

**RETHINKING BULGARIAN LITERARY MODERNISM –  
25 YEARS AFTER THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL**

**Ivan Hristov**

**Abstract:** For decades under the communist regime in Bulgaria, literary modernism was renounced as a deviation from the “correct” norm of Socialist Realism. Modernist works by some of classic Bulgarian writers were disparaged and neglected, while other modernist writers were directly struck from the canon and forgotten. With the partial liberalization of the regime during the 1960s, some of the Bulgarian modernists, especially those with leftist convictions, were rehabilitated. However, the true rethinking of Bulgarian modernism came shortly before the Transition – during the 1980s. Modernism began to be recognized ever more often as a positive and creative movement, and after 1989, it was acknowledged as one of the most significant phenomena within Bulgarian literature. After 1989, numerous monographs about individual authors and literary circles, as well as whole modernist trends, contributed to a new interpretation of that period and to the objective construction of a heretofore unwritten history of the movement. The present paper aims to present and analyze this process of change, with a particular focus on the question of the local–the global, as well as to examine the specific interrelations between the various modernist and totalitarian ideologies.

**Introduction**

The year is 1980. In the Science and Art Publishing House’s “Dictionary of Literary Terms” (4<sup>th</sup> revised and expanded edition) by Lozan Nitsolov, Lyubomir Georgiev, Hristo Dzhambazki and Spas Spasov, we find the following definition of modernism: “(from the French “modern,” meaning newest, contemporary) A general term for diverse, contradictory and primarily anti-realistic movements in world literature during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which attempt to introduce something new, contemporary or original into it.

Bourgeois literary critics attempt to tie modernism to the epoch as they see it. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is a time of wars and human catastrophes, whose causes remain mysterious for the bourgeois “modern man.” For the most typical mod-

ernism, reality is ugly and irrational, thus it must be rejected, destroyed, or dubbed illusory. Man is a weak, solitary creature, thus literature must reflect his helplessness, alienation and pessimism.

The defenders of modernism proclaimed Balzac and Flaubert, Gorky and Sholokhov for “traditional” writers, while Joyce and Kafka, Robbe-Grillet and Ionesco are called innovators, daring avant-gardists, the sole creators of new, contemporary literature. They claim that the particularities of our dynamic, contradictory, tragic era can be reflected only in art that represents the world in a hazy, mystified aspect, while man is characterized as a powerless, crippled, nondescript creature. The reality of our times for most modernists is joyless, nightmarish, and unfathomable, while human existence is seen as a dream, as babbling in one’s sleep. This predisposes them towards the creation of myths”. (...) Moreover: “A series of aesthetic notions held by modernist writers are based on the reactionary philosophy of subjective idealism, on Nietzsche’s extreme individualism, on Bergson’s intuitivism, on Freud’s psychoanalysis, on agnosticism, pragmatism, abstractionism, etc.

Modernism is not a separate literary school. The writers and poets called “modernists” are those who in the past or today belong to the literary schools or movements known as Symbolism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism, Acmeism, Surrealism, Cubism, Abstractionism, Existentialism and so on. The common factor that unites representatives of these schools and movements is the inclusion of decadent ideas and tendencies within literary works, the disengagement of the writer with the people and reality, individualism and cosmopolitanism, aestheticism and formalism. The literature of modernism reflects above all the decay, aimlessness and hopelessness of bourgeois society during the stage of imperialism” [Nitsolov et al., 1980: 461-462].

During the 1980s, the basic oppositions between modernism and socialist realism could be expressed as follows:

Realism – Antirealism  
Proletariat – Bourgeoisie  
Clear, progressive – Hazy, mystified  
Objective materialism – Subjective idealism  
Collectivism – Extreme individualism  
Marx – Nietzsche  
Socialism – Imperialism  
Content – Form  
Optimism – Pessimism  
Traditional – Anti-traditional  
Unified and normative – Not unified, not normative

The authors of this dictionary entry on modernism conclude: “While noting what is valuable and progressive in modernist poetry, belle-lettres and dramaturgy, and while recognizing some of its achievements especially in the realm of artistic form, socialist realist criticism clearly points out what is decadent and corrupting within them.

In some of its variants, modernism strives to exert its influence in socialist countries as well, primarily through emphasizing the artistic work's form over its content, introducing hazy notions, drawing freakish images, expressing feelings of skepticism and pessimism which are foreign to our way of life, rejecting or neglectfully underestimating our literary heritage, which it proclaims as old-fashioned, unneeded, and so on. Our artistic intelligentsia has put up stiff resistance to formalist and abstractionist fads, and against the penetration of bourgeois influence into socialist culture" [Nitsolov et al., 1980: 463].

