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Biblical Villains and Historical Narratives in Modern Bulgarian Culture: From Secularised Figures to Postsecular Figurality

Introduction

When investigating *Slavonic parabiblical traditions*, an issue that should not be overlooked is the functioning of biblical and parabiblical narrative templates in modern Bulgarian culture.[1] It is not only a question of acknowledging that there has been continuity and that the "old", pre-modern, and presumably religion-based motifs continue to function in the modern world

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as carriers of meaning, but also of addressing how and under what circumstances these meanings matter – that is, how the (para)biblical may operate and interfere today.[2] I would argue that it is necessary to engage a multiplicity of perspectives: from cultural history and cultural transfer, through the history of literature and arts, to the history of ideas and the humanities themselves. The case of Bulgarian culture seems to provide an interpretative challenge. While being shaped by Eastern Orthodoxy and fostered by Byzantine tradition, since the nineteenth century it has followed a path of adaptation to modern ideas and principles that goes beyond the patterns associated with both the Byzantine Commonwealth and *Slavia Orthodoxa*. As such, Bulgarian culture provides a particularly revealing site when it comes to encounters between different modes of understanding the world. I would suggest that biblical and parabiblical traditions have become an important nexus for various intertwinements that take place *when Modernity and Eastern Orthodoxy encounter one another.*

The main assumption is that as far as (early) modern Bulgarian culture is concerned, one may find a peculiar mode of *non-reading* the Bible that stems from both the specific notion of the Holy Scriptures in the (Bulgarian) Orthodox Church and the specific development of the local (Bulgarian) modernity. It is important to recall that the notion of the Bible as the primal and coherent corpus of texts that is available for worshipers is typical of Western European modes of reading that have been influenced by (post) Reformation controversies and Protestant hermeneutics. In Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Bible is perceived as an integral part of Holy Tradition, not as a separate authority or consistent book. It speaks within the sacred landscape of the Church – namely, in liturgy and iconography – so its narrative and message are mediated by ritually structured time and space. Moreover, this liturgical essence of its reception refers not only to the time and place of its reading, but also to the nature of interpretation, which is collective, traditional, and faithful.[3] Indeed, in the South Slavic context, the Holy Scriptures were translated into the local Slavic language as early as in the 9th century by the Byzantine monks St. Cyril and Methodius. At least in the early period

[2] The current text exploits concepts and ideas discussed previously in Drzewiecka (2009, 2016); Джевиецка (2012).

[3] The question of the Eastern Orthodox notion of the Bible and its interpretation is only briefly sketched here, although it requires far more consideration as a research issue. See, e.g., Florovsky (1972); Breck (2001). Cf. Dunn et al. (2000).

following the translation, the text could have been comprehended easily by the local population. Moreover, a very significant role in transmitting knowledge about sacred (hi)story was played by folk legends and popular readings that enhanced the Biblical message. As Florentina Badalanova Geller suggests, referring to the storytellers and singers who composed and transferred these folk legends and popular readings, "the Bible was a book ever imagined, but never held" (Badalanova Geller, 2017, p. 267). Bulgarian people were provided with motifs and tales from biblical and parabiblical traditions, which were interpreted mostly in terms of oral and vernacular experience; as such, these contributed to a worldview that functioned beyond the institutional Church and traditional hierarchies such as "written – oral" and "official – unofficial".

However, in the nineteenth century the Church Slavonic language used in liturgy proved to be incomprehensible for many members of rural and urban communities. Apart from the Orthodox rituals and iconography, vernacular folk legends and popular readings were the main sources of knowledge about the biblical narrative. Most of these were known through oral transmission and printed editions of religious booklets and literary and folkloric collections (for more, see Badalanova Geller, 2017). The Bible functioned more as an object of cult, not as a book that was read (Аретов, 2016).

Although the first translations of biblical books into modern Bulgarian language were made in the second half of the nineteenth century,[4] they were initiated and supported by "foreign" biblical societies, which was seen as a threat of proselytism. Therefore, the Bible as a printed edition was not actually read; it was even regarded with suspicion. The early modern reception of the Bible in Bulgarian conditions may thus be described as paradoxical (Аретов, 2016). On one hand, the authority of the biblical narrative was (still) unquestionable; on the other, the efforts underway at that time to establish secular education in modern Bulgarian language did not serve the popularisation of the Bible. The official translation of the Holy Scriptures into modern Bulgarian, endorsed by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, was not published until 1925.

As part of the broader process of modernisation, including in Bulgaria, at the turn of twentieth century, the Bible started to function in two

[4] For more on Bulgarian translations of the Bible, see, e.g., Марковски (1926–1927); Clark (1971); Solak (1997), Димитров (2022).

different and supposedly autonomous orders: the religious (Church-related) and the aesthetic (secular). This differentiation has both an axiological and ontological character and is often commented on in terms of the secularisation that manifested itself in the process of the religious sources moving away from their original (institutional, Orthodox) context. The new sources of knowledge about the biblical narrative were secular in the sense that they were produced by intellectuals outside church circles. Moreover, they seemed ideologically foreign because they usually originated from Western European cultures, which were rooted in non-Eastern Orthodox faiths – namely, Catholicism and Protestantism.

The modern paradigm shift transformed the social authority of religion, as well as the relation between the "religious" and the "secular" domains of life; as such, it had a serious influence on Bulgarian cultures, but one needs to remember the impact that the Communist period had on the scope of potential understandings of the notions the religious/secular. Due to programmatic atheism, the secular did meant not "non-religious" but "anti-religious", and cultural references to religious traditions were perceived (at most) as a manifestation (albeit problematic) of aesthetic convention or hubris. Therefore, when addressing the issue of Biblical narrative in Bulgarian literature, I will refer to the religious–secular opposition – particularly as it concerns the relationship between modern, presumably secular, institutions and religious institutions – and thus to the power and authority of those institutions as understood within the Western Christian tradition (cf. Calhoun et al., 2011). However, one must bear in mind that the classification of phenomena as religious or secular is more complicated since different meanings referring to either genealogy or functionality overlap. The use of biblical motifs or figures in literature or politics is often regarded as secular because it occurs outside a religious context, but the use of elements that originated in religion does not necessarily constitute an act of secularisation.

