

## POETS - GENRE CONQUERED

TOPOS: Sofia, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski

### THE FRAGMENT IN TSOCHO BOYADZHIEV' S VERBAL AND VISUAL WORLD

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Hardly anyone would doubt the authority of Tsocho Boyadzhiev as one of the most brilliant intellectuals in Bulgarian humanistic thought - an erudite philosopher with a long academic career dedicated to the philosophical ideas of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. He is one of the most insightful researchers of Plato's ideas (*Nepisanoto uchenie na Platon*, 1985 [Plato's Unwritten Teaching]) and at the same time one of the major figures in philosophical medievalism in Bulgaria (*Studii varhu srednovekovnia humanizam*, 1988 [Studies on Medieval Humanism]; *Renesansat na XII vek: Prirodata i chovekat*, 1991 [The Renaissance of the 12th Century: Nature and Man]; *Noshtta prez Srednovekovieto*, 2000 [Night in the Middle Ages]; *Loca remotissima: studii po kulturna antropologia na evropeyskoto srednovekovie*, 2007 [Loca remotissima: Studies in the Cultural Anthropology of the European Middle Ages]; *Drugoto Srednovekovie*, 2021 [The Other Middle Ages]; *Zimata prez Srednovekovieto*, 2023 [Winter in the Middle Ages]). Tsocho Boyadzhiev presents the period of the West-European Middle Ages in a new, previously unknown light - he affirms the notion of this culture as syncretic, teeming with divergent mindsets.

As a translator into Bulgarian, he has made available a number of ancient, medieval and modern European philosophical texts such as Aristotle's *Physics*, *On the Soul*, *The Great Ethics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*; Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and others. But these two fields do not exhaust his professional achievements. Tsocho Boyadzhiev has proved himself to be well versed in the art of poetry. Although he calls himself a Sunday poet and admits that this art "does not cover word-for-word" his entire life (Отгласи 2020: 21), the artistic value of his work is validated not only by the high readership and the vast critical responses to his poetry, but also by the awards he has received – the Golden Metaphor (2005), the Ivan Nikolov Prize (2021).

The intellectual does not see himself as a professional photographer either. He defines himself as "a simple amateur, a Sunday photographer" (Отгласи 2020: 147). Appearing for the second time, the metaphor of Sunday art-making emphasises the freedom of some private space - a space of idleness and a creative celebration only for the Self. Over the years, visual art has become another territory of cultural presence successfully conquered by Tsocho Boyadzhiev. The philosopher-poet has created several photographic exhibitions. His photographs have been published in the albums *Patyat na choveka* [The Way of Man], *Domat na choveka* [The Home of Man], *Choveshkata uchast* [Human Fate] (all three together with Nikolay Treyman), *Punctum*, *Punctum II*. Having achieved impressive results, he even developed his own scientifically based

vision of the nature and dimensions of this art. He shared it in the form of a university lecture course, which later became the basis of the book *Filosofia na fotografiyata*, 2014, 2020 [Philosophy of Photography].

The assumption of the existence of links between the heterogeneous fields in which the intellectual expresses himself has been observed repeatedly. Tsocho Boyadzhiev says that even his academic supervisor, Radi Radev, claims that poetic expression was inherent in his philosophical texts<sup>1</sup>. Toni Nikolov, a skilful and insightful interpreter, discovered a correspondence between Tsocho Boyadzhiev's poetic work and his preoccupation with photography.

The profound interest in several fields of expression, and the constant effort to master them, can be thought of as a way of compensating the lack of one field with the availability in another. Photography, unlike poetry, has rather limited possibilities for externalising inner experiences. And poetry is the means of expressing subjective emotions that are inevitably muffled under the pressures of objectivism in science. The grounds for this assumption can be found in a statement by Tsocho Boyadzhiev himself:

*Poetry is the language of my melancholy, photography is the expression of my admiration for this amazing world we live in, academic pursuits satisfy the need to know, to understand the mechanics but also the meaning of what happens in our lives. Poetry is an expression of inner experiences, and so it ignores the inevitable reality effect of photography (the unequivocal confirmation that this really happened) as well as the emotionally neutral objectivity of scientific inquiry, whose horizon is truth. Poetry is the exteriorization of the most intimate, the most intimate in us under the rule of memory and imagination. And if the poetic word objectifies an experience that is private and only has personal meaning, and makes it shareable, then that is a true miracle* (Поезията 2018: 3).

