

POETS - GENRE CONQUERED

TOPOS: Plovdiv

THE PUPPET AND ITS CITY CLOCKS

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“In my life I have done a lot of things: I have written and translated poetry; I have come up with and put on plays. I have done everything with love and so it is hard for me to divide or evaluate them separately” (Теофилов 2013: 53). This is what Ivan Teofilov shares, the poet who took his creativity beyond poetry and conceived of art free of any boundaries, in whose works the wonderful is a primary feature of life.

Ivan Teofilov was born in the city of Plovdiv in 1931. He finished high school in his native city and in 1955 graduated in acting from Krastyo Sarafov National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts. He worked at the theatres in the cities of Sliven, Silistra, Burgas, and Ruse, then later in the Central Puppet Theatre in Sofia. His plays transformed the traditional understanding of puppets and introduced new themes and techniques. For the Bulgarian reader, however, he would always remain first and foremost Ivan Teofilov, the poet, author of a number of poetry collections. His first book was published in 1963, *Nebeto i zvezdite* [The Sky and the Stars], followed by *Amfiteatar* (1968) [Amphitheatre], *Grad varhu gradove* (1976) [City on Top of Cities], *Spodeleno bitie* (1984) [A Life Shared], *Da* (1994) [Yes], *Monoloji* (2001) [Monologues], *San ili nadmoshtie* (2004) [Dream or Overpowering], *Infinitiv* (2004) [Infinitive], among others.

Ivan Teofilov's fate reveals some of the processes that have influenced art in the times of the totalitarian regime in Bulgaria. His debut collection appeared in 1963 but is, in fact, based on the second manuscript he submitted, due to the inexplicable loss of the first one at the *Narodna Mladezh Publishers*. However, the collection did not suit the ideas of literariness of the socialist state then. The response to his next book, *Amfiteatar* [Amphitheatre], was positive because literary critics viewed it as written in accord with Todor Zhivkov's project, who was the head of state and party at that time, to turn the city of Plovdiv into a sanctuary of Thracian culture. Unfortunately, the poet's third book, *Grad varhu gradove* [City on Top of Cities], brought back the tension with authorities and the book was placed outside the margins of the literature that 'reflected reality' in accordance with socialist realism.

Ivan Teofilov talked about the ways in which his work differed from official politicised literature through his experience with the publication of his emblematic collection *Grad varhu gradove* [City on Top of Cities]:

Hristo G. Danov Press was very firm on following policy. They probably viewed me as suspicious, or God knows what they might have thought. The book remained with them for seven years. After the usual torturous procedure, it came out in a very simplified

form... like a volume in some young adult collection. In the annual report of the Union of Writers it got destroyed. It did not so much as touch ideology, but with its devil-may-care attitude it infuriated a lot of the proponents of the regime back in those barbaric times (Теофилов 2013: 102-103).

In the early 1960's those who dared to experiment in our literature were publicly denounced as bad role models who the 'real' socialist writers should refrain from following. For Ivan Teofilov, however, "in poetry we find the spirit of imagination, in the motion of images and ideas, the transformation of language, that is why he finds it suitable to experiment with" (Теофилов 2013: 19). Thus, he chooses to experiment in his work, where we are hardly able to find any traces of the otherwise all-permeating socialist realism. This gives grounds to researchers from New Bulgarian University to classify the poet's work under an alternative literary canon¹. Ivan Teofilov's puppet theatre plays also refused to follow the set ideological norms. Moreover, they were prototypes of the avant-garde and proved themselves as original and novel for the Bulgarian stage.

The pressures that Ivan Teofilov experienced led him to open a translation bureau (this path very much reminds us of the life of Atanas Dalchev, the poet, who is one of the sources of inspiration for Teofilov²), and his work as an editor for the Poetry Department of *Plamak* [Flame] magazine helped quite a few alternative texts to see the light of day and reach an audience. The author's poetic pursuits were thus focused on the regional, and in 1970's he was forced to leave the theatre. Only after the end of the 1980's, after the communist doctrine was finally overthrown, did the interest in the author begin to slowly but surely return.

Up to 1989 the works of the poet can be seen as the building blocks of a world that shares the poetic realm of Atanas Dalchev, Nikolai Liliev, and Valeri Petrov, and this is precisely what brings them closer to 'soft lyricism', rather than the works of the April poets. In fact, regardless of whether we are considering the period of the People's Republic of Bulgaria or the newly established democratic state in the 1990's, with his devil-may-care attitude, the poet always remained aside from any current vanities or worries, so much so that his poems bring the reader a sense of timelessness.