In this paper – taking into account Bulgarian literary works on historical themes – I will explore the "secular" mode of reading and the use of biblical motifs and figures within the realm of modern literature and the arts. However, I will focus not on issues of literary genre or the relationship between facts (sources, models) and their poetic interpretation, but on the master narratives on the Bulgarian nation's past that have been documented, actualised and transmitted in Bulgarian literature since the end of the nineteenth century, and the way in which biblical figures function within them.

History in literature and the question of secularisation

The notion of Bulgarian history in literature has been addressed recently by Albena Hranova (Хранова, 2011) and Wojciech Jóźwiak (2018), although considerably more research exists with regard to particular cases representing Bulgarian historical fiction.[5] This question is one of the most sensitive in Bulgarian literary studies as it relates to both the general issue of the historical past and its relevance for the needs of national identity and the presumption that Bulgarian literature lacks a great novel. However, the subject of this paper will not be the issue of fact vs. fiction relationship, nor the matter of (historical, literary) representation, nor the role of historiography and literature in creating views on the national past (cf. Хранова, 2011), nor the interpretative models which seem to occupy Bulgarian historical prose, such as the "promise–punishment" or "salvation–fall" models (cf. Jóźwiak, 2018). Indeed, when it comes to literary (hi)stories about the rise and the fall of the medieval Bulgarian kingdom (or the rise and the fall of the national revival ideal/movement), the prevailing interpretation is that this reflects an epistemological pattern or convention that reveals the fundamental role of the tradition of Church historiography. Looking at historical plots about the fall of the Bulgarian kingdom through the prism of the "promise–punishment" or "salvation–fall" models confirms the widespread thesis that thinking and writing about history and historical change has been underpinned by Judeo-Christian eschatology.

In his book *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Carl Löwith (1949) discusses transformations in the image of history. In his account, the image of history was one in which history was understood as the course of events, endowed with metaphysical significance and moving towards its future fulfilment (Wiśniewski, 2020, p. 391).

[5] There are only a few monographs devoted to Bulgarian historical prose in terms of this genre and its role in Bulgarian literature (Пенчев, 2012, 2018; Г. Цанев, 1963, 1977). However, they carry the load of the ideological inclination of their authors and are not relevant to the question of biblical plots. See also: Радев et al. (2002). It needs to be emphasised that the two-volume monograph by Hranova (Хранова, 2011) gives a monumentally designed framework and thoroughly investigates cases of the relationship between literature and historiography in Bulgaria.

The main assumption was that thinking about history is religiously motivated because it has its historical origins in Christianity. For Löwith, the sources refer to Judeo-Christian heritage as they are (crypto)theological in nature. Other thinkers have suggested that modern historiosophy has its roots in the apocalyptic tradition (Taubes, 2009) or was shaped by the gnostic tradition (Voegelin, 1975). In any case, the fundamental thesis developed by Löwith and taken up in subsequent research is that historical consciousness – being based on systems of concepts and interpretative schemes that refer to a transcendent agent – has ultimately been secularised – that is, removed from the domain of religious principles and situated within the immanent world. The subject here is so-called Western historical consciousness, and the discussion is framed by Western experiences of secularisation, understood as the differentiation of social spheres and emancipation from the authority of religious symbols and Christian discourse. The concept of Western historical consciousness has itself been the subject of extensive debate, with different scholars locating its origins in different historical and intellectual traditions, often within the frameworks of political theology or postsecularism. The main question is what happened to the "old" (presumably religiously motivated) horizon of meaning when the "new", modern (presumably secular) world emerged. Is it necessary to interpret these changes, which have been occurring since the late nineteenth century, in terms of secularisation as a sociological and/or ideological process? Is it still conceptually fruitful to interpret these changes in terms of a decline of religion, its privatisation, or its reinterpretation?[6] The presumption is that there has indeed been some kind of transformation within the attitude towards religion. If we do live in a secular age in the terms of Charles Taylor (2007), i.e., within changed conditions of understanding and practising faith, then what would be the meaning of the biblical figures in historical narratives nowadays? Is their usage in a presumably secular context a relic of the old world, a well-known convention, or even a prostheses? I would like to argue that the usage of biblical figures in a "secular" context is a phenomenon that still has something to reveal.

I have focused on selected literary manifestations of the modern usage of biblical figures that refer to the greatest villains in persuasive narratives about the fall of states. In the case of Bulgarian culture, the figures that seem to be most relevant are Judas and Cain, which should come as a surprise when their

[6] On the issues of secularisation, cf. Casanova (2007); Calhoun et al. (2011).

strong and persuasive image in Christian tradition is considered. Moreover, Judas's act of betrayal seems to be one of the main motifs that recurs within the Bulgarian master narrative (cf. Джевиецка, 2012). Therefore, my starting point will be the presumption that in the Bulgarian case the Christian narrative (i.e., the Gospel story and its Church interpretation) has been subjected to immanentisation and historicisation, i.e., the point of reference has been shifted to the immanent sphere of Bulgarian history. The transcendent dimension has been pushed into the background, if not completely removed, so one may see it as a manifestation of the secularisation process. Being radically decontextualised, the meaning of the (religious) narrative gains its validity within a national – and entirely secular – domain. In the following sections, I would like to challenge that notion by looking at the role of biblical villains in a Bulgarian historical context from a different perspective. My guide will be Hayden White and the postsecular interpretation of his notion of historical imagination that was suggested by Tomasz Wiśniewski (2019, 2020).

