Anti-Odysseus: Orphism and Late Communism in Bulgaria

Antи-Одиссей: Орфизм и поздний комунизм в Болгарии

MIGLENA NIKOLCHINA • nikolchina@gmail.com
A 1980s debate between Bulgarian “structuralists” and so called “impressionist critics” provides a line of demarcation between structuralists and post-structuralists while simultaneously delineating “Orphism” as the heavily controversial theoretical counterpart to the rise of Thracian studies in archeology and historiography. Since national identity turns out to be a major ideological wager of these controversies, they acquire an unforeseen relevance today.

В этом исследовании дискуссия с восьмидесятых годов ХХ века между болгарскими «структуралистами» и так называемыми «импрессионистскими критиками» рассматривается как способ разграничения болгарских структуралистов и постструктуралистов. В то же время эта дискуссия позволяет наметить «орфизм» как арена теоретических разногласий, разворачивающихся параллельно с ростом фракологии в исторических науках. Поскольку национальная идентичность является одним из идеологических залогов этих разногласий, они оказываются сегодня неожиданно актуальными.

**ORPHISM, THRACIAN MYTHOLOGY, LATE COMMUNISM, NATIONALISM, NATIONAL IDENTITY**

**ОРФИЗМ, ФРАКИЙСКАЯ МИФОЛОГИЯ, ПОЗДНИЙ КОМУНИЗМ, НАЦИОНАЛИЗМ, НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ**
This essay explores a peculiar trend in 1980s Bulgarian theoretical thinking which might be termed Orphism and which accompanied - without necessarily recognizing, or being recognized by - the rise of Thracian studies in archeology and historiography. Although the genealogy of this trend has been traced back to the first half of the 20th century, the immediate point of departure for my examination will be the antagonism between structuralists and so called impressionist critics, which marked intellectual life in Bulgaria since the 1960s. My goal, however, will be to foreground a certain brand of orphism, if there ever was one, which ignored and was ignored by this antagonism, while participating in theoretical communications with a broad spectrum of disciplines and discourses ranging from dissenting Marxist critiques of the regime to various post-structuralist orientations. What made the exchange not only possible but also quite fruitful was a common strategy for evading, displacing, and ultimately erasing all traces of the official dogma, even when it was contested. Ignoring the structuralist-essayists clashes was hence intentional and strategic. Contestation, it was implied, would already contaminate the contestant with the discourse of the enemy; complete disregard would be the only proper road to take.

The “Orphic” link was nevertheless there. Towards the end of the 1970s there was, so to say, a classical turn to the controversies, theoretical, ideological, and obliquely political, between the rather irregular brand of Bulgarian structuralism and the “impressionist critics” whose major representative was Toncho Zhechev. A number of paradoxes surround these controversies. Toncho Zhechev and his group were prevailingly perceived then, as they tend to be perceived today, as courageously antagonistic to the official dogma and hence subversive. This view disregards Zhechev’s efforts to ground his ideas in a certain
reading of Marx, however superficial and misconception (Panova 15; see also Enyo Stoyanov’s contribution in this issue), as well as his easy-going relationship with the central publishing venues: all this in stark contrast to the situation with the structuralists who were attacked in the central press and frequently had trouble publishing their works. As Iskra Panova, representing the camp of structuralism, acerbically remarked (14) apropos of Zhechev’s essay “The Myth of Odysseus”: “One might envy the courage of [Zhechev’s] creed if it were not well known that Odysseus was never one to take uncalculated risks.”