### **Rethinking the literary heritage of Bulgarian modernism during the 1980s**

Most likely the authors of this article did not yet know that in 1979 Simeon Hadzhikosev's book "Bulgarian Symbolism" had come out. In practice, they reiterate the basic viewpoints held by Bulgarian literary criticism from the 1950s, whose standard model was Georgi Tsanev's 1952 article "From Symbolism towards Realism and Social Poetry." The story of Bulgarian symbolism turns out to be especially important for the history of the rehabilitation of modernism, since it was the first modernist school to be rehabilitated. Although it was the most viciously attacked during the 1950s, Symbolism turned out to be convenient for rehabilitation in the late 1970s, most probably because it was asocial and avoided political messages. This was not the case with avant-garde writers. Their rehabilitation was put off until the end of the 1980s, if not even later.

In his article "From Symbolism towards Realism and Social Poetry" from 1952, Georgi Tsanev declares:

"Symbolism has arisen as a reaction to realism. The Symbolist flees from reality, from social struggles, from social problems. For them, art is an end in itself. They not only flee from reality – they profess the conviction that reality is unknowable. The philosophical basis of Symbolism is subjective idealism, which proclaims the feebleness of reason and science. Symbolist poetry is **antirealistic**, **antidemocratic**, extremely **subjective** and **individualistic**. It concerns itself with the strange, exceptional and sometimes sickly states of the human soul. One of the teachers of Symbolists everywhere is that most reactionary of German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche, preacher of an extreme and brutal individualism. His obscurantist philosophy would later form the basis of dehumanizing Hitlerism. It is clear that Symbolist poetry reflects the psychology of a social class that has lost the historical ground beneath its feet, which is devoid of prospects and afraid of the future. This is the bourgeois-capitalist class, which as of the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was no longer the creative and rising class – it had long since played its positive historical role and was in decline. The bourgeoisie, having passed into its final phase – the imperialist phase of complete decay – is afraid to look objectively at reality, since a new social power has arisen there that is struggling against it in an organized fashion and which will replace it on the historical stage. It is afraid of the revolutionary proletariat. It does not want literature that would give true, realistic knowledge about social life. According to Zhdanov, Russian Symbolism (and this holds true for every Symbolism) expresses 'an animalistic fear of the future proletarian revolution.'

Whence comes the gloomy pessimism of Symbolist poetry. Whence also arises its favourite topic of death (...) Symbolist literature is the artistic expression of **decadent bourgeois ideology**" [Tsanev 1952, 242-243]. If we compare this with the dictionary entry from the 1980s, we will see that the situation has not changed much, yet nevertheless a series of scholars point to Simeon Hadzhikosev's book "Bulgarian Symbolism and European Modernism" from 1974 as the first crack in the harmonious doctrine of socialist realism. In this book, Simeon Hadzhikosev conducts a comparative analysis of Bulgarian symbolism with French, German and Russian Symbolism. The connection is obvious and does not require substantiation, but in his next book, "Bulgarian Symbolism" from 1979, Simeon Hadzhikosev states:

"Due to the force of historical circumstances, the study of symbolism was also neglected for a certain period of time (the 1950s). The damages inflicted by the cult of personality within the sphere of literature and culture also appeared within scientific and critical thinking. The simplified interpretation of Lenin's idea of 'two national cultures' became the reason for a series of important questions stemming from our literary heritage to receive dogmatic, untrue elucidations or simply to disappear from researchers' field of vision. Let me recall that back then debates were held about the works of Vazov, Pencho Slaveykov, and Yordan Yovkov, while Symbolism was stigmatized as a decadent, reactionary literary school and was practically thrown out of literary history. Of course, today we should not look with arrogance or suspicion on the naïve mistakes made by literary history or criticism from thirty years ago, because they trace out the complex and contradictory curve of an inevitable stage in our young socialist literature and culture. Inevitable, because the victory of the socialist revolution presupposes not only economic and social, but also cultural restructuring of society; the triumphant revolutionary class also "inventories" its inherited cultural heritage and designates – according to its specific goals and tasks – what part belongs to it and what part is hostile to its ideology. It is perfectly natural in the years of post-war excitement that part of our literary heritage would turn out to be unacceptable and become the object of simplified, dogmatic interpretation, which has hindered the development of literary-critical thought" [Hadzhikosev, 1979: 5].

What's more: "Even during the 1960s, when a decisive change in the study of Symbolism could be noted, this simplified interpretation of it under the alternative line of realism – antirealism was not entirely liquidated – Symbolism's realistic features and motifs were endorsed, while its symbolistic features were subject to critical analysis. This unique **dichotomic** type of analysis reflects the opposition of realism vs. antirealism which is traditional in our literature, as well as the lack of a sufficiently clear understanding of Symbolism as a literary and social-psychological phenomenon" [Hadzhikosev, 1979: 7].

Simeon Hadzhikosev points to Panteley Zarev's multivolume "Panorama of Bulgarian Literature," in which Zarev proposes a new interpretational model for Symbolism: "For the first time in 'Panorama of Bulgarian Literature' Panteley Zarev offers a well-developed Marxist interpretation of the contradictory works of complex poets such as Pencho Slaveykov, Peyo Yavorov, Kiril Hristov, Teodor Trayanov, Nikolai Liliev and others, breaking away from the traditional schema of realism/anti-realism. He manages to cross that ticklish Rubicon be-

yond which many believed that the rehabilitation of modernism and Symbolism begins. Zarev showed that the interpretation of symbolist or modernist elements within themselves on no account means the restoration of modernism, but rather is a means for a fuller penetration into the contradictory world of the author. [Hadzhikosev 1979, 9]" Here we see that Hadzhikosev has managed to loosen the grip of socialist realism's first hold – the opposition Realism/Anti-Realism.

