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Phantom Pains: The Image of Bulgarian Transition in Elena Aleksieva's Dramas

1.

After 1989, the socio-political processes in South-Eastern Europe were of a completely different nature to those of other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. This, of course, was reflected in the language. In Polish, the word *transformacja*, i.e., change, implies a certain framework of this process, in contrast to the word *преход*, i.e., transition, which is used in Bulgaria to refer to the period after 1989 (see Pytlak, 2017). In the Bulgarian discourse, in academic and popular science, and in journalism in the second decade of 21st century, it was not uncommon to find opinions that the transition was still ongoing (cf. Варзоновцев, 2009; Гавранова, 2014). This conviction appears to relate most particularly to culture. However, there is a growing conviction of the necessity to establish a caesura, otherwise the transition could be endless, completely blurring the framework of

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change (Алфа Рисърч, 2014). In a recently published synthesis of the latest Bulgarian literature (in the chapter with the meaningful title *How long are the 90s? The Long Twentieth Century*), literary historian Milena Kirova proposed that the upper limit of the *passage* should be set at the year 2007, i.e., the moment of Bulgaria's accession to the European Union and the symbolic end of the political transformation (Кирова, 2023, p. 29). However, as noted by the researchers associated with the research project *Transition and literature*, which was devoted to the literature of the transition period, both transformational processes and the art that reacts to them definitely go beyond this caesura.[1] The term 'breakthrough', which is so popular in Polish discourse, is not used in Bulgaria, thus also reflecting the fluidity of the phenomenon itself (or rather, the constellation of phenomena). The historical moment I am interested in is described by the open phrase: *time/period after 1989*. In light of the above, the image of the Bulgarian transition would also cover the period up to the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, which in Poland is associated with the post-transformation years.

In this article, I will analyze Elena Aleksieva's dramas on a literary level, without considering their stage productions. However, it is important that any reading of these dramas is contextualized by the situation of the theatre and dramaturgy itself during the transition period.[2]

As in other countries in the region, Bulgarian drama and theatre reacted to socio-political changes after 1989 in a specific way (unlike the publishing or film industries, theatre remained a public institution, so although it was not directly affected by free-market processes,[3] it resonated with the political and financial crises of the state). In the case of Bulgaria, I propose distinguishing the following four stages in this context:

1. The beginning of the 1990s – an attempt to find oneself in a new reality by trying to describe it. The search for a new language results in the emergence of new theatrical forms, genres and aesthetic diversity, which flourished in the second half of the decade.

[1] For a record of the discussions that took place within the project, see Преход и литература (2023a, 2023b).

[2] On changes in the dramatic texts themselves, see Николова (2011).

[3] Another version of the translation of the free market economy into theatrical life, i.e., the creation of private theatres, dates back to 2009, when the Модерен театър (Contemporary Theatre) stage was opened. Although the first private theatrical initiative was established in 1989 (Dialog Theatre), the Contemporary Theatre was the first to have its own headquarters and a permanent acting team.

2. The second half of the 1990s – the emergence of a new type of authors' theatre (e.g., the *Triumviratus Art Group*; *Sfumato Theatre*). Theatrical activities were an attempt to escape from the "here and now" and were dominated by abstraction. There was also a turn towards "roots" (in a local and global sense). Thus, we are talking here about adaptations of classical texts and their reinterpretations, as well as a return to local myths and beliefs and their creative translation into the language of experimental theatre.
3. The first decade of the 21st century – this period can be called a "state of limbo". The dramaturgy was filled with post-dramatic texts, in which there was no decisive action. At that time, there was also a visible return to the theatre of the absurd, which was also popular during the late communist period.
4. After 2010, a new generation of creators emerges. Political theatre and socially engaged theatre began to operate.[4]

It should be noted that the above framework is clearly conventional; individual tendencies are not confined to them. However, the proposed stages indicate the moment of their appearance or their intensity. Elena Aleksieva's work is part of the last stage.