The publication of Zhechev’s essay “The Myth of Odysseus” and the controversy it triggered is what I describe as classical turn in the structuralist-impressionist confrontation. “The Myth of Odysseus” initially appeared at the end of 1979. In it, Zhechev opposes the home-coming Odysseus to the sea-faring Odysseus. Odysseus’ home-coming to the bucolic joys of agriculture is proclaimed to be the quintessence of Bulgarianness. The sailor is transformed into a settled tiller of the land; Odysseus – into a noble Bulgarian peasant who has never given in to cravings to leave his fruit-bearing vale. This retro-utopian patriarchal vision had already become apparent in Zhechev’s previous writing; its articulation through Greek myth, however, might be seen as symptomatic of a more general tendency. The 1980s are characterized by the infiltration of Ancient Greek literature, culture and philosophy in various areas of the humanities, which, via the arc of antiquity, find a way to connect and share, or sometimes oppose, their agendas. I do not claim that the turn to antiquity during this decade is stronger qualitatively or quantitatively in comparison with other periods of Bulgarian culture. Its specific aspect is, rather, the effort to translate the highly specialized classical studies into broader philosophical, ethical, esthetical and ultimately political horizons.

3 I analyze the 1980s multidisciplinary exchanges and their political implications in (Nikolchina 2013a).

4 What I call “irregular” is, among other things, branding it as structuralism in so far as its major representatives resisted being branded as structuralists – or, indeed, as anything. Nikola Georgiev has meanwhile argued for the impossibility of schools in literary theory (17–136). This position is subverted by a certain “vertical” orientation of Bulgarian theoretical thinking – a meta-positioning with respects to all brands and schools (Cf. Nikolchina 2013b: 146–147), which, set side by side with what will appear here as Orphism, acquires a curious new dimension.

5 The essay was reissued twice before the fall of the regime and has been reissued many times since. Iskra Panova’s response has never, so far as I know, been re-issued.
Multiple factors were probably at work. At a time when practically all Bulgarian intellectuals knew Russian, the influence of A.F. Lossev and Sergei Averintsev was definitely among those factors: not only in terms of their contribution to their concrete fields of study but most of all in terms of their ability to transform these fields into a meta-reflexive position with regards to the present. This ability was typical of the efforts to escape the ideological clichés of the regime yet the manner of its application was far from homogeneous. In Bulgaria, in the 1980s, Bogdan Bogdanov and Tzotcho Boiadjiev succeeded in consolidating classical studies into a dynamic mode of dissenting thought. As their younger colleague Kalin Yanakiev points out after the fall of communism, what inspired such endeavors was “resistance to the dead official philosophical thinking, which drove us to oppose it with a blend of rhetoric, imagination and reflection, at times, perhaps, too expressive and too trustful of subjectivity.” (Preface 7) In spite of the ingredients of imagination and subjectivity – which were, after all, present to a different degree in the different authors – this mode was also, as Kalin Yanakiev’s book Ancient Greek Culture: Problems of Philosophy and Mythology demonstrates, inflected by close reading, linguistic discipline, and attention to the letter of the text. Although totally opposed in its implications to Zhechev’s Odysseus, the book never mentions him and never makes clear who exactly is implied in the lash at the “official semi-ideological semi-anachronistic Bulgarian academism.” While the structuralists’ attack of Zhechev’s Odysseus is explicit and direct, Yanakiev keeps a sanitary distance from the controversy by avoiding any reference to it.

This divergence with respect to Zhechev’s Odysseus might in fact serve as a line of demarcation between structuralists and posts-structuralists in Bulgaria during the 1980s. Among the post-structuralists
there were many who were deeply and personally indebted to their structuralist teachers (Cf. Kiossev); their own work, however, thrived in a heterogeneous and multidisciplinary milieu which was a major feature of the epoch and which included classical studies as one of the most active strands. At the time, various authors working in various spheres of the humanities resorted to the classical inheritance in the spirit described and exemplified by Kalin Yanakiev. Many of them were closely connected through a dense network of seminars which allowed constant and immediate exchange of knowledge and ideas. The range of what they did with the ancients was sometimes staggering. There was Bogdan Bogdanov’s voluminous output which elegantly, cunningly, and expertly undermined official clichés. There were, at the opposite end, extremist “dada” theoretical gestures like Vladislav Todorov’s “Eros, Knight of the Prosthesis.” From ethics and axiology (Videva) to literary studies (Nikolchina 1988), it was as if paying tribute to the Greeks were some sort of rite of passage. Tzotcho Boiadjiev’s influential study Plato’s ‘Unwritten Doctrine’ with its emphasis on oral philosophical communication became emblematic for the penchant to sidestep censorship through seminar discussions. The propensity to think the shared dialogic fields via ancient Greek prisms is even more explicit in Boyadjiev’s “Socratic Discussions and Modern Dialogue,” as well as other texts like Rajcho Pozharliev’s “Phenomenology of the Dialogic Situation in Plato’s Symposium,” Boriana Katsarska’s “Soul. Eros. Community,” etc. In the 1980s this exchange almost completely disregarded Toncho Zhechev’s Odysseus and Fol’s Thracology. Yanakiev’s “alienated individualist” approach to antiquity was following a shared project for inhabiting a parallel universe with regards to the methodological, ideological and political wagers of the controversy surrounding Odysseus. 