In the 1970s, a series of books on Bulgarian literature by scholars from Poland and Czechoslovakia strongly influenced the rehabilitation of Bulgarian modernism. Such was the case of the book by the Slovak scholar Jan Koshka: "Bulgarian Modernism in Poetry." Hadzhikosev talks about this case in his book:

"While the opinion of Bulgarian and foreign scholars more or less coincides as to their general assessment of the originality of Bulgarian Symbolism, with respect to their scholarly methodology certain differences can be noted. They are predetermined by the adherence to different models for reconstructing literary history. The predilection towards the **Eurocentric** model, which is characterized by the isolation of modernism into a separate school, places Bulgarian Symbolism into a slightly more unusual position than we are used to imagining it in. This is characteristic of the book by Jan Koshka, which makes apparent the Slovak scholar's ambition to suggest his own model for the period of the development of Bulgarian literature which he studies (Jan Koshka "Bulgarian Modernism in Poetry"). The explication of such a conception is largely an a priori condition for Jan Koshka, since in a series of Slavic literatures the isolation of modernism as an independent stage in literary development has long been established. (...)

The conception held by contemporary Bulgarian literary studies, however, is far closer to the viewpoint of Soviet criticism, which sees modernism solely as one of the schools within Russian literature which makes no claims to comprehensiveness or normativity. This conception is far more fitting to the real processes going on within Bulgarian literature at that time, since it more correctly reflects the complex picture of the literary process in which the change of various styles and schools took place against the backdrop of the so-called "parallel belated development," as the Soviet literary critic Georgi Gachev so aptly formulated it. In rejecting in principle the model suggested by Jan Koshka, we must emphasize that within the framework of a specific study, which presupposes a certain degree of abstraction from the literary process as a whole, it is not only possible, but also expedient as an expression of a given literary methodology."

And so, albeit only "within the framework of a specific study, which presupposes a certain degree of abstraction from the literary process as a whole," Hadzhikosev weakens the grip of yet another exceptionally important contention – namely that Bulgarian modernism is not unified.

If we're talking about Bulgarian Symbolism, however, why not talk about Bulgarian expressionism as well? Indeed, in 1988 Edwin Sugarev's book "Bulgarian Expressionism" appeared. It was followed by Tsvetanka Atanasova's book "The Misal [Thought] Circle," published by Sofia University Press in 1991, dedicated entirely to Bulgaria's first modernist circle, Elka Dimitrova's "Lost History: Aspects of the Mythical and the Historical in Bulgarian Poetry from the 1920s" – Sofia, Boyan Penchev, 2001 and others.

## Conclusion

What is the end of this story about the rehabilitation of Bulgarian modernism? In “A Short Dictionary of Literary and Linguistic Terms” by Amelia Licheva and Gergana Dacheva from 2013, we find:

“Modernism (from the Latin for ‘contemporary’). According to the contemporary usage of the term, modernism encompasses all arts and has its roots in the 1890s (fin-de-siecle ideas). Looked at politically, aesthetic modernism is tied to the start of the industrial era and of post-revolutionary society; it arises on the world stage as a result of World War One. (...) Modernists attempt to break with tradition and conventions through the use of new forms, techniques and styles. Their works are concentrated around the feeling of loss, the absence of illusion, hopelessness; the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung are accepted, while special attention is paid to language. Modernists look upon the world itself as fragmentary. It is no accident that authors such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce believe that through their works they can compensate for the decomposition and disintegration, which is why they also see art as a potentially integrating as well as restorative force, as a remedy for the uncertainty of the new world. In this sense, even when their works express chaos, modernists slip in order through the creation of models based on allusions, symbols and myths” [Licheva and Dacheva 2013, 145-146]. We can see that in the end, all the oppositions between socialist realism and modernism have fallen away.

## REFERENCES

- Личева, А., Дачева, Г. 2012.** *Кратък речник на литературните и лингвистичните термини*. София: Колибри.
- Ницолов, А., Георгиев, А. и др. 1980.** *Речник на литературните термини* (4-то, преработено и допълнено издание). София: Наука и изкуство.
- Хаджикосев, С. 1979.** *Българският символизъм*. София: Български писател.
- Цанев, Г. 1952.** От символизъм към реализъм и социална поезия. – В: Пантелей Зарев, Огнян Бояджиев. *Развитие на българската литература*, с. 242–243; София: Български писател.

Correspondence address:

**Ivan Hristov** – Assoc. Prof., PhD  
Institute for Literature  
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences  
52 Shipchenski prohod Blvd, Bl. 17  
1113 Sofia, Bulgaria  
Phone: (+359) 885 501 723  
e-mail: christoff78@abv.bg