During the socialist regime Ivan Teofilov was significantly more visible and more successful as a master of the puppet theatre. His success was marked by the play *Chasovnikar* [The Clocksmith] which revealed the potential of the puppet as a tool of dramaturgy. The puppet was no longer only capable of expressing humour, but also suitable for drama. This was only one of the reasons why Ivan Teofilov's *Chasovnikar* [The Clocksmith] was awarded the Special Prize of the International Union of Puppetry Art (UNIMA) in 1964.

Interesting is the timing of Teofilov's plays, which always seemed to come out at critical moments for the development of the Bulgarian puppet theatre for adults. Ever since the foundation of puppet theatre in 1924, followed by Mara Penkova's theatre in the 1940's and the subsequent Central Puppet Theatre in Sofia, among the plays for children there were always plays for adults as well. Admittedly, this type of theatre has had its ups and downs.³ The 1960's and the 1970's were very uncertain times for puppetry.

The creative freedom Mara Penkova had fought for and her insistence that there should be more plays for adults lived on as traditions of the Central Puppet Theatre in Sofia, where Ivan Teofilov put on his shows. In the 1960's and the 1970's he rediscovered that adults were very much interested in the art of puppetry. In 1965 Teofilov was working on the script for *Yunakat i zlatnata yabalka* [The Hero and the Golden Apple] with Nikolina Georgieva, then

¹ For more details see Дойнов 2012: 197-205.

² For more details on the poet's appreciation of Dalchev's talent see Теофилов 2013: 34, 50, 75, 87, 99.

³ For more on the development of puppetry in Bulgaria see the book by Elena Vladova (Владова 2009) in the reference list of the Bulgarian text.

later he created *Krali Marko*⁴, using an unsuccessful script for a film by Veselin Hanchev. With it the poet positions the puppet for the first time in the unexplored territory of the folk epic. The puppet proved to be an apt instrument for the purpose of recreating the legendary figure of Krali Marko. Masculinity and heroism were instilled through the action. Teofilov not only expanded the ways in which puppets were used, but he changed the mode of the epic: we were no longer juxtaposing the Bulgarian, local hero with the foreign one, but the good versus evil in all its forms (treachery, despair, hopelessness). In this way the characters in the play achieved deeper expressiveness, which carried the dramatism of the Bulgarian epic and allowed viewers to live through what was happening on the stage. It is then no surprise that Ivan Teofilov's play was part of the International Puppet Festival in Charleville-Mézières.

But the People's Republic of Bulgaria had pushed Ivan Teofilov to the periphery, making him invisible to his own literary community. At the same time, however, Teofilov received high international acclaim for his puppet dramaturgy. After the democratic changes of the 1990's Ivan Teofilov's puppetry was no longer central to his work, centre stage was reserved for his poetry from that moment on. Today, outside academic circles, the author's success in puppetry is almost forgotten.

These two sides to his work are somehow brought together by the clock and the unusual time it keeps. The special attention he pays to time is a primary characteristic feature of the poet's collections about Plovdiv. In them, Plovdiv is not simply his birthplace, Plovdiv is timeless, it is a city set in eternity.

According to literary critics, the figure of Ivan Teofilov, often referred to as *the poet of Plovdiv*, often turns to the image of the city of his birth in *Amfiteatar* [Amphitheatre] and *Grad varhu gradove* [City on Top of Cities]. Plamen Doynov comments that this nickname⁵ gives us the right idea about Teofilov's strong connection to Plovdiv⁶, but at the same time this can be seen as a constraint to metatextual interpretations of his works. The poetry in the two collections, mentioned above, goes beyond the factual, it creates a world of poetic cosmopolitanism and, as literary critics such as Svetlozar Igov and Rozaliya Likova have repeatedly noted, far exceeds the genre territories of a mere poetic narrative about Plovdiv. Each of the poems is about the city but at the same time it is not. Each carries a sense of harmony, of happiness and ease of everyday life.

The poems in these two collections, dedicated to Plovdiv, as well as all the following poetic works by Ivan Teofilov, refuse to touch upon social topics and are marked by a sense of joy, the joy of life itself. In them time passes in a special way. The focus is not on a bright, utopian future, but on an intimate present moment. Important is that single moment in time, in which the whole point of human existence is concentrated. It should come as no surprise then that the speaker in the poem *Pristapva zaleza* [The Sunset is Near] says "the world is simple" (Теофилов 2001: 22). Living in the moment, irrespective of the time of day, carries wisdom. Ordinary existence could be the source of wonder and inner peace:

...And I look
To the sky – rich, chaotic and fresh,
Where the sun is just a mere afterthought.
And I am free to now compare
The city and the sunset with
A gilded cage with bright and noisy birds...⁷

⁴ Krali Marko is a legendary figure from Bulgarian folklore (t.n. PP).

