

## FIGURES OF THE *PRESENT*: URBAN SILHOUETTES

### NESSEBAR, THE QUAY

#### NESSEBAR AS A TOPOS IN IVAN PEYCHEV'S LYRICAL POETRY OF THE 1960s

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Ivan Peychev made his debut in 1939. The beginning of his craft as a poet is marked by an ambition to write intimate lyric poetry on existential topics. After the institution of socialist realism in Bulgaria, Peychev published poems mainly on the themes of war and patriotism, particularly in the 1950s. After the Bulgarian Communist Party April Plenum and ensuing “liberalisation” on a cultural and literary level, the poet had the opportunity to go back to his early poetic style with *Dalechno Plavane* (*A Distant Voyage*, 1962) and *Lakonichno Nebe* (*Laconic Sky*, 1967).

In her recollections of the poet Ivan Peychev, his wife says, *I hadn't seen the sea yet. He promised to introduce me to it, and one beautiful and warm autumn, we set out for the sea. We arrived in Burgas late in the evening. He was impatient, we went to the seashore right away* (Peychev 2006: 231). The husband and wife's love of the sea begins in Burgas but travels to Nessebar: *This ship-city, as he called it later, remained anchored in his heart. It captivated both of us* (Peychev 2006: 231).

Sea, autumn, seashore, and ship-city become key topoi in Peychev's poetical works. They function as existential markers of liminality and semantic fluidity. They designate and define the subject's movement through time and space. In Nessebar's psychologised city silhouette, the lyrical subject confronts the past, present, and future. The temporal states in Peychev's poetry are delineated through the presence and absence of the Other.

Peychev's poem “Pladne v Nesebar” (“Noon in Nessebar”), first published in the volume *Dalechno Plavane* (*A Distant Voyage*, 1967), marks a movement from the general to the concrete from the beginning. The natural scenery of autumn clouds and sky leads to the image of the city, which resembles an anchored ship *lashed by the waves* (Peychev 2006: 54). It is appropriate to mention that, in this case, the connection between autumn and the ship-city lies in the semantic meaning of the two concepts. Autumn is a transitional season, which presupposes anticipation; it is a borderline between past and future, summer and winter – two complete states – between which is one that is unsteady and transitional. The city is found in an apparent transition and instability because, like a ship, it is *lashed by the waves*. The clash between urban space and sea current is a way to compare the city to a seashore. In this sense, autumn and the city are highly critical spaces due to the naturally predisposed uncertainty of their conceptual meaning.

The positioning of the imagery in a temporal framework is realised through the presence of the lyrical *you* – autumn and city reveal the figure of the Other, whose function in the Self's mind is analogous to that of key topoi from Nessebar's history; the beloved is connected to the objects of the external world through shared recollection: *Let us forget about autumn / Although it gives me back everything: / you, the bay, the fish, / the clay amphorae, / hinting at sea and gods* (Peychev 2006: 55). In the first place, the season and the city as a locus suggest recollecting the relationship with the Other, and only after that do the projections of realia from the physical reality become relevant since they are linked to the space of sharedness between the Self and the Other. The past is lived as a present in the shape of memories, which pass into the subject's soul and are experienced as real: *it [autumn] gives me back everything* (Peychev 2006: 55). The transition from the subjective to the objective is mirrored and, at the same time, inversely proportional to the opening lines, where the natural scenery calls the city to the lyrical speaker's mind: *a city resembling an anchored ship*. Only after that does the focus turn to the beloved: *and you, and your presence, it gives me back* (Peychev 2006: 55).

The firm presence of the temporal reality of the ancient past in the context of urban space is corroborated by the symbols of *pomegranates* and *roses*. The pomegranate appears in the myth of Hades and Persephone – when Persephone is preparing to leave the Underworld, Hades offers her a pomegranate. Tasting the fruit for the first time, she is compelled to remain with him. The rose is symbolically connected to the idea of reciprocity. It is connected to the image of the lady in Medieval courtly love writings. It is possible to situate this trend in the traditions of Western Christianity, in which the flower is associated with the Madonna and piety in the Litany of Loreto.

The ship-city turns into a space of memories and projections of historical realia – the autumnal noon in Nessebar is *hinting at sea and gods* with its *clay amphorae* (Peychev 2006: 56). Through the image of autumn and the beloved, the lyrical speaker contemplates that reality: *And its ruthless light / baring the ruined churches, / the dry water basins covered up in rocks, / the streets overgrown with grass, / where, on its cobblestones, / the invading barbarians / outraced the night / with their bronze feet* (Peychev 2006: 54-55). These lines exemplify how the lyrical subject in Ivan Peychev's poetry experiences past events as an actual present.

There is a significant temporal and semantic overload in the description of the ancient scene. Autumn does not carry only a material memory; it carries the reality of lived experience. The Self experiences the past through the image of autumn, which actualises the presence of the Other in his memory. The function of the fluid temporality of the poem evokes the philosophical ideas in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the blessed writes: *It is in thee, my mind, that I measure times* (Popov, Boyadzhiev 1985: 81). To him, time resembles an extension of the mind: everything that happens to us or has already happened to us in a past moment is an *impression* (Popov, Boyadzhiev 1985: 75). There is a similar concept in Aristotle's writings: we differentiate between past, present, and future by perceiving *first one and then the other* since *the mind speaks of two presents*, which are past and future (Popov, Boyadzhiev 1985: 34).

The image of the Other is prevalent in the lyrical speaker's consciousness, like the images of physical objects and entities of the past in the present. The beloved figures in the Self's mind in the shape of a movement, "stretching" in the subject's inner world, while the signs of the

presence of the objective antiquity in the coastal city could be observed outside the mind while functioning as projected by the subject.