This text seeks another angle of unity and focuses on the notion of *fragment*, which we take to be central in interpreting the concepts of *time* and *memory* in Tsocho Boyadzhiev's poetry, photography and philosophy. The fragment is the common link by which the trinity between these fields is realized. Through the fragment, a unified view of existence is formed, articulated in a trilingual version - the visual (the pictorial as a specific mode of expression) and the verbal (poetic and philosophical discourse). The conceptualization of these two categories both in Tsocho Boyadzhiev's poetry and in his philosophical texts can serve as a basis for confirming the sense of the interconnectedness between philosophy, poetry and photography, even for the transposition of ideas and images between the territories he conquered. The conceptual triad chosen here: *time*, *memory*, *fragment* is based on the conviction that Tsocho Boyadzhiev himself has persistently demonstrated an abiding interest in their philosophical negotiation, both in his theoretical writings and through the language of poetry and photography. This erudite is one of the compilers of the anthology *Ideyata za vremeto* (1985) [The Idea of Time]. His in-depth commentary on the *Eleventh Book of Confessions* by St. Augustine (*Avgustin i problemat za vremeto. Razsazhdenie varhu edinadeseta kniga na „Izpovedi“*, 1997 [Augustine and the Problem of Time. A Reflection on the Eleventh Book of the Confessions]). As will become clear later in this exposition, theorizing about

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<sup>1</sup> See in more detail Да стъпваш 2022.

the categories of time and memory<sup>2</sup> is present in his philosophy of photography, as well as in a number of his poetic works.

In his *Filosofia na fotografiyata* [Philosophy of Photography], Tsocho Boyadzhiev focuses on the problem of the fragmentary nature of the and in the photographic image and even defines photography as "the art of the fragment" (Бояджиев 2020: 83). Therefore, in this type of art, fragmentation is a kind of constructive principle. Understatement represents a specific potential of photography, and the photograph itself is a "fragmentary reproduction of reality" (Бояджиев 2020: 72). The punctum, which Tsocho Boyadzhiev defines as "the most significant component of the picture" (Бояджиев 2020: 222), can be thought of as the main element through which the fragmentation in the image manifests itself. The theoretical justification of this notion was made by Roland Barthes in *Camera lucida. A Note on Photography* (Барт 2001). *The punctum* is the fragment in the image designed to attract the attention of the beholder and unlock the meaning potential of the photograph itself. In its function, this part can be compared to the poem in the lyric text. It is this point that gives connotative potential to the whole image.

As already mentioned, fragmentation manifests itself on several different levels in the photographic image - it is its essence. The fragment is a means of expressing meaning. The image itself is a fragment of a frozen reality, however, the fragment also functions as a constructive element. Fragmentation is a quality of images captured by the lens. This multi-layered manifestation of fragmentation is visible in various photographs from the album *Punctum* (2017). For example, the image on p. 20 captures a fragment of civilization (the building) and a fragment of nature (the goat). The building itself, on the other hand, is constructed from fragments - it is evident that its parts are made of different kinds of building materials. This gives the building a heterogeneous, disharmonious appearance.

The two images, the aging building and the young goat, contrast each other. The whiteness, fragility, youth and size of the goat against the old building suggest the idea of the transience of matter and the life-affirming power of nature. The building crumbles, ages under the pressure of time, which leaves its irreparable traces on the matter. In this sense, this photograph functions as a visual expression of the idea of the ubiquitous, all-consuming time that leaves behind only debris and fragmented memories of human presence.

Similarly in the image on p. 21, we once again see this idea of transience of matter and its obliteration under the pressure of passing time. The remaining fragments of matter (the broken chair, the jacket hanging on the wall) are evidence of human presence.

Although many of the images included in this album capture entire human figures (mostly of elderly people against the backdrop of old buildings, again suggesting the idea of the inexorable passage of time), due to the fragmentary nature of the photographs themselves, human existence also begins to appear incomplete, fragmented. The fragments of houses, streets, vehicles, trees, and parts of everyday life create a sense of the fragmentation of human existence and the doom of the search for wholeness and purpose of human existence, the human is wandering among the debris of the past, the anxieties of the rushing present, and the uncertainty of the future, trying to piece together meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> Tsocho Boyadzhiev's deep and abiding interest in memory as a phenomenon of human existence is evidenced in an interview in which he shares the themes that have become for him a constant object of reflection: 'My themes were and remain life and death, love and separation, memory and forgetting, etc. I consider these themes to be universal and at the same time strictly personal; they are the vast and mysterious, and at the same time very intimate, very "domestic" world of the poet, which "is constantly circling around his heart", as František Hrubín puts it' (Поезията 2018: 3).

