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Geo Milev's polemical style – a mode of use

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Abstract. This article presents a portrait of Geo Milev that differs from the canonical creative one – namely, a portrait of the polemicist actively participating in and provoking a series of literary scandals in the 1920s. The analysis of the texts not only highlights colourful details from the sociocultural context but also makes it possible to outline the aesthetic and subjective motivations for Geo Milev's involvement in numerous polemics. These polemics generate a wide public resonance through their synthesis of effective style, figurative language and intellectual arguments, thus meeting the expectations of a broad reading audience. In the individual micro-plots that constitute each of his articles, Geo Milev gives free rein to his imagination, creating a colourful mosaic of metaphors, similes and associations, weaving intertextual connections, juxtaposing literary and political figures, and evaluating authors, books and cultural events in an ironic or condescending manner.

Keywords: literary polemics, artistic style, sociocultural context, aesthetic positions

The studying of an author's polemical style reveals a multifaceted and provocative semantic field, whose boundaries dynamically shift from aesthetic to psychological and from cultural to personal motivations. In this sense, polemical texts are not simply a colourful touch, a more authentic or more piquant empirical given, but an uncertain and misleading dialogical space, usually structured according to the principle of the thematic differentiation and mutual opposition of a system of signs.

By expanding the horizon of knowledge in literary history through directing critical discourse towards the analysis of these public discussions, we expect them to become a subjective transition to a certain, often elusive, objective truth, to mediate the perception of socio-cultural situations encoded by temporal layers, to provoke the unraveling of complex networks of psychological, aesthetic and intimate relationships. Through attempts to deconstruct various levels, we could correct hasty or distorted notions imposed by literal or arrogant readings of verbal conflicts. These conflicts are traditionally perceived in a playful context – as scandals that are all the more memorable the more offensive characteristics are placed in a minimum of textual space, or as gossip that acquires even a mythological hue when verbal clashes escalate into physical confronta-

tion. Literary memory preserves many such recollections, whose protagonists are prominent Bulgarian writers, poets and critics.

What is Geo Milev's participation in the polemical spectacles of his time? If we seek the shortest and, in this case, quite accurate answer, we would have to settle for the self-explanatory definition – active. But I would like us to look beyond the visible concreteness and familiar unambiguity with which his polemical articles are perceived. Some of the meanings they provoke sound relevant as an aesthetic position even today, and are often in sharp contrast with the dialogical style typical of that period. To the horror of the literary scholar and to the delight of the curious reader of old editions, entering the polemical labyrinths shatters too many intellectual mythologems, because even in the most academic verbal clashes, ethics are not revered at all.

In his texts, Geo Milev does not deviate from the style characteristic of the 1920s and not only does he not spare any piquant details from the personal or creative portrait of his opponent, but he often reaches the limits of what is acceptable in his humiliating caricature. The visual impact is reinforced by the abundance of punctuation marks – dashes, colons, ellipses – and by numerous spaces that highlight the semantic accents. In every polemic, there are at least two models of truth and the goal of every author is to impose their discourse unconditionally. Of course, Geo Milev is not immune to the vanity of seeking to provoke a broad cultural effect, publicly attributing aesthetic and personal faults to his opponents. This requires not a detailed presentation of facts but their skillful implication at the subtextual level, not a detailed exposition of someone else's truths but the imperative imposition of one's own scale of values. The poet masterfully applies this winning tactic in his verbal disputes. Usually, the polemical theme is indicated already in the title – "Za spisanie *Ek* i literaturnite nagradi" (On the *Ek* Journal and the Literary Awards) (Milev 1924a, 103), "Protiv realizma" (Against Realism) (Milev 1919a, 55), etc., and the opening sentences fix the author's position categorically and unambiguously: "Where on Derizhan? – On his head. What else? – A beating. But it is questionable whether, after so much beating – with facts – the seismograph on his head and his conscience will show any tremor: because he has not yet submitted his resignation..." (Milev 1922a, 257). Hristo Tsankov-Derizhan is a favourite target of his "merciless mini-philippics". With vigilant attention, Milev closely monitors his every action as director of the National Theatre, his public appearances and his publications. In a series of texts, sketching elements of the prehistory of their conflict, but situating it in the immediate present, he announces, without courtesy or false correctness, his assessment: "...Derizhan is illiterate and a simpleton", and graciously offers him one last chance to be rehabilitated: "...to IMMEDIATELY submit his resignation from the high position he holds".