2.

Born in 1975 in Sofia, Elena Aleksieva is one of the most important artists of the young (though not the youngest) generation. She made her debut in the mid-1990s with two volumes of poetry and is the author of several collections of short stories and novels which were subject to critical analysis, which led to this author being conferred with the most important Bulgarian literary distinctions and awards (Пелева, 2020). Since 2012, Aleksieva has also been writing dramatic texts. In 2014, she published her first collection of dramas, entitled *Ангелски огън* (Angel Fire; Алексиева, 2014), and a year later her second, *Жертви на любовта* (Victims of Love; Алексиева, 2015),

[4] The most important voices on Bulgarian post-communist theatre and drama, on the basis of which I have distinguished the above phases, belong to Prof. Kamelia Nikolova (see, e,g., Николова, 2007, 2017) and Prof. Violeta Decheva (see, e.g., Дечева, 2001, 2013, 2014).

which were monodramas. Her dramatic texts have won the most important theatre awards for dramaturgy in Bulgaria: the Askeer Theatre Award 2013 for the drama *The Therapist*, the Award of the Association of Independent Critics in 2014 for the monodrama *The Voice*, and the Ikar Theatre Award 2015 for the monodrama *Madam Mishima*.

From the perspective of the specificity of the transition period, it seems important that this acclaimed writer (who had already published one of her most famous books, *Читателска група 31*) began writing for the theatre quite suddenly and abandoned this form of expression equally abruptly, as I will return to later in the article.

Attention is also drawn to the fact that the author's texts that were most frequently staged in the theatre were subsequently also published as books. On the publisher's website, you can read the following opinion of the writer and publicist Georgi Borisov:

> Usually, publishers avoid drama. Usually, playwrights take into account, above all, the laws of dramaturgy and the vagaries of the stage. A significant part of society, on the other hand, believes that plays are written to be seen. Elena Aleksieva debunks stereotypes and rules. (Борисов, n.d.)[5]

In fact, Elena Aleksieva's plays read well – as, one should add, does any good drama from the classics to the present day. A book edition might indicate that the author perceives her plays primarily as literary texts. However, it is possible to look at these books of this author's plays through the prism of the reality of Bulgarian theatre-related life, and especially the opportunity to publish and popularize dramatic texts. At this point, it is worth emphasizing the role of the annual festival devoted to contemporary Bulgarian drama, *Нова българска драма* (New Bulgarian Drama), which takes place every year in Shumen. This festival includes readings but also publishes plays. Actually, it is the only way that young playwrights can publish their texts, which is why most of those who also pursue other literary forms (i.e., they have already managed to make their mark on the literary scene) publish plays in book form.[6] What's more, these are usually texts that have already functioned in the theatrical space – they have been staged and often given awards, not the other way around. In this context, Elena Aleksieva is no exception.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, I give quotations in my own translation – MP.

[6] Examples from Alexieva's generation include Ola Stoyanova (Стоянова, 2015) and Ivan Dimitrov (Димитров, 2013).

3.

I have only selected published texts for analysis. Let me remind you that we are talking about two collections: *Ангелски огън* (Angel Fire) and *Жертви на любовта* (Victims of Love). The former contains seven plays (including four one-act plays), while the latter consists of three monodramas. Aleksieva's texts reveal the most important topics that bothered Bulgarians in the period of late transition, i.e., the second decade of the 21st century. Of course, the selected works do not exhaust the subject matter, but the picture that emerges in them is quite clear and, in my opinion, representative.