*I cannot go here into the full complexity of either the individual development of the authors discussed, or the trends of which they are part.*
ODYSSEUS AND NATIONAL(IST) EXOTICISM

A decade later Boyan Manchev employs the concept of “national exoticism” in order to examine Zhechev’s use of the myth of Odysseus. Manchev explores both the specific Bulgarian genealogy and the broader European context of Zhechev’s approach. At various moments of time, a number of European cultures construct their national identity through classical reference. Manchev evokes the structural paradox inherent in this practice – the paradox of a national, i.e. particular universalism – in order to address the dilemmas of Bulgarian culture when, in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, it came to face the task of such construction. Orpheus and Dionysus – the Orphic-Dionysian, Bacchic, ecstatic, sacrificial, carnal, transgressive, primal, chthonic elements – become central to this effort because of a double or triple causality with respect to European but also Balkan and especially Greek (the most problematic for multiple reasons) uses of the classical inheritance. On the one hand, these chthonic aspects remained more or less vacant after earlier European uses which emphasized the rationality, harmony, and classical measure of the ancients; on the other hand, both Orpheus and Dionysus have a Thracian connection, so Bulgarian could claim a geographic relatedness; and there was Nietzsche, of course, whose early 20th century influence played its role. Manchev sees Zhechev’s return to the earlier efforts as an answer to the failure of the communist regime to implement a communist identity and the ensuing ideological crisis which produced the Thracian myth as one of its symptoms:

[...] The “Thracian myth” is de facto a project for the “rediscovery” (equivalent to a “re-planting”) of the roots of the Bulgarian nation:
an apparent tendency toward de-europeanization [...] which in fact unconsciously is trying to reconstruct the traumatic – because seen as lacking – European identity of the Bulgarian nation as “central” rather than “peripheral.” In short, this is an attempt to re-write the Bulgarian (or now Thraco-Bulgarian) culture as the cradle of the European civilization tout court. Through its new self-identification as inheritor to Thracian culture the Bulgarian national project discovers the veiled road to identification with the Other of Greece, or the other Greek – Dionysian (i.e. “Thracian”) culture.

The dynamic Manchev uncovers is that, while being late and left with no other options but the exotic ones for its identity, Bulgarian culture implements the Thracian myth as a mechanism for transforming the exotic into universal. This, however, implicates an anti-modernity move in so far as identity is sought for in a unique archaic past. Zhechev’s specific input into this effort is, according to Manchev, to “tame” and “domesticate” the Thracian Orpheus through the image of the home-coming rather than sea-faring Odysseus. The failed future-oriented communist identity is thus translated into a return to patriarchal roots. Zhechev transforms elemental excess into pastoral morality and tragedy – into idyll. As other studies have noted, Zhechev subjects to the same domesticating procedure key historical figures from the Bulgarian past, trimming their questionable bohemian ways into models of pristine patriarchal virtue (Penchev 20–21). This taming tendency sums up Zhechev’s ideal of Bulgaria’s “vale culture” (small, isolated, misunderstood by the harsh big world but beautiful) and his take on national identity.

