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Bulgarian Poetry about the Past and the Post-Socialist Present

(Dorota Gołek-Sepetliewa, *Pamięć kulturowa a symptomy traumy. Idea ojczyzny w liryce bułgarskiej po 1989 roku*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023, 389 pages)

In the second quarter of the 20th century, Petar Mutafchiev, the outstanding historian who is considered the founder of Bulgarian medieval studies, drew attention to the Bulgarian historical paradox that consists in rapidly succeeding periods of strength and impotence, a synthesis of opposites, extremes and crises, sudden and unexpected ascents and perilous falls, all of which constitute the Bulgarian past and influence the way it is perceived and remembered. This diagnosis regarding the medieval period of the history of the state and the nation is largely adequate also in the description of the successive successes and crises of the 19th century and modern times. Characterizing lyrical

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attempts to describe (and often define) contemporary Bulgarian political, ideological and ethical crises/traumas through the prism of the updated idea of homeland is the aim of a monograph by Dorota Gołek-Sepetliewa, published in 2023 by the University of Silesia Publishing House: *Pamięć kulturowa a symptomy traumy. Idea ojczyzny w liryce bułgarskiej po 1989 roku* [Cultural memory and symptoms of trauma. The idea of homeland in Bulgarian poetry after 1989] (Gołek-Sepetliewa, 2023). The book is an interesting and valuable reflection on Bulgarian poetry at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century (as the author herself explains – the three decades that followed 1989) and is a successful attempt to answer the question about the role of lyric poetry in contemporary Bulgarian historical, cultural and socio-political discourse.

Dorota Gołek-Sepetliewa analyses works from poetry books by fourteen contemporary authors that are characterized by uninterrupted creative activity lasting from the late 1980s to 2019 (adopted by the author as the final turning point): Ivan Teofilov, Ivan Dinkov, Ivan Metodiev, Edvin Sugarev, Zlatomir Zlatanov, Ani Ilkov, Boyjo Lambovski, Balcho Balchev, Bozhidar Bogdanov, Plamen Antonov, Georgi Gospodinov, Boyko Panchev, Vladimir Saburin i Plamen Doynov. In the works of these authors, the multidimensional semantics of Bulgaria (state, territory and society) is one of the key elements of the described world. Thus, the monograph is a successful attempt to present poets as insightful and critical observers of Bulgarian reality since 1989 who often uncompromisingly manifest opposition to the moral relativism of post-socialist society and, in various literary ways, express the trauma related to the experiences of the People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB) era.

The author, analysing literary texts as media of traumatic and cultural memory (in the approach of Aleida and Jan Assman, or Astrid Erl), emphasizes their importance for the process of maintaining, disseminating and evoking memory and shows the important roles in the mechanism of maintaining identity, as well as an element of self-identification of members of a social group (nation). In the context of memory, also taking into account its role in updating the past, the researcher looks for and interprets/reinterprets the idea of homeland in Bulgarian poetry created after 1989 – another dramatic period of political, social and cultural breakthrough in the history of Bulgaria. The idea of homeland is presented in the monograph as a theoretical and emotional concept that links a community with a specific area inhabited by its ancestors, based on selected literary works in both a broad ideological spectrum

(referring to the area of the country) and in a narrow, private one (defined by personal experiences). The author wants to reach the source of the Bulgarian idea of *patriae* and bases the analysis on categories rooted in the era of national revival, relating to places, ideas, motives and figures. Gólek-Sepetliewa shows that the national revival that is typical of many nations is not always a closed period. Under specific political and social conditions, this process may be continued after a break or restarted many times from the beginning. This may occur when a nation in the process of rebirth has failed to achieve all its goals or, as in the case presented by the researcher, there was a dramatic crisis in its history – a collapse having a destructive impact on the “spirit of the nation” – namely the period of totalitarian rule in the years 1944–1989 and the chaos of the transformation that occurred after 1989.

Dorota Gólek-Sepetliewa not only undertakes a dialogue with the Bulgarian literary tradition by reconstructing, revising and deconstructing the eponymous idea of homeland; she also shows the process of “depolicizing” memory, which was subjected to multi-faceted ideological manipulation during the period of PRB and was carried out, among others, through contemporary lyric poetry. Reading the monograph reveals that the researcher wants to show as comprehensively as possible the essence of literary relations between the present and the past (both the distant and the recent). For this purpose, in the exegesis she also uses essays of selected Bulgarian authors that are characterized by their concerns about historical memory; she also mentions their other non-literary activities aimed at reconstructing the memory of modern history. This multi-aspect nature allowed literature/poetry to be presented as a platform for artistic opposition to a common phenomenon of forgetting about events and figures from the state’s socialist past – a forum replacing the expected revisions of opinions about events fundamental to the functioning of PRB – and reconstructing biographies of politicians, cultural and literary activists involved in the activities of the political and state apparatus.

The author begins her monograph with considerations defining the categories of memory (collective, cultural, traumatic) and homeland (idea of homeland) in the historical and cultural context of Bulgaria in the (post-)transformation era. She also designates research fields based on categories rooted in the cultural and literary tradition dating back to the Bulgarian National Revival.