I will start with the issue of freedom and the associated sense of agency and possession. Freedom appears in the author's plays, in relation to both free will and broadly understood freedom (from individual to moral; in the dramaturgy of the Bulgarian pen there is even a whole catalogue of desires). The category of freedom, however, occurs in most cases as something given, ergo something that can be taken away. This is most eloquently seen in *The Therapist*, where the title character, a canine behaviorist, gives himself divine qualities (he speaks from the position of "I and God") (Алексиева, 2014, p. 27) and literally enslaves people using methods recommended by animal training. The possession and use of power also appears in relation to women, which will be discussed in more detail in a moment. There is another recurring image associated with power in Aleksieva's work: the image of spiritual leaders, the "new Messiahs". We have the aforementioned therapist (a self-proclaimed canine behaviorist who is actually more interested in how he can impact the owner's lives). In *Phantom Pain*, the main character, the Woman Without Arms, who used to be a porter in a fireworks factory, undergoes a transformation after an accident: she becomes a spiritual neophyte in the style of Dr. Deepak Chopra or Paolo Coelho (these names appear in the text) and then, based on rumors that the images she paints with her mouth have healing powers, she claims to be a spiritual teacher. Finally, there is the medium and his assistant from the one-act play *Оракул* (The Oracle), to whom the author ascribes a diabolical touch. The reverse of this phenomenon is, of course, people looking for the possibility of realizing a spiritual element whilst also looking for simple solutions. In addition to the crisis of faith, spiritual confusion, and the search for authorities, an important element of Bulgarian reality is the media – its

social role and power to create new heroes. In *Phantom Pain*, what the journalist (who is actually guided by one rule, the principle of arousing extreme emotions) comes up with turns out to be of paramount importance, as determined not only by the main character, but also by the doctor and the gallerist.

In the new social order depicted by this Bulgarian playwright, several more issues come to the fore, the most interesting of which seem to be the place of women in society, social stratification, and the echoes of a bygone era.

Women in Elena Aleksieva's dramatic work should be the subject of a separate text because they not only occupy an extremely important place in her work, but they are also part of the process of working through one of the most important traumas of previous epochs (not just of the second half of the twentieth century): violence against women. A scene of physical violence opens the play *Bernhard in Hell*, while sexual violence builds the one-act play *Angel Fire*, and in the drama *The Therapist* there is both physical violence (against Fania, one of the clients) and psychological violence (against Diana, the secretary). Using her language with great precision and intuition, Aleksieva uses minimal means to create realistic and brutal scenes, but – importantly – she does not stop there. In the Bulgarian writer's work, women are not helpless victims. On the contrary, Fani (described in the stage directions as a woman in her forties), whom Dr. Myrt tries to literally dominate by ordering her to put on a muzzle and a collar, to which the dumbfounded woman agrees, takes off her accessories in the finale (which is significant not only of this scene and act, but also of the entire drama) and puts them on the perpetrator, taking over his language ("It's just such a game") (Алексиева, 2014, p. 34). In the play *Angel Fire*, the sexual assault turns out to be a sham: it is the woman who has fulfilled her erotic fantasy, and the alleged perpetrator has provided her with a paid service. The whole scene (including the pretend season) was conceived and directed by a woman who, satisfied with the man's service, pays generously.

The question of women's decision-making power is also addressed in the monodrama *The Voice*. A girl who is endowed with an exceptional talent, given the stage name Victoria Voice by her teacher, must finally decide whether she is satisfied by playing the role of Maria Callas's understudy and eternally standing in the shadow of a star. The theme of reclaiming one's own voice is symbolic here. Finally, the most emphatic feminist social transformation is commented on by the simple Woman Without Hands: "Democracy has that on men and pushed all art into the hands of women. *She laughs at her own joke*.