There may have been, however, an additional and more personal trigger for his “Myth of Odysseus.” Zhechev was part of a small circle
which took care of the posthumous publication of the works of his friend Tzvetan Stoyanov, a brilliant theoretician and writer who died prematurely in 1971 under circumstances his friends found suspicious. (Cf. Vassilev) In the early 1960s, according to Zhechev’s own testimony, Stoyanov wrote a dialogue “Orpheus: Delirium with Mythology” which was published for the first time in 1978, a year before the first appearance of “The Myth of Odysseus” (Zhechev 1988: 13–14). Hardly a dialogue, Stoyanov’s “Delirium” alternates powerful and terrifying soliloquies in which Orpheus recounts now Dionysus invoking and raping him, now the Bacchante tearing him ecstatically to pieces (Stoyanov 357–362). It so happened that 1978 was also the year of the infamous Bulgarian umbrella case in which expat Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov was assassinated on a bridge in London, presumably by the Bulgarian secret services. Georgi Markov was a close friend of Tzvetan Stoyanov. When “Orpheus: Delirium with Mythology” was published for the second time ten years later, Zhechev and the other editors had it followed by “The Second Part of the Conversation,” a dialogue which had not been previously published, and for good reasons. In it, transparently disguised as 19th century Bulgarian writers, Stoyanov depicts Georgi Markov and himself discussing, deploring, and ultimately accepting self-sacrifice in the face of a hopeless situation which, again quite transparently, was the communist regime (Stoyanov 357–385).

Orpheus, sacrificial terror, Stoyanov’s untimely and disturbing end, Markov’s exile and violent death, as well as both Stoyanov and Markov’s dream of participating in the “grand dialogue” (Stoyanov 64) of world literature might have been, therefore, the very concrete background from which Zhechev’s idyllic Odysseus was differentiating himself, finding shelter in his vale, brushing the sweat from his forehead like some sort of agricultural Sisyphus. Odysseus was, perhaps, the fruit of
Zhechev’s on-going debate with his dead friends. Benignly, this could be perceived as survivor’s guilt and some sort of plea for the nation’s survival. But at what price? Iskra Panova, the most vehement and articulate critic of “The Myth of Odysseus,” does not mince her words when asking why Zhechev did not choose some other mythical figure for his hero. “All the others are losers, all the others are vanquished... Only Odysseus the Cunning scores all the points, collects all the profit, never misses a chance and is the only one to reach old age and close the cycle under the skirts of Grandma Penelope.” (Panova 33)

While this may look all too personal, Panova’s critique is relentlessly logical and follows two major lines of argumentation. The first one targets Zhechev’s methodology or, rather, lack thereof: he uses Ancient myth in order to produce a conservative and rightist new mythology disregarding scientific knowledge and analytical rigour. “His village becomes the Bulgarian village in general, the village becomes the people, the people becomes the People with a capital P, immutable and sacred.” (Panova 31) The second one targets the ideological implications of his essay. In counter distinction to received ideas about structuralism, Panova focuses on Zhechev’s tampering with context and temporality: his musings deny concrete realities, specific history, change, process, innovation, the courage of producing the new and – as she keeps repeating – of stepping into the unknown.

The fate of Panova’s article is rather strange: always mentioned, never quoted, its points frequently recycled without acknowledgment. Strangest of all, it has been denounced as an attack against Zhechev from the positions of the official party line (cf. Karev). In fact, apart from the editorial note with which the journal introduces her article, there is not a single instance of the orthodox Marxist rhetoric in Panova’s own text. Panova emphasizes the anti-European, anti-democratic,
anti-intellectual, and anti-modernization consequences of Zhechev’s nationalism: with this, she would make perfect sense today in the face of contemporary nationalisms. There is unavoidably too much Zhechev in a critique of Zhechev, which must have been a problem for Kalin Yanakiev’s milieu, but there is no discrepancy between her position in its broad outlines and the position exemplified by Yanakiev’s Ancient Greek Culture: Problems of Philosophy and Mythology. A curious illustration of their subterranean agreement may be found in their use of a rather rare word – wombness (utrobnost): the wombness and the return to the womb it implies is something they would both prefer to see avoided, culturally speaking, while Zhechev, according to Panova, keeps taking his Odysseus and Bulgarianness back there. That the wombness is equivalent to going back to brutal male domination, a return to padre padrone (the film with the same title was fresh then), Panova does not fail to hint. Yanakiev’s strategy was nevertheless quite different from Panova’s: instead of offering a direct critique of Odysseus, he reverses the reversal implemented in Zhechev’s myth.