(Bulgarian) Judas

In the case of biblical villains, the presupposition is that they are unambiguous figures that represent a particular axiological marker: in literary fiction, they may serve as a metonymy which points directly to a certain ethical message. When it comes to the figure of Judas, he is the traitor who is blamed for the fall of the state, the death of a hero, or loss in a battle. This causative structure is common, and the allusion to the biblical narrative seems fundamental to it, especially given that the first literary texts employing this pattern were written at the end of the nineteenth century, when Orthodox liturgical practice still strongly influenced the social imagination and biblical traditions formed part of readers' horizon of expectations. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Bulgarian intellectual milieu became receptive to Western European approaches to the biblical canon and to (post)Enlightenment reinterpretations of biblical motifs, especially rationalist and mythological ones. Within the master narrative about the Bulgarian past, the unexpected and deeply wrong action of a single man becomes a very powerful image that has both an explanatory and compensatory status. Literary works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that depict the history of the medieval Bulgarian

kingdoms follow this pattern. However, the figure of Judas has been particularly important in interpretations of the betrayal of Vasil Levski (1837–1873), the Bulgarian national hero who fought for freedom from the so-called Turkish yoke and, after being captured under unclear circumstances, was presumably betrayed by a fellow Bulgarian, Pop Krastyo. He was executed as a criminal by the Ottoman authorities in the winter of 1873.

The fact that the fate of this revolutionary has been read through a Christological model (a reading now widely acknowledged) is a truly interesting phenomenon from many points of view.[7] Here, I would only like to emphasise that the obligatory element within this narrative is precisely the betrayal of a comrade and the death sentence handed down by authorities regarded as enemies. However, while this interpretative framework initially had a clear and justified compensatory function because the biblical topos was both clear and expected within the pre-modern framework of Christian doctrine and Church tradition, it later became subject to contestation. Therefore, the history of the betrayal motif as a fixed element in the narrative about Vasil Levski within Bulgarian historical literature in the twentieth century can be summarised as follows: first, the betrayal is individual; then, the betrayal became a collective act; finally, both the moral responsibility for the events and the very fact of the betrayal get blurred. In the course of the development of the narrative, the supposedly unambiguous axiological model is dismantled; nonetheless, the image of the traitor, bearing the name of Judas, remains, yet it is constantly challenged. It turns out that the representation of national history is not so unambiguous or fixed. I would argue that it is not the case that these highly negative figures are subjected to the same interpretation again and again. References to the narrative of Jesus's death and/or Judas's betrayal are still present, but they are often attached to other elements of the basic narrative or treated as provocations. As an illustration, I will discuss a literary work by Stefan Tsanev (b. 1936), *The Last Supper of Deacon Levski* (*Последната вечеря на Дякона Левски*, 1987). However, the reason for my choice is not the fact this is a well-known play from an acclaimed and quite liked writer who is also the author of a very popular synthesis of Bulgarian history[8] and thus

[7] Vasil Levski appears to be the most important figure in the Bulgarian national narrative. There are many studies devoted to this cultural phenomenon. Cf. Липчева-Пранджева (2001); Todorova (2009).

[8] See Tsanev's four volumes of *Bulgarian chronicles* (*Български хроники*, 2006–2009) (С. Цанев, 2021).

has manifested a particular view on the matter of the history of the Bulgarian "soul" (cf. Drzewiecka, 2010). I am interested in the semantic tension that is evoked by clear biblical connotations in the context of the well-established national narrative of Levski as a Bulgarian Jesus. Is the notion of a Bulgarian Jesus a secularised figure because it is used in a secular (non-religious) context? Or is it a religious figure because its genealogy refers to the Christian interpretative schema? Does decontextualisation mean secularisation? Does secularisation mean that the sense given in a religious context is revoked or even rejected?

In his play, Tsanev depicts the last gathering of the important revolutionary activists who were convened by the imprisoned Levski on the night before his execution. Obviously, the secret meeting contaminates biblical images of the Last Supper and the Last Judgement. The conversation that takes place reveals conflicting notions on revolution, liberation, power, and nationality that still function in Bulgarian society today. During the dispute over Levski's work, the fundamental question of betrayal arises. In contrast to the Gospel account, those gathered "at the table" begin to accuse each other of it. Levski emphasises: *Who is my traitor – it is not important anymore. The scary thing is that this nation continues to give birth to traitors*[9] (С. Цанев, 1996, p. 273). This search for the guilty one manifests itself in general criticism of Levski's socio-political views, as well as his not so morally intact personal life and even his attitude towards his comrades. Meanwhile, the protagonist has a difficult choice to make: either accept the unexpected offer of a pardon and continue his work as revolutionist – although in the atmosphere of distrust among his compatriots – or die and become a symbol of the struggle for freedom. Levski decides to accept the death sentence in order to become a voice of the people's conscience. The fact that no one had previously tried to save him from prison is supposedly proof that his death would be more beneficial than staying alive: *This nation – even if finally free – will still need its Apostle of Freedom*[10], concluded Levski (С. Цанев, 1996, p. 305).

What does the reference to Judas do in Tsanev's play? The figure of Judas not only serves to create a metonymy of the sins of the Bulgarian people, but also highlights the mechanically attributed, conventional, and figurative character

[9] *Кой ми е предателят – това не е важно вече. Страшното е, че този народ продължава да ражда предатели*. All translations of the quoted literary works are mine.

[10] *Не, този народ – и свободен – пак ще има нужда от своя Апостол на Свободата.*

of the whole story, in terms of not only Tsanev's work, but also the Bulgarian ethnohistorical narrative about the national hero. It should be emphasised here that one of the comrades, Atanas Pophinov, points out with irony that Levski himself seems to want to be perceived as Christ, and if so, he *needs* Judas.