Especially those without hands" (Алексиева, 2014, p. 135). This commentary elaborates on the heroine's thoughts on the new system, which led many men to extreme exhaustion from slave labour. Moreover, similar remarks about the state of Bulgaria in the second decade of the twentieth century are made often and they are quite expressive, such as the Woman Without Hands's comment on the conduct of law enforcement agencies regarding her accident: "Accident in the workplace, the investigation is at a standstill, we know what it looks like in our country" (Алексиева, 2014, p. 126). Such remarks are shouted by the man in the one-act play *В любовта винаги всичко* (In love always everything). Aleksieva uses the well-known figure of a madman who is allowed to take this further. In the text, he takes the form of a frustrated man shouting his comments in the middle of the street against both the state and society, which remains indifferent to the actions of the authorities:

> I ask you, where have you been? If only you could see each other from the sidelines! Garbage! You've always been like that! And you sit on those flattened arses in some rotten office while they rob you! Let them rob you! You chose them yourselves! Then you cry! You deserve it! And you're surprised that no one hears you in this faggot country! And he won't hear! Because you are the state, just like you! Hey, baby! What are you laughing at? Yahoo! You're guilty too! You are all yahoos and you are all guilty! And your mothers are guilty! And your children too! Where have your children been, what, where have your mothers been all these years? Ha? You can only demand! And cry! But the end is near! (Алексиева, 2014, p. 204)

There is also another issue that I would like to address in relation to politics, namely the afterimages of the previous regime. It should be noted that this issue does not occupy a central place in any of the dramas. Echoes of communism appear in only two plays: *The Therapist* and *Bernhard in Hell*. In *The Therapist*, it is almost imperceptible and appears as a commentary on the choice of the dog's name – Fidel. Without being asked about anything, the owner, a representative of the young generation, begins to explain himself: "Not for political reasons, of course. We are against dictatorship. We hate communists, regimes, gulags. That's why we love nature" (Алексиева, 2014, p. 8). What we have here is a picture of a generation for which the former regime is global but has also been digested by pop culture. In *Bernhard in Hell*, the period of the Bulgarian People's Republic is directly evoked. In one scene, the protagonists reminisce on the state of art at that time ("During communism, art did not exist"), and bitter words are also spoken during a conversation about the president:

THE FIRST MAN OF ART (drinking):
Communism destroyed everything.
Some say he built it.
But in fact, he tore it down.
And he left us in shit.

THE SECOND MAN OF ART:
The shit of communism has become the fertilizer of democracy.

THE THIRD MAN OF ART (chewing):
Elsewhere, yes.
But not here. (Алексиева, 2014, p. 72)

The drama also features a former colonel in the role of a bodyguard – a quite typical trope for the early transition period. In the finale, the colonel turns out to be an active commander of a special forces unit tasked with fighting a new type of terrorism. As we have learned, an Austrian citizen, a certain Thomas Bernhard, has crossed the border into the Bulgarian state in order to make contact with a local intellectual sabotage group and has been detained. Underneath the layer of absurdity, the scene hides a conviction about the activity of old structures. In addition, the colonel's collaborators, i.e., the people of art who are at the center of events at all times, are aspiring young writers, musicians and actors, who in a way take revenge on a group of "old" intellectuals who have used them to do all kinds of work in order to be able to be in the orbit of the hermetic world of art.

On the theme of social stratification, the unprocessed trauma of uprooting, forcible resettlement from the countryside to the cities and the collectivization of land returns like a boomerang. In the plays *The Therapist*, *Bernhard in Hell*, The *Voice* and the *Phantom Pain*, origin is stigmatized by the offensive usage of the words province, village and peasant, and the desire is to prove one's own intellectual origins and belonging to the intellectual elite. Another aspect of this problem is poverty. The theme resonates most strongly in the play *Phantom Pain*. The main character, before she becomes a famous painter, is a poor porter. Having gained fame, she receives a letter from a woman who, left by her lover and fired from her job, is left without any means of subsistence. This woman is, as it were, a victim of a new, rapidly changing order. Until now, she has been working in a tracksuit sewing room, but because this type of clothing has become obsolete, the woman loses her source of income and her apartment overnight (see Алексиева, 2014, p. 147).