⁵ For more detail see Дойнов 2009: 12.

⁶ In his book Ivan Teofilov often talks about his feelings for Plovdiv, even after he moved to Sofia (see Теофилов 2013).

⁷ All poems used in the present paper, unless otherwise indicated, have been translated by Polina Petkova.

(Теофилов 2001: 24)

*A moment later – the light – exploded
Chattering and loud it took over.
The city put on its shades
And fell into the sound of silence.*

(Теофилов 2001: 85)

Light gleefully is pouring over the ordinary weekday. The suddenness of it all reveals a sense of wonder and cannot leave one impartial to what is going on. The day is no longer ordinary, it is magical. Thus, in the poetry of Ivan Teofilov the goings on in the main street “the café umbrellas / stretch their colourful shadows / over **festive** and **quiet** friendships” (my emphasis - Y. G.; Теофилов 2001: 82). Relationships and togetherness are an occasion to celebrate. Everyday routines are transformed into rituals, and the atmosphere of Teofilov’s world is at the same time ordinary and festive. This is the special power of the poet’s words. Behind the mundane there is a hidden present and to get to it, we need to find a way.

We are led to the miracle of life through a moment of stillness, of looking at what the city has to offer, of feeling the gentle breeze (*Peyzazh s vetrets* [Breezy landscape]), but also through the objects that carry a world that is unknown to us. Matter comes to life, and this helps one to ontologise the world. The city looks at one and comes to life, takes on magical disguise and reveals the wonder that is every day.

In Teofilov’s work clocks and “tick-tocking alarm clocks” (just like in the play *Chasovnikar* [The Clocksmith]) are not meant to take stock of time, whether it is passing or running out. They have a very specific function – to make objects come to ‘life’, they transform objects into miracles of life. That is why the tick-tocking alarm clock on the shelf, like a ray of sunlight, wakes up the pink glass fruit bowl (*Fruktierata* [The Fruit Bowl]) and makes it long for beauty and life. On the other hand, the objects that keep track of time in the poetry of Ivan Teofilov do not only bring a sense of magic to the mundane, but also attach this magical quality to the idea of timelessness.

*The clock is ticking softly in the dark kitchen,
The window is open.*
(Теофилов 2001:27)

*I heard a cricket in your silence,
It very much was ticking like a clock,
And then – a thousand other clocks
As if they were gathered to be fixed*
(Теофилов 2001: 33)

The clock is no longer an object that is used to keep track of time. Its purpose is to point to those moments when one forgets all about the time, moments that lie outside of the reach of any dial. Most often these moments are of happiness and harmony of being:

*But how does the fresh morrow of life creep
(unnoticed by the cane of old transience)
It rings
It rings in the delight of the clock
And makes you feel full of expectation
Of the mark you can make*

In the yard of the world...
(Теофилов 2001: 74)

The ticking of the clock marks a new start. In its essence this poetry is about the time one has. Minutes are slipping away, but they need to be felt, lived, and not counted. Thus, the clock keeps the memory only of the time spent in harmony. That is why Ivan Teofilov's poetry often turns to childhood, a gesture that socialism recognizes as backward and contrary to progress. Teofilov considers childhood as a lost territory of happiness (*Prez detstvoto* [As a Child], *Praznitsi* [Holidays]), but also as a special perspective on the life around us (*Prolet* [Spring]). Similar to Valeri Petrov's *Kray sinyoto more* [By the Blue Sea], here the memory of the past brings back the long-forgotten days spent with the figures of the mother, the father, all of the past relationships, which triggers a sense of nostalgia, sorrow, but at the same time happiness, because one is able to, for a time, return to the past. The ability to live in the moment, to dress up "from the colourful closet" means that one experiences the world as a child. There is a certain naiveté, deeply entrenched in philosophical existence.