The comfort that there is still some wholeness and meaning to and in existence can be found in the purity of the child's gaze (p. 76), the whiteness of the goat, the dog (p. 21), the white horse galloping free (p. 49). We also find a verbal expression of this consolation in the poem *Koteto* [The Kitten], included in the poetry collection *Sboguvane s predmeti i drugi zhivi sashtestva*, 2005 [Farewell to Objects and Other Living Creatures]). In the work, the lyrical subject, like the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, has come to the conclusion that wisdom brings only sorrow and that the meaning and integrity of existence probably lies in the details and simplicity of our everyday existence:

*when I had drunk the cup to the bottom  
of wisdom and in the maze of the soul  
the bitterness of being oozed  
I felt the wet muzzle against my face  
and realized I was ignorant.*

In the introductory part of the tenth lecture of *Filosofia na fotografiyata* [Philosophy of Photography], devoted to time and memory, there is the statement that one of the leading functions of art is to "mummify" the all-absorbing time (*edax rerum*). Photography, "capturing the elusive passage of time", turns out to be the art best suited for this purpose<sup>3</sup>. Tsocho Boyadzhiev proposes "the presence of a kind of latent temporality" in the photographic image (Бояджиев 2020: 195). According to the philosopher's ideas, the presence of time in the photographic image is realized through the super concentration of times<sup>4</sup>. But in essence, the photographic image captures time in a fragmentary way: a slice (a particular moment) of passing time is captured in a very specific and limited space. The images captured in the photograph represent fragments of the past, frozen parts of it.

The attempt to save the moment from being swallowed up by time by transposing it into the stasis of the photographic image is accompanied by the desire to preserve that same moment from oblivion. Therefore, photography is perceived as a means of preserving the fragments of the past. In this sense, the act of capturing, stopping the passing of time is invariably connected to the desire to preserve what is seen and experienced. The function of the photograph is "to be the keeper of memory"<sup>5</sup> (Бояджиев 2020: 202). In a sense, even the photographic image proves to be a more reliable source for preserving the past than our own memory, since the memory of a particular moment may fade away, but the material medium that imprinted the event remains unchanged.

According to Tsocho Boyadzhiev, it is possible to "remember not the fleeting event itself, but its remaining image", i.e. "we remember more clearly the photograph itself than the event it originates from, which only vaguely flashes in our memory, or we hypothetically suppose it, or else it has completely sunk into oblivion" (Бояджиев 2020: 206).

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<sup>3</sup> See Бояджиев 2020: 193.

<sup>4</sup> The fact is that the creation of the photographic image is instantaneous. Tsocho Boyadzhiev questions the notion of the moment as "the minimum building particle of time". The moment is to be thought of as "the gathering of all time into an immutable 'now', not as timelessness, but as a super time out of which it is possible to unfold the whole past, the whole present and the whole future". It is precisely the simultaneity of past, present and future in the moment of capture, this super concentration of times, that makes possible the presence of time itself in the photographic image (see Бояджиев 2020: 196-197 for more details).

<sup>5</sup> A clarification is made as to the purpose of the photograph. Although the photographic image functions as a reliable keeper of memory, it is nevertheless not identical with it, it is not memory itself in another form. The image captured in the photograph is "the occasion for the activation of memory" (Бояджиев 2020: 204).

Through the conceptualization of time in the artistic work of Tsocho Boyadzhiev, the notion of *time* - *edax rerum* - "the inexorably devouring time of human existence" (Бояджиев 2020: 193), emerges as dominant in some of the poems. Time cannot be altered by man, who is acts as a bystander and finds himself completely powerless and unable to influence its inexorable course<sup>6</sup>:

*why is it so insatiable  
the time of edax rerum  
Sanuvam vse stari sanishta* [I Dream Old Dreams] (Бояджиев 2021: 237)

*and even the hardest stone breaks through  
the stubborn drop of time  
incessantly carving out the days  
Sboguvane s moreto* [Farewell to the Sea] (Бояджиев 2021: 285)

Although time has become man's enemy<sup>7</sup>, and he is powerless to cope with its course, yet man's aspiration to cope with it is highlighted – "I have been at war with it for so many years now" (*Triptih* [Triptych], Бояджиев 2021: 138). Existence is presented as a never-ending Sisyphean struggle with the all-consuming time.

The functionality of man-made means of measuring time - the clock and the calendar<sup>8</sup> - have been questioned. The clock, "this unblinking nuisance" (Бояджиев 2021: 285), becomes a tool threatening the possible harmonious human existence. Clocks are like chains that confine man and turn him into a slave of time. From a tool created to facilitate domesticate time, the clock becomes the master and executioner of its creator:

*the hopeless scraping of the file on the rusty  
grid of the past the infinite  
flow around the wire fences of the hours  
Andante* [Andante] (Бояджиев 2021: 86)

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<sup>6</sup> The quotations from poems here and below are based on the publication *Apoteoz na melanholyata* (2021) [Apotheosis of Melancholy], which contains together all published collections of poems by Tsocho Boyadzhiev until 2021: *Pyasachen halm* (1999) [Sand Hill], *Pastir na dumi* (2000) [Shepherd of Words], *Prozorets na sever* (2002) [Window to the North], *Sboguvane s predmeti i drugi zhivi sashtestva* (2005) [Farewell to Objects and Other Living Creatures], *Kniga na ironiite i oproshtheniyata* (2016-2017) [Book of Ironies and Forgivenesses], *Kniga na razkayaniyata i utesheniyata* (2019) [Book of Regrets and Consolations], *Kuhata sartsevina na zhivota* (2020) [The Hollow Core of Life], *Epistolarium* (2021) [Epistolarium].