> For Christ shall be, and Judas shall be… And the simple people believe and seek Judas. There is one to seek! And his bones are there to seek!… Tell it straight – who did you talk into stealing your body from the tomb to make the mystery complete?[11] (С. Цанев, 1996, p. 280)

The biblical reference becomes an expression of a conventional storytelling structure – a well-known trigger for the audience. On the one hand, it is important to remember that, according to Christian doctrine, Jesus did not need Judas in order to fulfil his salvation mission. There was neither predestination nor cause-effect in the strict sense involved. However, it is a common misinterpretation to see the relationship between Jesus and Judas as necessary. This misinterpretation has pervaded modern culture and even became a premise for enhancing the Christological interpretation of Levski's fate. Tsanev makes this popular biblical reference a pretext for a controversial play with meanings, which is quite typical for him, yet it serves to uncover one more convention, i.e., in creating plots and national narratives.

(Bulgarian) Cain

Although Judas is the most persuasive figure in Bulgarian historical narratives, there are other biblical figures that appear in the context of literary representations of the historical past. The name of Cain also serves as a significant biblical reference. It occurs rarely in Bulgarian literature, but when it does it is an obvious reference to the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel – murder and betrayal. The most vivid example is provided by the poem *The Battlefield at Slivnitsa* (*Битка под Сливница*, 1885) by the famous national poet Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), which is about the greatest battle during the Serbian–Bulgarian War in 1885. Here, Serbs are called Cains because by initiating the war they

[11] *Понеже ще става Христос – трябва да има и Юда… И простият народ вярва – и търси Юда. Има да го търси! И костите му има да ги търсят!… Я си кажи направо – кого наговори да ти откраднат тялото от гроба, че да се закръгли мистерията?*

supposedly betrayed the fraternal relationship between the two Slavic nations. Just as in the case of Judas, it is a broken bond – a transgression – that is at the heart of the plot and, as such, functions as a well-known topos.

The fratricide motif is also a key element in the play *Cain and the Magician* (*Каин и Магьосникът*, 1972) by Kamen Zidarov (1902–1987). Moreover, the title of this play signals the crucial role of the Biblical reference to Cain. The story itself is about Tsar Peter I, who ruled in Bulgaria at the beginning of the 10th century, and his brother Prince Benjamin, who, according to a Bulgarian cultural myth, was supposedly the famous yet mysterious Boyan the Magician (for more, see Стойчева, 2017). Interpreting this play requires decoding a few mythologemes that function in Bulgarian culture; these are not as widespread as the image of Pop Krastyo (the alleged traitor of Levski), who is commonly interpreted as Judas, but they are nevertheless documented in numerous cultural texts. The plot setting is based on *Tsar Peter* (*Цар Петър*, 1918), a short story by the controversial (and partially marginalised during Communism) modernist writer Nikolay Raynov (1889–1954), who became famous in the interwar period with his "theosophical poetic version of Bulgarian history" (Стойчева, 1995, p. 161). Raynov offered his own model of historical prose on themes related to the Bulgarian Middle Ages, in which a plot motif would become an ornament, while historical figures would become expressions of human souls (Стойчева, 1995, p. 163). Within this model, history goes in cycles of rising and falling. Thus, Tsar Peter (reign: 927–969), as the successor of the celebrated Bulgarian ruler Simeon the Great (reign: 893–927), represents a period of decline. The negative image of Tsar Peter as a reason for the fall of the Kingdom is typical of Bulgarian historiography and refers to the still unresolved issue of Byzantine/Greek influence in the history of the Bulgarian state (for more, see Daskalov, 2021). The second royal son, Benjamin, is an alchemist and clairvoyant who is directly associated with the Bogomils, followers of a dualist Christian movement condemned by the Church as heresy. They are portrayed as martyrs for their faith who defend the oppressed local population – the Bulgarian people – a motif that recurs throughout the Bulgarian national narrative (for more, see Szwat-Gyłybowa, 2017). Peter is weak and hesitant; he succumbs to court intrigues and makes the biggest mistake of all by sending his brother on a mission to Constantinople, where he subsequently disappears. In the final scene of the play, Peter, although not directly responsible for his brother's supposed death, calls himself Cain.

> One ray was sent here by a god torn from the sun to shine and warm the earth and the people… And there you go… I extinguished it too, and there you go… I killed him too… Now what are we? Kingdom of Cain… Bloody, cut off, cursed, Cain himself sits gloomy on the throne […].[12] (Зидаров, 1987, p. 421)

The fate of Tsar Peter is in fact tragic: as Cain, *he seeks help and comfort from God, and loyalty and love from the people*[13] (Зидаров, 1987, p. 421), but he lives in self-delusion. The loss of his brother, *a shepherd, and a fearless warrior, handsome and clever – like an ancient god*[14] (Зидаров, 1987, p. 421), throws him into despair. However, what is interesting is that there is neither deliberate murder nor intended fault from the side of "Cain"; however, there is a stigma and an immense feeling of guilt, which in fact contradicts the message that is evoked by the Old Testament story, in which Cain does not feel remorse after killing his brother. The well-known "Cain and Abel" topos, which is introduced in the title of the play, turns out to be a trick. It seems to draw attention to the figure of Tsar Peter as a villain, but in fact it is intended to suggest the need for praise of the second royal son, who is acclaimed as a teacher and saviour of the Bulgarian people. The figure of the "wrong" brother is encrypted into the history of Bulgaria and, as such, it is expected to be a clear reference.[15] However, the stigma of Cain appears to be imposed and enforced, and the reason for this misjudgement is the future unfortunate fate of the kingdom, as well as the future critical claims of historians. The conventional interpretation is shown not only as unmotivated and in fact retroactive, but also as deeply biased and compensatory.

When it comes to the figure of the Bulgarian Cain, just as in the case of the Bulgarian Judas, the common structure of storytelling about the history of the Bulgarian nation is disrupted, i.e., subjected to an unexpected shift. In both cases, the starting point is the assumed horizon of expectations of Bulgarian

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[12] *Един лъч беше пратил тук бог от слънцето откъснат, за да свети и топли и земята, и народа… А ето… че и него угасих, а ето… че и него аз… убих… Сега какво сме? Каино царство… Окървавен, отритнат, прокълнат, сам Каин, седнал мрачен на престола* […].

