

# West European Impulses of Bulgarian Diabolism

(A Look at the Bulgarian Literature of the 1920s)

## Abstract

Keywords:

Bulgarian literature, expressionism, avant-garde, diabolism, horror fiction, marvelous, uncanny, Menippean carnival discourse, romanticism, naturalism, individualism

Svetoslav Minkov (1902–1966), Vladimir Poljanov (1899–1988), Georgi Rajčev (1882 – 1947), Čavdar Mutafov (1889–1954)

Contrary to its generally innovative potential for Bulgarian literature, the phenomenon called *Bulgarian diabolism* has been a marginal one from the point of view of literary discourse. The interest of postmodern writers and reviewers has given rise to accentuating some of the partial aspects of the works of Svetoslav Minkov, Vladimir Polyakov, Georgi Raychev and Chavdar Mutafov. However, with the exception of Thomas Martin's monograph *Der bulgarische Diabolismus. Eine Studie zur bulgarischen Phantastik zwischen 1920 und 1934*, published in 1993, works explicating the nature of the phenomenon in Bulgarian literature have been missing.

Due to their novelty and impurity, the syncretic writings of Bulgarian diabolists, blending fading individualistic modernist tendencies together with elements of romantic fiction of horror in the generally expressionist roots of their works, were a phenomenon difficult to rank for their contemporaries. Over the following decades, the scarcity of studies thoroughly dealing with the topic resulted in a considerably amorphous perception of the term of *diabolism* in the Bulgarian milieu.

In a society, whose fiction was ruled by the "realistic" focus on rural prose with decaying didactic tendencies of the national revival literature and the sentimental emphasis on the values of patriarchy, a craving was obvious for a new

kind of fiction that would be different from the familiar folklore-mythological imagination as well as from the science-fiction utopia of foreign authors, otherwise popular across the Bulgarian society as early as in the 1880s. The craving was meant to be partly satisfied by translations of works of fiction of horror written by dark romantics as well as contemporary authors. In principle, young authors who began translating E. T. A. Hoffmann and E. A. Poe and also G. Meyrink and H. H. Ewers soon tried to create in a similar way themselves, using motifs that had become clichés by then from the point of view of world literature. Being students in Germany and Austria, Svetoslav Minkov, Vladimir Polyakov and Chavdar Mutafov got in touch with German expressionist literature and film and began adopting the techniques of change of perspective within the narration and play with the reader. Expressionist manifestos were appealing to them. Temporarily, they also fell for schools of occultism which were fashionable at that time. With Georgi Raychev, a representative of the former generation of prose-writers, psychologism and individualism typical of the works of North European and Polish modernists became the leading principles.

That way, a coincidental connection of expressionism with the perception of fiction of horror, especially of German and American origin, was created by Minkov and Polyakov. With Raychev, the socio-psychological and psycho-analytical modernist views combined with ugliness, which was a topic for expressionism (also from the perspective of the focus on excessive human reactions), and the interest in mental diseases as a means to achieve an unusual view of the world and a sensational and provocative attack against the prudish and hypocritical bourgeois morals. Mutafov on the other hand was building up elaborate avant-garde poetical models based on avant-garde theories of art.

What Bulgarian diabolistic writers were lacking was the feeling of belonging. Although some of their concepts or ideas were shared,<sup>1</sup> it is difficult to find a key based on which it would be correct to rank Minkov, Polyakov, Raychev and Mutafov

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<sup>1</sup> The interest in psychoanalysis, human instincts, the dark side of the psyche, naturalistic descriptiveness, notion of the hidden substance of things and social layering behind which the human "Self" is not able to find its nature any more, and, after all, Minkov's, Mutafov's and Polyakov's participation in the literary group of *Стрелци*, advocating the idea of leaking into the spiritual substance of what is native, although based on West European scholarship; those are the features constituting the links between the writers on various levels, although not mutually tying all the texts considered to be diabolistic.

under one group and label quite a varied set of their texts diabolistic – some works emphasize feelings of mystical horror, supernatural elements and images of decay, destruction and death, some stories are touched by a rather superficial interest in occultism or folklore-mythological images and there are also prosaic works focusing on the problems of the modern individual's mental condition, pathological mental states and disturbed interpersonal relationships including the late Minkov's science-fiction visions and the elitist, provocative, intellectual experiments of Mutafov. In addition to that, with its extreme level of formalization the work of the latter significantly exceeds diabolism itself. Mutafov's texts are created based on a synthesis of a number of codes from different areas (philosophy, fine art, architecture, technology, literature etc.) and they deny the mimetic function of language, which the author tries to replace by the creative function.