Going back in time brings the past, which is dead, and the present, which is life itself, into one harmonic whole:

*The ordinary song of life is sung,
Old, forgotten scents come alive
Of dirt and of growing up
And you feel the lull of life, of death –
Bitter, happy, they come together...*
(Теофилов 2001: 73)

The poet turns to the past in order to enrich the present moment. In this way the events of the past, and those of the present, are not in juxtaposition, instead, they play off one another and are bound together in their timelessness (*Kapana*⁸ [The Trap]). The city is the space where all of this happens, with its lively buildings, streets, hills that are peering into people. The city is not a social or a dynamic space, it is deeply personal and in it past and present moments are instilled into one another. The places appear when they are seen, looked at, remembered:

*Ancient things and happy things
Ordinary things here are intertwined,
Tree canopies are sitting atop of everything.
Places etched into my childhood memories
Reveal
Magical memories.*
(Теофилов 2001: 40)

The topics of personal significance and those of collective memory, of historical significance, find their place in everyone. One realises one's part in one's own history, but also in the history of the world, which is relieved by the ruins, seen as the keepers of times gone by.

*We discuss the bright hopes
Of our time and the next...*
(Теофилов 2001: 79)

⁸ The name of a poem here that also coincides with the name of an important art district in Plovdiv. The name derives from the winding streets of the area where it is easy to lose one's way, even for locals (t.n. PP).

In the trap of streets (*Ulitsa „D-r St. Chakmakov* [Dr. S. Chakmakov St.]) and houses from the Revival period (*Vazrozhdenskata kashta* [House of the Revival]), the lyrical speaker is trying to find himself by taking a plunge into history. His blood turns into a clock that does not distinguish past from present (*Vazrozhdenskata kashta* [House of the Revival]). The clock does not keep the usual track of time, but intertwines the days gone by with the present, making one a collection of both. And searching through the inspirations of the ancient city, one gains the ability to perceive the surrounding world in a creative way. That is why, even though the city is present as a collection of objects, in it we also find artists and craftsmen, who draw their creativity from the wonders of the city. The city space in Ivan Teofilov inspires. It carries the characteristics of peaceful, mundane existence, in which the past carries “the broken puppets of ancient times” into the present and tries to create happy moments for the clock to keep.

The city and its extraordinary clocks develop further in the puppet plays of Ivan Teofilov. In *Chasovnikar* [The Clocksmith], we find the city with its legendary figures of the coffee shopkeeper, the barber, the clocksmith, the undertaker. Time passes by slowly and has almost come to a halt. On the one hand, this is revealed by the repetitive actions of the characters every single day, and on the other, objects are suggestive of time standing still. In *Chasovnikarnitsa Hri-100* [Hristo’s 100 Clocks] the clocks are extraordinary. Here, the clocks no longer keep track of personal time, they are no longer instruments for keeping time at all. People are used to taking part in a never-changing life and we cannot help but find a bit of harmony in that. Harmony is a prominent characteristic feature of the lyrical speaker of Ivan Teofilov, in spite of what the theatre critic Vasil Stefanov has to say about the mundane life of the characters of the poet (Стефанов 1971: 93).

In a talk with Georgi Gospodinov, Ivan Teofilov shared his experience of World War II: “The peaceful existence in the neighbourhood was suddenly drastically different and seemed somehow deformed. Instead of seeing and hearing carts in the streets, you saw military vehicles in all shapes and sizes.” (Теофилов, Господинов 2023: 35). Ordinary life of habit and routine is interrupted by the news of war in the puppet play *Chasovnikar* [The Clocksmith] as well. The changes leave a lasting mark on the average person, in this case, the clocksmith himself. Teofilov poses the problem of the loss of humanity and the perception of man as an instrument, an object. No longer is the city, or are other objects, peering into people, roles are reversed, and one perceives as one’s identity the insensitivity of the material world. With its anti-war themes, the play highlights the psychological aspect of war and poses the always current issue of its victims.

The action is organised in an innovative way for the Bulgarian stage of the 1960’s. The life of the clocksmith is represented in two modes: through actors using mime and through puppets. At one point, during an evening walk, both modes are mixed into one and on the stage both actors and puppets perform together, complementing each other. A number of critics take this as proof for the proclivity of Ivan Teofilov for the principle of alienation, often associated with Brecht. However, according to Vasil Stefanov, only certain formal characteristics are found of this type of theatre in Ivan Teofilov.

The works of Ivan Teofilov are a harmonic whole. The poet, translator, puppet dramaturg, experimenter – all inhabit the same space. These are his harbours, as Georgi Gospodinov calls them at the book launch of *Za radostta i ezika* [On Joy and Language]⁹. Ivan Teofilov draws into these harbours the puppet and its city clocks, the past and the present, the moment and eternity, the city... so we can all take a good look at them, then realise that the magic of life lies with us:

*And there, at the very brink of day
Amidst a labyrinth of houses and hopes,*

⁹ See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbEKCXT1hRY>> 29 April 2024.

*Full of the magic of life
With its sunny face alight
The city is peering into us.*
(Теофилов 2001: 51)