Autumn brings back key objects and the image of the Other: *autumn gives me back everything: / you, the bay, the fish, / the clay amphorae, / hinting at sea and gods* (Peychev 2006: 55). The material and the metaphysical exist in unity, and the movement between general and concrete continues – the suggestive, transcendent image of the season “brings back” the notion of the figure to “you”, and “you” is mentioned along with the *clay amphorae* which exist outside their time. Autumn is a collective image of the spiritual recollection in the lyrical speaker’s mind.

But what does it mean to imagine the city as a ship? On the one hand, Nessebar is a peninsular city situated within the space of the sea. On the other hand, it is also useful to impart a fluid understanding of time in the poem. If the urban space moves from past to present and from present to past within the poem, it is logical to include the notion of “swimming” in its temporal and spatial framework. The ship-city is a liminal space in which two temporal situations meet. In other words, *the tide ebbs and flows / as in the heart underneath my palm / and in the sea underneath your feet* (Peychev 2006: 56).

Nessebar also appears as a topos in the poem “Na Put” (“On the Way”), published in *Dalechno Plavane (A Distant Voyage, 1962)*. Like in “Noon in Nessebar”, the mood in the verses is built on the notion of the approaching evening with a *sunset without a sky* (Peychev 2006: 20). The paradox creates a peculiar expectation for a lack of culmination and *ekstasis* in the subject’s movement through urban space. On the contrary, the stroll along the seashore turns out to be an existential challenge; it is contradictory and joyless, like a *sunset without a sky*. Again, on the border, this time between day and night, the lyrical subject makes a transition from a natural scene to an urban scene: *The wind begins to blow and from the hill / you head downwards, while ahead of you both / the yellow grass / withers and rustles in the cold silence* (Peychev 2006: 20). The direction towards a lowland space suggests a transition from a state of contemplation and contact with the heavens and God to an earthly and common mode of being. The subject is joined with the wind through the pronoun *both*, which evokes the Romantic pathos of the sublime and the harmony with nature. This initial impression, however, is quickly dispersed by the oppressive appearance of the *yellow grass*. The use of anaphora and repetition gives a sense of cyclical movement, which reveals the lyrical speaker’s inner state – walking down the hill, he reaches the city, where he is confronted with the familiar *sorrow within four walls*. The subject is aware of this reality: a reality that he anticipates and foresees. Suffering is cyclical: *Where will you stop, where under the wind / will you find shelter for your heart? / You walk and know that you will meet sorrow within four walls. / You walk, and already in Nessebar, windows are burning, but there / among them there is one that watches you / with its pitch-black darkness* (Peychev 2006: 20). The Self is already situated under the wind; the connection between him and nature has been completely broken. This breakage figures on the level of poetic form with the recurrent use of enjambment.

The window’s liminal position symbolises isolation, as it *watches you with its pitch-black darkness* instead of being a portal to the outside world. *Windows are burning* in Nessebar, reflecting the *bleeding silence of this / sunset without a sky* (Peychev 2006: 20). The *spilt pitch dark* on the firmament is transferred to the transparent glass (Peychev 2006: 20). The

atmosphere is psychologised and reflects the lyrical speaker's inner state. The natural scenery is transferred to the context of the city, while the objects in the city absorb and acquire its features. Interestingly, the subject observes the oppressive *four walls* and *windows* from a distance. He notes their presence and negative connotations but is not situated in their spaces. What is more, the lyrical speaker *will not come back: This wind will cover / the footsteps with sand and the only thing that will remain / is the autumn quay / and ship. You depart today ...* (Peychev 2006: 20).

The Self is, in fact, distanced not only from the observed objects but also alienated from himself. This is shown through the increased use of the pronoun *you*. He is a bystander, observing objects from the physical reality and his existence. The absence of the Other, loneliness and isolation lead to the obliteration of his traces; there is no one to testify to his being, his suffering. He is alone in his existence, stuck between past, present, and future, in a borderline and divided state. His *footsteps* are obliterated by the image of the wind. The same wind which, at the beginning of the poem, accompanied him down the hill. Without the Other, the subject cannot be taken outside himself; he cannot be situated in a wholesome existence. In this sense, loneliness is shown as inherent to the lyrical speaker. This concurs with Levinas' philosophical ideas, according to which the subject is *alone due to the very fact that it is an existent. The solitude of the subject results from its relationship with the existing over which it is master* (Levinas 1995: 51).

What remains after the lyrical subject is the autumn quay and the ship. These images acquire a temporal significance and represent a borderline in the spatial-temporal framework. I have already analysed autumn as a transition between the past (summer) and the future (winter). If the autumn quay is situated on the border of its winter analogue, then this represents the subject's confrontation with forgetfulness and the existential stasis of winter. Autumn is the present expectation of the joyless near future. Later in the poem, the ship is called *a ship freighted with memories* (Peychev 2006: 21). There is continuity with the idea of *swimming* through time; the vessel is a means for reflexivity and retrospection of past events in the lyrical speaker's mind: *But in the darkened harbour, / in the city quietly benighted / a part of your heart will at least remain. / And the ship freighted with memories will sail away with the evening ...* (Peychev 2006: 21). St. Augustine's idea that the human mind keeps memories as an impression, which makes it possible for past moments to project themselves in the subject's mind as real, could serve for a more detailed analysis. If the ship is "freighted with memories", then the semantics of the image come close to the concept of the mind in the *Confessions*.

In Ivan Peychev's poetry, Nessebar functions as an existential marker. It symbolises the transition from past to present and the future, which the subject cannot foresee. Through the images of autumn, the ship, the harbour, and the seashore, the lyrical speaker makes sense of his own presence in life.

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