[13] […] *от бога търси помощ и утеха, а от народа – вярност и любов.*

[14] […] *пастир и безстраен воин, красил и умен – като древен бог.*

[15] It is quite interesting that as far as the history of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (681–1018) is concerned, there is another significant episode with brothers, and there is another "wrong" brother who is related to Simeon the Great. It is his older brother, Vladimir-Rasate (reign: 889–893), who was given a kingdom first, but shortly after he was dethroned by their father, Prince Boris-Mihail (reign: 852–889), due to his anti-Christian policy.

readers, who are familiar with the master narrative and its most important heroes through school education and popular readings. This cultural horizon becomes dismantled and one may see it as an intentional gesture of the writers, who move away from the set structure of meanings and interpretive traditions. The use of common biblical topoi refers here to both Christian and national traditions, going beyond a simple genealogical or causal relationship. I would like to argue that, based on the well-established tradition of storytelling, the tension that is documented in these two literary examples may indicate different frameworks; as such, it reveals another dimension of figurality in which the idea is not about reproducing the primary (presumably religious) figure.

Figurality

In terms of biblical figurality, the meaning of the primary figure is revealed to be incomplete. The secondary figure is understood as the fulfilment of the previous one, although it needs its precursor for its own legitimisation and self-revelation as the effect of a long process of progression (or providence). In terms of the Bulgarian master narrative, Pop Krastyo and Tsar Petyr are not fulfilments of the figures of Judas and Cain, yet the fact that they are presented as such seems to be the key element of the poetic interpretation. If every new hero or event is inscribed in an already established model within historical narratives, this is due to the logic of historical consciousness, which is driven by presuppositions about cause-and-effect regularities (cf. Uspenskij, 2017). What happens here is not that events repeat themselves, but that a particular (narrative) pattern is realised; in this case, it is the notion that a fall results from a transgression. If the Bulgarian model concerns the rise and fall of the State, the given events must be presented as its necessary components. Here, both of the transgressions – the betrayal and the fratricide – lead to some kind of collapse: respectively, the end of Levski's mission (and the fall of his revolutionary ideals) and the end of the Golden Age of Bulgarian culture (and the fall of the first Bulgarian medieval state). However, this is not about the cyclical nature of time, nor the cosmic fulfilment of the model, i.e., an eternal repetition of the events of Judas's betrayal and Cain's fratricide, although the usage of biblical topoi has such a hermeneutic potential. The primary figure here is betrayal and fratricide, which seems to constitute a secularised – that is,

universalised or immanentised – version of the biblical pattern and its realisation in Christian historiography. In this perspective, the biblical figurality of Judas and Cain appears to be a secondary – or even imposed – reading which comes to the fore due to the writers' poetic in(ter)ventions within the pattern of transgressions.

Both literary examples discussed above are from the Communist period. It seems rather clear why biblical themes would be present here only as old figures or myths that invite a reading which does not follow the inscribed "religious" (Judeo-Christian) or "secular" (nationalist) meanings, but instead plays with them. The works by Tsanev and Zidarov do not only engage with the inscribed meanings in terms of subversion but also offer another "secular(ised)" reading of history which suggests that what is subjected to delegitimisation is the principle of figurality itself. I would like to address this presupposition in the light of the general question of the secularisation of historical imagination.

Commenting on historical writing and historiography, Hayden White argued that the core of modern Western historical consciousness is figuralism (figurality) and its secularised procedures.[16] Although his focus was on professional historiography, the main issue that he developed in his work concerned writing history in general. According to White, writing about the past is inherently subjected to the mechanisms of storytelling and (en)figuration.

[16] The notion of the figure and figural mechanism, as well as the conceptual distinctions between figuration and enfiguration are discussed in Wiśniewski (2019, 2020). Since White did not explain the difference between the two notions, Wiśniewski proposes: *I would suggest the following understanding of figuration, emplotment and enfiguration: the first term, explored in works including 'The Rhetoric of Interpretation', describes the process of structuring narratives using linguistic tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Emplotment, meanwhile, involves ascribing to a narrative (or a part of it – to a certain protagonist, for example) one of the available plot types, i.e., romantic, tragedy, comedy or satire. Any such choice, as White states in* Metahistory, *necessarily entails particular modes of argumentation and has ideological implications. The third concept, enfiguration, is the most recent addition to White's vocabulary. It refers to the totality of traits, both tropic and plot-related, of particular agents, places or actions included in a narrative, meaning that it thus refers also to the definition of the relations pertaining between these elements within the whole course of the narrative as it progresses towards its fulfilment. Defined as such, enfiguration includes elements of both figuration and emplotment as particular elements of constructing narratives* (Wiśniewski, 2020, p. 404). It is also necessary to acknowledge that there is a vast literature on White's conceptual framework, as well as the notions of figurality and literary representation in general. However, since my aim is to explore a specific case of Bulgarian cultural memory and literature, I will follow only one interpretative perspective – that provided by Wiśniewski – so that some possible insights regarding the theoretical discussion may reveal themselves.

> Narration requires that historical agents, events, institutions, and processes to be […] enfigured in a twofold way. First, they must be imaged as the kinds of characters, events, scenes, and processes met with in stories–fables, myths, rituals, epics, romances, novels, and plays. And secondly they must be troped as bearing relationships to one another of the kind met with in the plot-structures of generic story types, such as epic, romance, tragedy, comedy, and farce. (White, 2013, p. 41)

I find White's point of view helpful in addressing the question of biblical villains for two reasons. Firstly, the main focus is on narrative in terms of story-building. Referring to Erich Auerbach's well-known *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, White pointed out:

> The Christian schema of the figure and its fulfilment (used by Christian thinkers to interpret the relation between the Old Testament and the New, between Judaism and Christianity, between This World and the Beyond, between the Present and the Future, and [in Dante] even between paganism and Christianity) is grasped by Auerbach as itself a "figure" that will be "fulfilled" in the modern idea of "history". (White, 1996, p. 133)

The argument is that the Western historical imagination is based on the hidden mechanism of the figure–fulfilment model, which is associated mainly with (Judeo)Christian tradition yet should be seen beyond this genealogical scope.