Most of the above-mentioned elements are related to the problem of the marketization of many areas of life, which is characteristic of capitalism. Money not only appears in virtually all Aleksieva's texts, but it also appears in a variety of contexts. The protagonists of her dramas pay/charge money for spiritual guidance (The *Oracle*, The *Therapist*), for sex/love – this relationship is not unambiguous (Angel Fire) – and for art (*Bernhard in Hell*, *Phantom Pain*, *The Voice*). In the play *Bernhard in Hell* there is a very interesting commentary on the contemporary financing of art in Bulgaria. In the fictitious "State Fund", decisions are made by a one-man board in the form of a painter of mature age who could not pursue his artistic career under the previous regime. Now, as he himself states, he is "the state within art" (Алексиева, 2014, p. 100). So, we have a picture in which the dissidents of yesterday become today's decision-makers, ruthless and omnipotent.

At this point, we move on to one of the dominant themes of Elena Aleksieva's work: art and its place in contemporary Bulgaria. In addition to marketization, money and payment is a form of "leverage" over the artist and it reduces the role of art to entertainment. We have a very poignant picture of the search for one's own voice, the issue of originality in art, and the loneliness of the artist. All these elements appear in the monodrama *The Voice*.[7] As already mentioned, the main character of this play is Victoria Voice, who is offered the role of Maria Callas's understudy. The woman, like a shadow, follows her master, who has no idea of her existence. Victoria's life boils down to waiting for the moment when Callas will not be able to perform, and it will be the Voice who takes the stage instead. Thanks to the monodrama format, we get to know the whole story from the perspective of the eponymous (?) heroine, who, in the course of her own reflections, undergoes an emancipatory moment on many levels, but above all as a woman and as an artist.

Comments on art and its value are also evident in *Phantom Pain*, in which they are uttered by the Woman Without Hands in an interview with the Journalist:

> Sometimes images are born in pain. Sometimes the images that are born are total garbage. But people buy them. Banks, hotels, state institutions […] the more my paintings cost, the more they make me despair and disgust me, the more people like them. (Алексиева, 2014, p. 132)

[7] A fragment of the drama translated into Polish by Hanna Karpińska was published in the magazine "Fraza". See: "Fraza", 2012, No. 3 (77).

Self-referential moments devoted to theatre and contemporary Bulgarian drama in the text *Bernhard in Hell* are also a commentary on the play itself. When the director of another theatre refuses to stage *Thomas Bernhard's Immanuel Kant* ("Bernhard is not a classic, it's not Shakespeare, Chekhov or Ibsen") (Алексиева, 2014, p. 31), the director (who has a great vision of a world-class performance)[8] learns from a writer friend that she has instead created something in the spirit of Bernhard, but adapted to the domestic audience, which she has already agreed with the director of one of the theatres:

> "At last," the director almost shouted in my face with excitement,
> "at last, a native art with a contemporary theme,
> which has potential.
> […]
> We will stage this play in our theatre. In its own time. Using all the means of theatrical art. We will not regret the funds for a theatrical play. We will not economize on art, as has often been the case, because our homeland is thirsty for contemporary native theatre plays dealing with current issues. Our audience is hungry for accessible theatrical art on native soil.
> A play in which the audience will not be insulted or overlooked. Merciful and bright art, tailored to our audience". (Алексиева, 2014, pp. 95–96)

Aleksieva's reflections (albeit dressed in grotesque) are, on a meta-level of course, a bitter commentary on the situation of theatre in Bulgaria. The predominant structure of the writer's dramas can be said to be small forms, monodramas, one-act plays, i.e., those requiring little money during production. The observance of structural preference addresses, in a way, the question posed in the introduction about the author's desire to write plays and her

[8] This is yet another example of camouflaged criticism of theatre in Bulgaria (and beyond) and of the great aspirations of the artists and their contempt for the domestic audience:

> "My *Immanuel Kant* will last four hours. Maybe even four hours and twenty minutes. But by no means less than four hours. No interlude. Without a minute's break. The doors of the auditorium will be locked from start to finish. Let them pee. Let them shit. Let them suffocate in their own stench. The unfortunates. They will see what theatre is. How theatre is done in the world. How to exhibit Bernhard. In the world.
> BREAK
> For the first time, Bernhard. Here.
> In this shit tank.
> BREAK
> Of course, they won't understand anything" (Алексиева, 2014, pp. 68–69).