**THE DIAPHRAGMIC SOUL**

Yanakiev’s point of departure is precisely the “Other Greece” described by Boyan Manchev as the orphism which remained vacant and thus open to the aporias of Bulgarian cultural identity. Ancient Greek Culture: Problems of Philosophy and Mythology is based on a straightforward and clear-cut rejection of the ideas about Greek antiquity as noble simplicity and tranquil greatness. This, according to Yanakiev, is the dominant but misleading paradigm to which his reflections will oppose an angry, passionate, troubled, brutal, voracious and ultimately tragic spirituality, which is material and carnal in its very abhorrence and revolt against
the material and the carnal. This is Dionysus who has devoured Apollo into a “unity of the epic and the tragic.” Dionysus, so to say, does the work of Apollo: the spiritual, the distant, the archer shooting from afar is seen here as only possible through spastic and enraged interaction with the bodily and the material. This stormy border is implemented as a constant passage between reason and madness, affect and control, exploit and crime, heroism and monstrosity, Olympian and chthonic: it is an antagonistic merger of Dionysus and Apollo, a tragic coincidence of liturgy-and-defilement, which acquires its anatomo-philosophical expression in the “pneuma” of the “diaphragmic soul,” conceived as a foundational spastic agitation, as seething and stormy breathing, and as infuriated expulsion of elemental materiality in a confrontational articulation of the world. Anger is the mode of existence of this soul:

Human existence in so far as it is animated – unlike the chthonic one – is essentially an enraged existence, it is a constant and heterogeneous irritability against the world and in the world. (Yanakiev 1989: 15)

Being spiritual means being infuriated in the most literal sense of the word. (Yanakiev 1989: 19)

Yanakiev proposes the diaphragmic spirituality, the thumos of Homer’s hero, as uncovering the tragic in the Homeric epic: this re-writes Nietzsche who did influence Yanakiev’s early 20th century predecessors but most importantly it completely pulverizes Zhechev’s transformation of tragedy into idyll. It is not that the epic turns tragedy with Yanakiev: their unity, rather, engenders his own genre of “expressive” philosophical reflection. If – according to Manchev – the result
of Zhechev’s Odysseus operation is a “horizontal immanentism” and an incarnation of the transcendent in the immanent, with Yanakiev the furious and tireless breathing in and out of the chthonic constantly brings forth the transcendent which keeps collapsing back into the immanent: hence the rage. An acquiescent and cosy identification with the topos of the native vale is completely incompatible with this dynamic.

And yet, perhaps, this is again Bulgarian, too Bulgarian. Or is it Thracian?

**ORPHEUS THE IRONIC**

Bogdan Bogdanov’s book *Orpheus and the Ancient Mythology of the Balkans* appeared in 1991: i.e. after the changes, after Yanakiev’s *Ancient Greek Culture: Problems of Philosophy and Mythology* and more than 10 years after Zhechev’s “The Myth of Odysseus.” The book includes and re-writes various articles beginning with the late 1970s: thus, Bogdanov’s interest in this theme precedes and is co-extensive with the debates around Zhechev and with their displacement exemplified by Yanakiev. Alexander Fol is also an important explicit reference point for Bogdanov, which is not the case with the other authors discussed here. Bogdanov is critical of Zhechev and Fol but, like them, he is concerned with the problem of identity, Bulgarian but also Balkan. This is a major difference from Yanakiev for whom national or ethnic identity, vale or peninsular, simply did not exist as a problem worthy of discussion. Orpheus seems to have been a rather dramatic topic for Bogdanov. In the Introduction to the 1991 edition, he claims that writing the book was motivated by his lack of satisfaction with his earlier publications (Bogdanov 4). Towards the end of his life he once again edited and re-worked the book which
appeared a few months before his death: the theme of Orpheus, which according to some of his close friends Bogdanov hated, accompanied him for about 40 years.