Secondly, White introduced a distinction between the historical past and the practical past as a subject of writing. While the former is produced by professional historians, the latter is the field of writers. The practical past is not about the reconstruction of facts, i.e., how things really were, but about the image of the past for the needs of everyday life – also in a moral dimension. In this perspective, the literary representations of the national past that I have analysed are particularly telling. It seems that the practical pasts that have been created in literature serve a function analogous to that of older speculative philosophies of history, which are deemed a "secular form of religious apocalypticism, metaphysics, or myth" (White, 2014, p. 21), thus giving meaning to a disenchanted existence (Wiśniewski, 2020, p. 393; cf. Gustafsson Chorell, 2020, pp. 8–9).

In White's terms, historical imagination is based on the powerful presence of figural interpretation, but this is not about the Biblical and medieval Church model of writing history; rather, it is about the general mechanism of the "figure–fulfilment model of narrativity". In this perspective, (en)figuration in historical narratives is not a result of the process of secularisation but is itself a figure which can be found in many texts from different epochs.

If this is the case, what is at stake here is not the supposed secularisation of Sacred History but a certain quality that transcends the religious–secular division. As summed up by Wiśniewski (2020):

> […] what White suggested was that the phenomenon fundamental to "fulfilment" (Erfüllung) should be called "figural causation". As he argued, this mode of fulfilment constitutes a modern equivalent of classical "telos" and a secular equivalent of Christian "apocalypse", but it differs from these precedents in the sense that it remains more open and should thus be understood as "a kind of anomalous, non-determining causal force or atheleological end". (Wiśniewski, 2020, pp. 399–400; the inner quotation is from: White, 1996, p. 125)

What is important here is that figural causality functions from the present backwards. The historical past is a retrospective and retroactive construction that only in the present emerges as the fulfilment of fate or destiny (Wiśniewski, 2020, p. 403). However, the present is constantly changing. Therefore, historical narratives are characterised by what Wiśniewski calls "immanent yet relative multifigurality" (Wiśniewski, 2020, p. 403). As explained by Wiśniewski:

> While, on the one hand, incorporating various figures ought to lead to their fulfilment within a given narrative, on the other hand, revealing the internal complexity of these figures means that they can become entangled with other narratives that contain the same or similar elements. (Wiśniewski, 2020, p. 403)

It is, therefore, a question of the very technique of storytelling/writing/creating the past through the figure of fulfilment as *exfoliation*. As pointed out by White:

> Fulfilment (*Erfüllung*) is understood as an exfoliation of all the possibilities for action contained in the "situation" (the context enfigured as a scene of possible action). The enfiguration of agents, agencies, actions, events, and scenes as elements of dramatic conflicts and their resolutions (either as victories or defeats) is the means by which narrative interpretations of historical processes are constructed. Emplotment (*mise en intrigue*) is the means by which a specific set of events, initially described as a sequence, is de-sequentiated and revealed to be a structure of equivalences – in which earlier events in the chain are shown to be anticipations, precursors, or prototypes of later, more fully "realized" instantiations thereof. (White, 2013, p. 42)

The difference would be that, unlike professional historians, writers have signed a contract with their audience on the subject of truth and falsehood. But what about writers who reinterpret the historical past? Their relation to the figure–fulfilment model is twofold: it is based on narratives about the historical past (directly or not) that are implicitly built on the figure–fulfilment

model – namely, the axiological dimension of the practical past emphasises the fulfilment. In the case of literary works that contain direct references to biblical figures, the figuration is multiplied; it highlights the original figurality, although the purpose is to re-create the old figure. From this perspective, it is the subversive power of biblical figurality that dismantles the mechanisms for legitimising meaning – in the Bulgarian case, the mechanisms that organise the progressive (hi)story of the state.

Multi-figurality

When it comes to the usage of biblical figures and figurality for the purposes of modern historical narration, the presupposition that their religious sense is secularised seems to be a misjudgement – a radical reduction of what White calls the "exfoliating" power. If one were to look for a secular or religious character in the genealogy of figures as such, then of course one could speak of the religious potential of biblical figures in a secular age. If, however, one were to search for the secular or religious character of the figure of the figuration itself – the figure of fulfilment – the matter would be far more problematic. I would say that genealogically and functionally the figuration is in fact *post-secular*,[17] which means that it is "either/or" within the common framework of the modern secular–religious opposition.[18] I refer here to the deconstructive dimension of the postsecular turn in humanities that goes beyond the (alleged) return of religion in (Western) society and academia. The postsecular turn rather puts emphasis on the need to recognise the epistemological biases that lay behind modern thinking in terms of the religious–secular division, which supposedly determines the division between the (premodern) then and the (modern) now; it is about acknowledging that the notions of the religious and the secular, and the consequences of using them as classificatory

[17] The notion of postsecularism has become an umbrella term which serves to capture quite various phenomena and positions in social and academic life. Here, I refer to the position presented in Drzewiecka (2014), and Drzewiecka and Wiśniewski (2025).