resignation from this form of expression. When asked by me about this issue, Aleksieva says:
"I started writing drama because I was tired of writing alone and wanted to collaborate with other people, and theatre was a logical and obvious choice. Turning language into a driving force, words into action – and not on a philosophical and theoretical level, but into real, physical action – is very moving, but writing plays for the love of the genre itself, if they are not staged but only printed in books, makes no sense. In theatre, dramaturgy is a means, not an end."

4.

The title of this article is taken from one of Elena Aleksieva's plays. Recall that the drama *Phantom Pain* tells the story of a woman who loses both her hands as a result of an accident at work. In an attempt to cope with the trauma, the woman begins to paint with her lips. Thanks to the media attention, her mediocre paintings become a sensation and she becomes famous. The world demands one thing from her – disability. And yet, a miracle happens, and the woman's limbs grow back. However, there is nothing sublime about the turning point; on the contrary – it is terribly painful and pushes the woman back into poverty.

In her drama, Aleksieva poses a question about pain, the right to suffer and its commercialization. On a meta-level, however, the eponymous phantom pain can be read very broadly, extending it to various types of deficiencies, absences, losses, with the most painful being the loss of the right to suffering itself.

Perhaps, in the context of the image of transition that emerges from Elena Aleksieva's dramas, the *Voice*, the search for and recovery of its own narrative would be more appropriate as a thematic borrowing. However, just as the author is interested in what cannot be seen, the most interesting thing for me is what pulsates under the surface of the image, namely the broadly understood loss of certainty, the crisis of values, the state of a kind of instability, and the need to redefine one's own identity. These are obvious symptoms (to use medical terminology) of socio-cultural trauma (Alexander, 2010, p. 195), or, more specifically, systemic trauma (Sztompka, 2000, 2003, 2004), which, as a dynamic process concerning the collective, is difficult to grasp and diagnose. Its traces, on the other hand, are deposited in works of art, among which theatrical art

occupies a special place. Perhaps, then, Elena Aleksieva's choice of dramatic form is a subconscious turn towards the performative word, behind which there is an unconscious need to detach reality in order to work through it.

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Bóle fantomowe. Obraz bułgarskiej tranzycji w dramatach Eleny Aleksijewej

Artykuł zawiera analizę dramatów Eleny Aleksijewej opublikowanych w zbiorach *Ангелски огън* [Anielski ogień, 2014] oraz *Жертви на любовта* [Ofiary miłości, 2015] w świetle zmian ustrojowych w Bułgarii po 1989 roku. Mimo że autorka nie pisze o tranzycji wprost, to obraz tego okresu, jaki wyłania się z jej tekstów dramatycznych, jest klarowny i reprezentatywny. W artykule omawiam wybrane elementy składające się na ów obraz, spośród których najważniejsze to: wolność, miejsce kobiet w nowym społeczeństwie, rozwarstwienie społeczne oraz sztuka (teatr w szczególności).

Słowa kluczowe: Elena Aleksijewa; tranzycja; zmiana społeczna; teatr bułgarski; dramat bułgarski

Phantom pains: the image of Bulgarian transition in Elena Aleksieva's dramas

The article analyzes Elena Aleksieva's dramas in the books *Ангелски огън* [Angel fire, 2014] and *Жертви на любовта* [Victims of love, 2015] in the context of the social changes in Bulgaria after 1989. Although this Bulgarian author does not write about the transition itself, the picture of the time created by her plays is very clear and representative. In the article, I focus on elements that serve to create this picture, such as freedom, women and their role in the new society, social stratification and art (particularly theatre).

Keywords: Elena Aleksieva; transition; social change; Bulgarian theatre; Bulgarian drama

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