Unlike Toncho Zhechev (a literary critic) or Kalin Yanakiev (a philosopher), Bogdanov is a classical scholar proper. Furthermore, Bogdanov explicitly associates his methodology with semiotics which amounts to taking a side in the structuralist-impressionist debate. And yet, in a note at the beginning of the book he waives aside these aspects in order to emphasize that his true interest is “through the analysis of ancient written sources about Orpheus to reconstruct the ideological background, which found concretization in the image of the hero. The author believes that the resilience of this background is the major factor explaining the vitality of this character in the ancient and more specifically the Balkan cultural tradition.” (3) Bogdanov, therefore, explicitly enters the discussion via its ideological implications (like Iskra Panova who makes a similar move in her article on Zhechev). Like Zhechev, Bogdanov seems to situate his “homo Balcanicus” in a sort of timeless or at least sufficiently ancient framework; unlike Zhechev, he introduces the “resilience of the background” in a critical manner. The critique is carried out through the opposition of “open” and “closed” societies (not without a reference to Karl Popper, of course), a problem which will keep appearing in Bogdanov’s books in the 1990s. In this framework the Orphic, transcendent and (hypothetically) Thracian orientation of the cosmos is taken as an example of closedness and indifference towards the creation of a rich and varied social world. It is monotonous and apocalyptic, but it is also extremely hierarchical in its penchant to “flee social reality”, its “a-sociality,” its “imperviousness and intolerance towards variety” and its proclivity for “forms of irrational abreactions:”
The Thracian idea of the world is produced through the enhanced relation between the chthonic and the uranic along a vertical axis which seems to be less formal and endowed with greater value than it is in the Hellenic cultural sphere. The passion for differentiation allows us to presume that, unlike the Hellenic domain in which the vertical axis is a tool for describing a natural hierarchical articulation, the Thracian domain leaves the vertical direction undeveloped as a hierarchy and shapes it as a simple vertical tension. (Bogdanov 165–166)

If Bogdanov is thinking of Yanakiev here, he never says so. Did Yanakiev? Bogdanov appears in Yanakiev’s acknowledgements in the 1988 edition and is no longer there in the 1999 edition. It is clear, though, that funnily enough philosophy which is considered to be one of the greatest Ancient Greek contribution to Western culture, is identified by Bogdanov as an “unarticulated” Thracian and Orphic verticality, which has been “devoured” by the Hellenic world. Orpheus, verticality, and (the poverty of) philosophy are thus opposed to the seafaring horizontal openness of the Hellenic polis with its inclinations towards realism and rationalism, and towards the “pleasures of plurality,” which can explain

political phenomena like the democracy of the polis and the free spirit in the Athenian social life, as well as facts like the Hellenic polytheism and concrete phenomena like the circulation of writing in the early Hellenic world. A direct consequence of this tendency is the penchant of ancient Greek culture towards written communication and the early emergence of secular literature with an array of different genres and especially genres of prose. (Bogdanov 163)
So if with Zhechev the idyll absorbs the epic and the tragic, if with Yanakiev they are blended into philosophical reflection, with Bogdanov, it is narrative and the early Greek novel that wins the day. It is important to emphasize that Bogdanov’s opposition of Thracian and Hellenic is highly strategic in the early stages of Bulgarian democracy when his Orpheus book appeared. While always insisting that there cannot exist an ethnically pure culture (“Thracian” philosophy is Greek, after all), Bogdanov is clearly sending a warning through his distinction between the democratic, plural, seafaring, and open Hellenic world (an idealization that played a key role in Western democracies) and the monotonous and unarticulated vertical hierarchism of the Thracian cosmos which was being produced as Bulgarian identity. This warning obviously refuses to differentiate between the enclosure of Zhechev’s stationary Odysseus who, as Manchev points out, collapses even the vertical in agricultural immanentism, and Yanakiev’s intense verticality. Yanakiev’s passionate and infuriated diaphragmic soul, if read via Bogdanov, would appear to dump any colourful multiplicity in the tension between chthonic and uranic. It is extremely Orphic and Thracian, and, ultimately, apocalyptic.