[18] The postsecular perspective has been actualised by Wiśniewski, who not only discussed White's notion of the figure with regard to its cryptotheological genealogy, but also suggested that his ideas "enable a neutralization and even a deactivation of the dualistic division of the religious and secular" (Wiśniewski, 2020, p. 407).

terms, do more to obscure than to reveal human experience and creativity. Therefore, when I identify figuration as postsecular, it is not because it is a phenomenon characteristic of the postsecular age, understood as a period marked by the rejection of the secularisation thesis and a renewed openness to the religious. It is "postsecular" because it gathers different meanings that are traditionally understood as "religious" and "secular". The historical imagination itself is a hybrid in terms of influences and meaningful elements; it is not at all secular (non-religious) by nature, nor is it a modern ("secularised") copy of the Judeo-Christian model. I would suggest that investigating the usage of biblical figures in historical prose – or, as in this case, in narratives on the practical past – would reveal this hybridity since "the logic of figures and tropes" refers in fact to "an assemblage of images". As pointed out by White:

> For the facts are figurations posing as predications, images posing or being represented as manifestations of conceptual contents of utterances governable by a logic of identity and non-contradiction. But the logic of narrative representations of the world is a logic of figures and tropes, which is not a logic at all unless an assemblage of images can be said to be a structure of meaning logical in kind. (White, 2013, p. 45)

It is the question of images and imagination that turns out to be the most relevant when it comes to biblical references. When commenting on White's notion of historical imagination, Wiśniewski states:

> History is presented here from the perspective of a panoramic overview where agents and their actions have been frozen at a more or less arbitrary moment that captures the tensions and transformations that their actions entail, even if any such tensions remain, at first glance, imperceptible. Narratives would thus be secondary to such images. (Wiśniewski, 2020, pp. 405–406)

It is only in the narrative form that images of the past can be "fulfilled". As concluded by Walter Benjamin and paraphrased by White himself: *History does not break down into stories; it breaks down into images* (White, 2013, p. 45). As a result, it is not about deciphering or setting up the cognitive model that is based on the sense of fulfilment; it is about opening up to all the possibilities waiting to be "exfoliated" while enfigurating the historical past.

If literary representations of the historical past are interpreted as medias of memory (Erll, 2011), then it becomes particularly relevant that they need to be read within a specific memory culture which assumes specific conventions of reading – also with regard to biblical and historical figures and their intertwinement within figurality. In this sense, they trigger, or *cue*, certain

images or image-ideas only within a certain cultural context. As Astrid Erll explains:

> Individual memory processes are set in motion by cues. These cues can be intrapsychic in nature (for example, associations, other memories), but they can also belong to the material and social context of remembering (for example, pictures, texts, other people, and parts of conversation). On the social level, too, media can cue collective remembering […]. As "media cues" feature neither a sender nor a semiotic code, they cannot be actualized outside the context of the memory culture. Thus, social agreement – or convention – is of central importance for the effectiveness of media which fulfil a pure cuing function. It is often the narratives *surrounding* such media (such as oral stories, historiography, or novels) which determine their meaning. (Erll, 2011, pp. 127–128)

It is the notion of *cue(ing)* that links the notion of multi-figurality and (historical) imagination. Just as events within the plot-structure become *clues* that produce "the meaning-effect of the narrative", i.e., the sense of the fulfilment (White, 2013, p. 42), the assumed (biblical or historical) figures become *cues* that extract certain collective memories, images-ideas and meanings (Erll, 2011, pp. 127–128).

According to Erll, members of the same culture of memory share the same media "cues", even though the images of the past that these "cues" trigger are not uniform since they are influenced by the personal experience of an individual and by their cognitive horizon and views (Erll, 2011, p. 128). Importantly, the collective memories and images-ideas that are expected to be evoked are not only highly dependent and interconnected but also subjected to constant modifications due to the changing present and the in(ter)ventions of various remembering individuals and subcommunities. In this sense, the dynamics of the semantic relationships between images-ideas within a specific culture of memory correspond to the unlimited possibilities for the multiplication of figurality and, together with the fulfilment perspective, shape historical narratives. In the case of the literary examples given above, the biblical figures "trigger" the collective image-ideas of Bulgarian Judases and Cains – for example, Pop Krastyo and Tsar Peter – but they set in motion a network of synchronically and diachronically changing meanings, thus potentially offering a multiplicity re(con)figurations.[19] From this perspective, the images-ideas, or figures, based

[19] In fact, the multi-figurality of the historical narrative becomes even more radical when genre conventions are taken into account. Both literary works discussed here are plays, which means that their hermeneutic potential is realised not only through the multiplicity of individual readings but also through the multiplicity of theatrical adaptations and the variety of individual and collective performances.

on the biblical tradition are neither religious nor secular in either sense – genealogically or functionally – because they operate neither according to a clear chronological order of (re)appearance nor within predetermined systems of meaning. One needs to remember that the biblical narrative itself, when considering both the genealogy of its accounts and the original function (context) of the Holy Scriptures, is situated beyond the modern "religious–secular" distinction. The notion of the secularisation of (the historical) imagination is deeply misleading in this context because it is not about rejecting or replacing the religious message; however, it is not about making it latent either. The main issue is that the very notions of the religious and the secular have always been misleading. The possibility of meaning is indeed multi-layered, and biblical references – with their own multi-layered genealogy and function – may help us grasp the ambiguity of the religious–secular distinction.

Conclusion

The cultural usage of themes, characters, and interpretive models from the biblical and parabiblical traditions is often presented as a question of the conditions of possibility for the religious to create or connote meaning in the modern age. However, the presumption is that modernity is a secular(ised) phenomenon; as such, it is a post-religious stage in the development of history and human thought. In this paper, the issue of this well-functioning master narrative is brought up in the light of the postsecular turn, which calls the modern "religious vs. secular" opposition a convention and opens the interpretation of this master narrative up to a complicated diversity of meanings and classifications in this regard. Therefore, I explore this diversity of meanings and classifications by investigating narratives about the past – including historical narratives, which constitute an essential part of national master narratives – since it is here that the modern notions of history, nationality, and religion converge. Moreover, my focus is on modern Bulgarian culture, which is rooted in Eastern Orthodox patterns and, as such, is a case that challenges Protestant-oriented conclusions.[20] To complicate this picture, the focus is on

[20] On the protestant bias with regard to the modern/academic notion of religion, cf. Asad (1993).

instances in which modern notions of history draw on the biblical tradition, which has its own local history of use in non-religious contexts.