However, for such diverse works reviewers tend to use the covering term of diabolism - predominantly based on their feelings. They clearly perceive the provocation against the traditional realistic imagination. The emphasis has always been put on hallucinations, raving, madness, double-gangers and also merely fantastic visions and scary effects. The techniques of changing the narrator's perspective and breaking the causal relations are more interesting in that direction and new at the given moment of the context of Bulgarian literature. However, it is necessary to admit that Bulgarian writers do not succeed working with the escalation of the scary tension and they usually tend to naturalistic descriptions of monstrosity or decorations, comprising cliché symbols of penetrations into the world beyond such as mirrors, pictures, cemetery sceneries, spider webs and other supernatural symptoms in the form of things coming to life, marionettes etc.

Nevertheless, feelings of fear and distress are really characteristic of the works of Bulgarian diabolists, although being incarnated on the level of existential fear of death, of time passing by, darkness and the unknown; in other words the fear of our own lack of knowledge (abundantly exploited by expressionism), and also the disintegration of human identity in its total alienation from the world and itself. Demons are abstract. They can be identified with the machinery of human society and mass commonplaceness causing the failure of individualistic aesthetics and the post-romantic effort for achieving entirety: the human being is not capable of reaching itself, as it is mutilated by numerous discourses and replaced by imitations.

The universal key to the labelling of Minkov's, Polyanov's, Raychev's and

Mutafov's work thus seems to be its pessimistic attitude to mankind as well as to the individual's humanity which is perceived as a weakness. Challenging current values by means of provocation and tendency towards scandals and eccentricity is traditionally perceived as satanic or hideous and hostile (in terms of a rebellion against the order).

Supposed mystic suggestions are thus transferred to a more "down-to-earth" position of philosophical problems. Nevertheless, in many critical works the philosophical and artistic concepts which the writers start from in their proeses are left aside. The impulses affecting Bulgarian diabolists are thus being confused with parallels to other writers that are discovered by researchers. In addition, there is a tendency typical for Bulgarian critique to transfer the term of *diabolism* to foreign authors representing various styles of art. This fact confirms the unsubstantiality of treating diabolism as a direction (line) and prompts interpretations of the term in the meaning of a motive manner. The use of the term in the English, French, German and Russian milieu is another indication of that, the German and Russian sources giving evidence of their close relation to Bulgarian interpretations of *diabolism*, namely its wider and abstract, not the narrow theological, perception.

The only unambiguous point here seems to be the feeling-based and non-systemic approach of researchers to diabolism as a foreign phenomenon - probably a necessary one, although not regular in the development of Bulgarian literature. The conclusion that it is a non-Bulgarian original impulse has also been reached by this thesis based on the analysis of texts of Bulgarian writers and authors which they are related to. However, the spreading line of authors, the works of which could have presumably affected Bulgarian diabolists, has been narrowed here. The thesis is more likely intended to draw attention to ideological aspects and refer to reflections of worldwide and European trends in the life and thinking of Bulgarians of the 1920s, that have not been recorded yet.

As a prerequisite for the creation of literature deforming the empirical reality in a new, unusual way, the thesis sees the newly gained (self-)confidence of the artists allowing them to emancipate from the problems of the nation. Diabolism draws away from the pragmatic function of art and approaches poetical discourse as the only one, evasive of laws and bans. That way, the principles of Menippean carnival discourse, which is intended to deliver liberation from all conditionalities, leak into Bulgarian prose for the first time. However, Bulgarian writers themselves

lack spontaneity in their approach to the primitive, i.e. the part of the human being free of social layering, and thus they are incapable of employing free uncontrolled imagination. They linger close to the didactic traditions of Bulgarian literature embodying idealistic efforts to intellectually upheave the society and incorporate it into European culture.