**REPETITIONS: THIRD PART OF THE CONVERSATION**

Tzvetan Stoyanov’s post-humous publications, although written in the 1960s, became part of the debates of the 1980s. Adding to the genre diversity, his “Orpheus: Delirium with Mythology” has been defined as a “dialogue.” Yet there is nothing dialogic in the terrifying ravings of Dionysus and the ferocious extasy of the chorus. Orpheus is the one who narrates their invocations in a strange temporality which is both future (“and then he will tell me... and then they will tell me”) and past because it is the severed head of Orpheus which seems to repeat the
story, post-mortem, into eternity. The merger of pneuma and spirit, of the carnal and the heroic, which Yanakiev foregrounds as “tragic mystery,” follows, with Stoyanov, a downward spiral of destruction and horror. His Orpheus/Dionysus is a figure of doom face to face with chthonic and gory sacrificial carnage:

Come, let me touch you one last time before you become a minced pile, before they rip your white sacrificial flesh! I will never hear you again, never! How unbearable this rite is, this subterranean secret! Stench and fissures, and seething mud – disgusting! Beautiful and disgusting! Look at me, Orpheus, look at me closer, even closer, look in my eyes! Don’t you recognize me? Don’t you remember – how many times you have looked into these eyes, with these eyes? Now you know me! This is me, this is you, I am you, you are Dionysus, yes, you yourself are Dionysus! Mud in the mud! Have you recognized yourself? Murderer and victim! [...] Born from mud – die in mud! (Stoyanov 361)

Toncho Zhechev domesticates the sacrificial into the pastoral; he excludes it from the cosy patriarchal “vale” which will become the signature of his nationalist exoticism. With Tzvetan Stoyanov sacrificial doom is tied to the national problematic. In “The Second Part of the Conversation,” the dialogue which follows “Orpheus,” the Bulgarian twist to sacrifice is described as a “principle of deterioration,” as a law of “constant sinking,” which postulates that the “vale concealment,” which hides horror in its complacent heart, transforms any heroic act, any exceptionality and sacrifice for the common good into a senseless and fruitless defeat bound to vanish without a trace. Quotations from emblematic Bulgarian poems are mingled in Orpheus’s delirium explicating the connections with “The Second Part of the Conversation.”
You say that the river will take [the severed head of Orpheus] – the big river that runs towards the plains seething with blood; the crimson river; the widow crying for husband and sons lost in the rite; she will take it; she will carry it; and the head will sing, it will keep singing with earth and sky, beasts and nature; covered with blood; my head will sing floating down through the inseminated, fertile, dark, muddy native plain! (363)

The infinite loop which the temporality of “Orpheus: Delirium with Mythology” introduces – the still living Orpheus narrates what his severed head will be singing, what it has already sung – is re-enacted in “The Second Part of the Conversation.” In it, 19th century poet Botev discusses with another 19th century writer, Karavelov, whether to undertake a suicidal revolutionary act which he has already undertaken, which he will keep undertaking. Repetition is implied by the very title but also by the fact that Botev and Karavelov are in fact performing a later conversation, a mid-20th century conversation, one which implies the author himself and his friend, the writer Georgi Markov. According to Maria Kalinova the principle of deterioration, expounded in the conversation, is not entirely hopeless because Stoyanov offers as a way out, [...] not innocent self-sacrifice but another Dionysian logic: theatre. Like an actor, performing his role, Botev stages and rehearses his own death. Escaping Dionysus is through repeating Dionysus. In “The Second Part of the Conversation” self-sacrifice is replaced by the mimicry and mimesis of death, by a theatre act, a performance [...] (Kalinova)