References to biblical characters and events indicate that the figure–fulfilment model is at work. From the perspective of a postsecular interpretation of White's concept, however, this phenomenon should not be interpreted through the lens of the secularisation thesis. In biblical characters' capacity as images(-ideas), they are effective triggers of the imagination that actually operate against the traditional religious vs. secular opposition. Obviously, they are "religious" in terms of the original institutional usage, but they are involved with the complex issue of the genealogy of biblical texts – namely, ancient literary conventions and interpretative schemes. Potentially, biblical characters may be used in non-religious contexts and for anti-religious purposes. In any case, in literary texts they need to be recognised as neither (just) "religious", nor (just) "secular".

Biblical figures help create the ontological effect, which, according to White, is the only meaning of history or historical discourse (cf. Doran, 2013, p. 109; Wiśniewski, 2020, p. 406); the fact that they may help create this effect is precisely due to their double and ambivalent relation to figuration – not to the fact that they are well established and secularised in a given (Western) culture. The ontological effect is due to the multiplication of figurativeness and fulfilment perspectives, which creates a semantic tension, especially in cases when a writer's aim is to approach the necessity of fulfilment in a different way – in terms of both meaning and plot structure. It is then that a particular version of the fulfilment model is being dismantled or undermined. What is interesting, however, is that this reorganisation and reinterpretation of a given history (or a historical past) happens through its own figurative equivalent. In Tsanev's play, the figure of Levski as a Bulgarian Christ is fulfilled – or one could say crafted or imposed – through the figure of the traitor. In Zidarov's play, the figure of Cain is fulfilled – or one could say crafted/imposed – because of the figure of a good brother. The figure–fulfilment model, being a figure itself, works precisely because of its plurality, reversibility, and retroactivity, all of which are constantly confronted with the compulsion of referentiality with regard to a single source – here, the biblical one. This need for clear, one-way semiotic representation manifests itself vividly when interpreting biblical figures and paraphrases. However, it seems that it is precisely biblical figures that could provide a way of breaking down this cognitive pattern and rediscovering multi-figurality, which reveals itself in

a constantly changing yet common set of images(-ideas) that are potentially cued thanks to the social context and cultural conventions. In this light, the question of local biblical and parabiblical traditions becomes even more relevant in research today as it is not only about the genealogy of pre-modern society(s), which needs reconstruction and acknowledgement, but also about the sense-making horizon that biblical and parabiblical figures cue by their own – postsecular – means.

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Biblijni złoczyńcy i narracje historyczne w nowoczesnej kulturze bułgarskiej. Od figur zsekularyzowanych do figuralności postsekularnej

Artykuł porusza kwestię funkcjonowania tradycji biblijnej w warunkach nowoczesności na przykładzie kultury bułgarskiej, która odsłania prowokujące do refleksji spotkanie idei zachodnioeuropejskich z lokalnymi wzorcami kulturowymi, zakorzenionymi w prawosławiu. Badania koncentrują się na dziełach literackich o tematyce historycznej, w których pojawiają się postaci najpopularniejszych biblijnych złoczyńców, Judasza i Kaina. Interpretacji poddane zostały dwie sztuki – *Ostatnia wieczerza Diakona Lewskiego* (*Последната вечеря на Дякона Левски*, 1987) Stefana Canewa oraz *Kain i Mag* (*Каин и Магьосникът*, 1972) Kamena Zidarowa. Ukazane są one jako teksty literackie, które uruchamiają i podważają powszechny pogląd o szczególnej roli bułgarskich „Judaszów" i „Kainów" w historii narodu. Stanowią one subwersywne przykłady „modelu narracyjności opartego na wypełnieniu figury" (H. White), który wykracza poza pojęcie zsekularyzowanej wyobraźni historycznej. Wskazują na biblijną figuralność jako strukturę ani religijną, ani świecką, lecz postsekularną – odrzucającą ujmowanie tej relacji w kluczu dychotomii świeckie–religijne. Zostaje wskazane, że w kontekście lokalnych kultur pamięci tradycja biblijna oferuje potencjalnie wielorakie re(kon)figuracje, otwierając na sieć synchronicznie i diachronicznie zmieniających się znaczeń – zarówno tych typowo klasyfikowanych jako „religijne", jak i „świeckie".

Słowa kluczowe: tradycja biblijna; nowoczesność; sekularyzacja; historia Bułgarii; literatura bułgarska; figuratywność; Hayden White; postsekularność

Biblical villains and the historical narratives in modern Bulgarian culture: From the secularized figures to the postsecular figurality

The paper raises the question of the functioning of biblical tradition in terms of modernity by taking into consideration the case of Bulgarian culture, which represents a thought provoking encounter between the Western-European ideas and the local cultural patterns rooted in Eastern Orthodoxy. The research focus is on literary works on historical themes in which figures of the most popular biblical villains, i.e., Judas and Cain, are explicitly referred to. Two Bulgarian plays – *The Last Supper of Deacon Levski* (*Последната вечеря на Дякона Левски*, 1987) by Stefan Tsanev and *Cain and the Magician* (*Каин и Магьосникът*, 1972) by Kamen Zidarov – are interpreted as literary works that trigger and challenge the common presumption about of the role of the "Bulgarian" Judas' and Cain's in the national history. It is argued that they are subversive examples of "figure–fulfilment model of narrativity" (H. White) which goes beyond the notion of the secularized historical imagination, and as such – they point to biblical figurality as neither religious nor secular, but postsecular, i.e., rejecting the convention of the secular–religious relationship. It is suggested that in terms of local cultures of memory the biblical tradition potentially offers multiply re(con)figurations, as it opens to a network of synchronically and diachronically changing meanings – both those that are typically classified as "religious" and "secular".

Keywords: Biblical tradition; modernity; secularization; Bulgarian history; Bulgarian literature; figurality; Hayden White; postsecular

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Zainteresowania naukowe: kultura bułgarska, tradycja judeochrześcijańska, historia idei, historia humanistyki, religia i nowoczesność, postsekularyzm.

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