In the first part of the work, Dorota Gólek-Sepetliewa includes a comment referring to the exemplification of research on memory conducted in the Bulgarian humanities and social sciences after 1989; she also characterizes

the Bulgarian poems created in that period, shown in the context of the literary struggle for the revision of PRB's memory policy and Bulgarian attitudes to the historical-cultural past and literary tradition. The author also compares and briefly describes opposing literary discourses relating to the shape of Bulgarian literature since the last decade of the 20th century; she shows the diversity of attitudes towards the PRB tradition and paths of literary exploration.

The key contents of the monograph are articulated in the extensive, multi-threaded part II, in which the author, in five chapters, clearly systematizes the repertoire of categories that define the idea of homeland in the historical and cultural context. The researcher carefully describes the methods of creation (contemporary, poetic de/reconstruction) of significant spaces encoded in areas of collective memory in the context of the place and landscape of memory of the areas of ancient Thrace, the space of Plovdiv, the Balkan or the Bosphorus, Russia and Western Europe. The author points to the breakdown of traditional ethical and moral values and the identity crises present in the analysed texts, emphasizing the contemporary reconstruction/deconstruction of the motif of the Bulgarian mother – the anthropomorphized image of *patriae* – rooted in 19th-century tradition. The Bulgarian lyrical return to the past – its layers of self-identification – would be incomplete without contemporary artists' references (as emphasized by Gołek-Sepetliewa) to the legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius and the images of the traumatizing almost 500-year-old Turkish rule (the constantly updated trauma of captivity), prompting reflection on the lack of freedom (foreign conquest) as an immanent component of the national history. Another field for contemporary literary reconstructions/deconstructions that is closely related to the image of the homeland refers to the image of heroized national heroes from both the distant and the more recent past.

The researcher points to a lyrical modernization of the memory of medieval heroes, national activists and anti-Ottoman fighters from the period of Turkish rule. She also points to a modern (postmodern) interpretation of the figure of an "iconic" hero of Bulgarian literature, namely Bay Ganio, a specific representative of the extremely understood idea of "Bulgarianness".

Dorota Gołek-Sepetliewa bases her research on the idea of homeland in the strict context of traumatic moments in the history of the Bulgarian nation: from the Ottoman conquest to the events of the early 1920s, and finally the late 1980s, with its contemporary socio-political and economic disappointments, which influenced certain attitudes and choices of society. A large part of her

work is devoted to analysis of how PRB's image is presented in the works of Bulgarian poets, and the post-transformation repercussions of the transition from Zhivkov's totalitarianism to democracy. Gołek-Sepetliewa also points out the phenomenon of economic emigration related to the trauma of absence as immanent to the realities of contemporary Bulgaria. The researcher highlights the extremely different contents of memory about the socialist period; she contrasts nostalgic flashbacks with the project of new political poetry for settlement and the project of new social poetry arising from left-wing lyricism. She presents the image of a society in a state of permanent, multi-faceted changes, exposed to the oppressive influence of the new government, and the lack of settlement with the times of PRB. Gołek-Sepetliewa points out the impunity of those responsible for crimes, the constant activity of representatives of the former elites and the barbarization of life, as well as manipulation of the assessment of the recent past. According to the presented authors, all these factors lead to another trauma related to the idea of a homeland: the failure to realize the idea of freedom and justice.

Gołek-Sepetliewa, analysing the motif of the homeland in post-1989 Bulgarian poetry, points to the still-current literary and cultural references to the past – primarily the era of national revival, the ideas of which are (re)activated but also deconstructed and rejected by these poets. A mythologized homeland space rooted in cultural memory, a language closely related to the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition, a strategy of recalling and collecting the memory of national heroes from the past, cultural activists and fighters fighting against the enemy of the homeland, and finally, the traumatic Turkish rule and the oppressive Soviet domination and (post)transformational disappointment, as the author proves, all of which are based on the lyrical images of the Bulgarian patriarch presented in the analysed texts.

Dorota Gołek-Sepetliewa enriches her monograph with short biographies presenting the poets whose work has been analysed and interpreted. She includes all quoted fragments of poems, and sometimes entire analysed works, both in the Bulgarian version and in translation into Polish (mostly her own). This approach means that, thanks to this monograph, Polish readers will have the opportunity to become familiar with the works of many contemporary Bulgarian poets for the first time; readers who do not know the Bulgarian language will be able to conduct comparative research on both Balkan and broadly understood Slavic literatures created after 1989. Dorota Gołek-Sepetliewa's publication clearly summarizes and concludes the recent past.

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Liryka bułgarska o przeszłości i postsocjalistycznej współczesności

Recenzja monografii naukowej *Pamięć kulturowa a symptomy traumy. Idea ojczyzny w liryce bułgarskiej po 1989 roku*, autorstwa Doroty Gołek-Sepetlicznej (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023, 389 ss.).

Słowa kluczowe: recenzja; „Pamięć kulturowa a symptomy traumy”; pamięć; ojczyzna; trauma; poezja; Bułgarska Republika Ludowa; literatura współczesna

Bulgarian poetry about the past and post-socialist present

This article is a review of the study entitled *Pamięć kulturowa a symptomy traumy. Idea ojczyzny w liryce bułgarskiej po 1989 roku* [Cultural Memory and Symptoms of Trauma: The Idea of Homeland in Bulgarian Poetry after 1989], authored by Dorota Gołek-Sepetliewa (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023, pp. 389).

Keywords: review; “Pamięć kulturowa a symptomy traumy”; memory; homeland; trauma; poetry; People’s Republic of Bulgaria; contemporary literature

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