And yet, this performative repetition works back and forth in time and as bloody as ever: Georgi Markov will be (is, was) assassinated; Stoyanov’s own end will be (is, was) strange without, as he seems to have
feared, even the benefit of being recognized as sacrificial. Repetition... repeats; it repeats its own unacknowledged sacrificial gore. Against this background the anger of Yanakiev’s furious diaphragmic soul acquires a double function: it is a universal principle of rejecting the chthonic in which it is nevertheless immersed; but it is also a refusal to accept the fate of vale deterioration, the fate of a doomed local identity. Anger (which I call revolt in my Promethean reading of romanticism) preserves the struggling verticality, which acquiescence collapses into Zhechev’s idyll and drowns in the blood of unacknowledged scapegoats, as Stoyanov’s Orpheus has it. Maintaining the vertical is a rejection of sacrifice; a refusal to play the victim. A year after the publication of Yanakiev’s youthful book the anger will explode into the streets...
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Резюме

Текстът разглежда една специфична насока в теоретичното мислене в България през 1980те години, която би могла да се нарече „орфизм“ и която съпровожда възхода на тракологията в историческите науки, като връзката между двата феномена често пъти остава неразпозната. Дебатите около „Митът на Одисей“ (1979г.) от Тончо Жечев са поставени в този контекст благодарение на изследването на Боян Манчев „Модерност и антимодерност. Българският националекзотизъм.“ „Митът за Одисей“ с неговото патриархално-идилично „котловинно“ „опитомяване“ на Орфеското е разгледан от Манчев в генеалогията на, от една страна, усилията по конструиране на българска идентичност от първата половина на 20 век и, от друга страна, идентификационната криза, настъпила през втората половина на 20 век след краха на опита да се изглади комунистическа идентичност. Настоящето изследване покаства как през 1980те години споровете, предизвикани от Жечев, очертават зоната на противопоставяне не само между „импресионистичната критика“ и структурализма, но също така между структурализъм и пост-структуралнизъм, който в онази епоха в българския контекст има характера на подвижно и хетерогенно сговаряне на множество дисциплини, школи и типове дискурси и за който самата тема за национална идентичност е ирелевантна. Така докато статията на застъпващата структурализма Искра Панова „По повод на един мит“ (1980) влиза в пряка полемика с националекзотизма на Жечев, ранната книга на Калин Янакиев Древногръцката култура – проблеми на философията и митологията (1988) радикално преобръща визията на Жечев и функционира като страна в този дебат, като обаче по един знаков начин отказва
да го припознае. Наред с Искра Панова и Калин Янакиев, Богдан Богданов с монографията Орфей и древната митология на Балканите (1991), както и диалогът „Орфей. Бълнуване с митология“ от Цветан Стоянов (написан още през 1960те години, но излязъл посмъртно едва през 1978г. и по такъв начин оказал се част от дискусиите на 1980те) са разгледани тук като реплики в един критически обмен, който показва проблематичността и рисковете на дясно-националистическия ретро-утопизъм, намерил израз в Одисей на Тончо Жечев. Този обмен би могъл да хвърли изобилна светлина върху явления, превърнали се в част от политическия ни живот днес, и си заслужава да бъде изследван още по-внимателно, включително с оглед на по-късните му трансформации.

**Miglena Nikolchina**

*Miglena Nikolchina is a literary historian and theoretician whose research engages the interactions of literature, philosophy, political studies, and feminist theory. She is professor at the Literary Theory Department at the University of Sofia, Bulgaria. In English, her publications include the books Matricide in Language: Writing Theory in Kristeva and Woolf (2004), Lost Unicorns of the Velvet Revolutions: Heterotopias of the Seminar (2013).*