<sup>7</sup> The idea of time being man's enemy is present in the first poem of the *Reministsentsii* [Reminiscences] cycle:

*I stay  
because they say if I wait patiently  
I'll see the water go by  
the corpse of my mortal enemy  
and my only mortal enemy is time  
devouring life and transforming  
into yesterday every today and every tomorrow*  
(Бояджиев 2021: 259)

<sup>8</sup> On the question of the thematization of the calendar in the poetry of Tsocho Boyadzhiev see in more detail Кръстева 2019.

The idea of the ruthlessness of time in relation to memory and its ability even to erase memories and messages from the past is made explicit in the poems *Otkas*<sup>9</sup> [Excerpt] and *Palimpsest* [Palimpsest]. With its inexorable course, time alters the integrity of memory so that only faded fragments remain for preservation:

*I'm afraid that the eraser of time deletes  
the most meaningful sentences and leaves us  
with separate words with which  
we barely patch our lives  
from the fabric of our scarce memory  
our past is sewn (...)  
Otkas [Excerpt] (Бояджиев 2021: 112)*

As previously mentioned, memory is the other topic of interest in Tsocho Boyadzhiev's poetry. Memory also has a fragmentary character. It is a fragment of the past, preserving a reduced vision of it, which does not remain unchanged - it fades and disintegrates into separate partial parts. Memory is presented as a kind of refuge for man, in which he continually accumulates debris from the past:

*this greedy and feverish hoarding  
in the walls of our memory  
Poshtenska kartichka [Postcard], (Бояджиев 2021: 99)*

*I store up debris of memories like the bee  
collecting sweets in her honey-comb.  
Kaza, 2. [Tell, 2.] (Бояджиев 2021: 225)*

They accompany, and sometimes even overwhelm, the present of man. Remembering is a process of retrospectively returning to what has already passed and the possibility of reliving it. But recollection can be too painful, and therefore the lyrical subject may prefer the refuge of oblivion, as in the poem *Apoteoz na pametta* [Memory's Apotheosis]:

*to feel  
that every touch opens  
a new wound  
graciously  
buries its treasures  
in the deepest  
at the bottom  
into oblivion.  
(Бояджиев 2021: 68)*

The problem of memory of things - cities and objects - is also developed. The urban space of, for example, Matera, Rome, Prague functions as a particular topos that has accumulated and

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<sup>9</sup> It is necessary to clarify that the work referred to here is from the poetry collection *Kniga na ironiite i oproshiteniyata* (2017) [Book of Ironies and Forgivenesses], as there is another poem with the same title in *Kuhata sartsevina na zhivota* (2020) [The Hollow Core of Life].

continues to accumulate memory of everything past and present within the city's boundaries. This particular kind of collective memory has a dominant role in the construction of the individual image of each city. Memory in this case appears as a means of valuation. The longer and more ancient the memory of a particular city, the more important it is for cultural consciousness.

Attachment to objects is intrinsic to human consciousness. They are a topic of constant teleologising by man. In this sense, they function as bearers of memory. A characteristic of individual memory is the fixation on objects from the surrounding environment:

*they took out the wardrobe the beds the kitchen table  
tableware books in short everything  
that he could cling to  
the wounded memory  
Svetlopsi. 1. [Light-painting. 1.] (Бояджиев 2021: 215)*

The category of *time* has been central to philosophical enquiries throughout history, and its full comprehension has never been achieved, and probably it is not going to be achieved. Memory is a function of human consciousness, but man's attitude towards it is inherently contradictory and divergent. In the poetry of Tsocho Boyadzhiev different concepts of time and memory find place. Philosophical thinking is a *form of life*<sup>10</sup> for this intellectual, and this is directly reflected in his literary and artistic work. The conception of time and memory is a common link between Tsocho Boyadzhiev's poetry and his philosophical reflections on photography. There are also intersections between the constructed visions. The frozenness of the moment, this beyond-time achieved in photography, is transposed in his poetry. The idea of the all-consuming time is the topic of several poems, and photography itself appears as a means of capturing and preserving time. The image has to do with memory; it is the occasion for its activation. Memory in poetry is conceptualized as a complex phenomenon of human existence, on which it is itself highly dependent. Memory is a refuge, it brings comfort, but it can also be a source of inconsolable pain. Similarities exist in terms of fragmentation as a characteristic of the photographic image and as a feature of poetic cycles.

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<sup>10</sup> The wording in question, referring to Tsocho Boyadzhiev, is the work of Deyan Deyanov. See in more detail Деянов 2023.