Before Elin Pelin scandalously announces "Zashto ne mi se hodi v Narodniya teatar" (Why I Don't Feel Like Going to the National Theatre) (Elin Pelin 1921) in the first issue of *Razvigor*, Geo Milev, with his characteristic categoricalness, presents his "artistic diagnosis of the Bulgarian theatre"[1]. He not only

[1] Under this title, Geo Milev publishes four articles in the *Zarya* newspaper in April 1918, which are later included in the book *Teatralno izkustvo* (Theatrical Art) (Sofia, 1942).

identifies the causes but also polemicizes passionately with tradition, proposing Reinhardt's avant-garde explorations as the only possible way out of the crisis, because "the theatre cannot have any laws other than the laws of rhythmic expression through word and movement. Rhythm – the expressive power of rhythm – is today the only means and the primary goal of all arts, including the theatre" (Milev 1942, 103).

In addition to presenting his ideas theoretically, the poet also puts them into practice with his staging of Strindberg's "The Dance of Death" (premiered on 11 January 1920), which provokes both enthusiastic approval and categorical rejection. He challenges the realistic traditions of the Bulgarian theatre and the established ideas about directing and acting through his own original interpretation of the play. The public is shocked and since anything new in Bulgaria has a painfully difficult time gaining acceptance, after eleven performances the play is withdrawn, leaving behind rumour[2] about the failure of his directorial attempt. This also presupposes Geo Milev's painful sensitivity to the topic of theatre, his active involvement in polemics regarding Bulgarian drama and actors' interpretations, to which he is most tolerant, as well as to the scenography and productions by foreign directors. Towards them, however, he is merciless: "Let my voice be the first protest against the foreigners who wish to interfere in our art! We have no need of them! And besides, they cost us many thousands and millions that could be used for our native art rather than for them" (Milev 1942, 92). Returning to some of these polemics inevitably provokes associations with contemporary socio-cultural situations, thus becoming yet another argument that historical memory offers no lessons.

Geo Milev has no affinity for the gradual construction of a complex web of hints, nuances and riddles that imperceptibly seduce the reader. For him, the reader is not simply an object of persuasion but a participant in a spectacle that is sometimes comical and sometimes dramatic. Therefore, the polemicist seeks maximum proximity to his reading audience by overlapping his understanding and subjective goals with their interests, and why not with their appetite for sensation. This usually presupposes lowering the intellectual style and reducing analysis to bare journalism. In "Yubilei i pogrebeniya" (Anniversaries and Funerals) (Milev 1921a), Geo Milev manages to achieve something rarely seen in our literary polemics – a harmonious synthesis between the horizons of expectation of both the enlightened and the tabloid readers. In the individual micro-plots that make up the text, he gives free rein to his imagination, creating a colourful mosaic of metaphors, similes and associations, superimposing contexts, weaving intertextual connections, juxtaposing public figures and evaluating the creative achievements of others in an ironic or condescending manner. Ana Karima's anniversary is presented as a parody, her speech as "preposterous and deplorable" and the rhetorical question "Will she too leave her bright name in the history of Bulgarian literature?" is left for time to answer. With perfidious sarcasm, he subjects his "heroes" to a psychoanalytic dissection – Tsanko Tserkovski, Krastyo

[2] This has been refuted by published archives of the National Theatre, cited and analysed in a number of contemporary studies of Geo Milev's theatrical creative biography.

Sarafov, "the artist who carries today the entire Nar. Teatr[3] on his shoulders", and his well-deserved but "outrageously ridiculous anniversary". Even the ceremony surrounding the burial of the mortal remains of Pencho Slaveykov and Petko Todorov is commented on negatively, as is the participation of "Mr. Professor Boyan Penev – the inevitable Sancho Panza in the shadow of that great Don Quixote, thirsting for a feat, as Pencho Slaveykov was in his lifetime".

With a precise sense of composition, Geo Milev manages to weld together the individual fragments and, at the same time, not simply list facts and events, but temperamentally and attractively outline the relief and perspective of his concept. Thus, each one of his polemical appearances becomes a kind of theatrical performance, which is different with each new stage interpretation. On the occasion of Elin Pelin's forthcoming anniversary (1922), he returns once again to his obviously favourite topic in order to definitively condemn this "impossible resurrection from the dead" and to deliver his unappealable verdict: "The anniversary is no miracle, no mystery, no question; on the contrary, it is a very firm, positive black dot; a huge, heavy dot that falls like a literary tombstone upon its honoree..." (Milev 1922b, 356). As in any good play, the author remains hidden behind the scenes, but the other characters – his verbal enemies – have clearly defined psychological and intellectual images. The sets are not underestimated either – each polemical act is effectively situated in an appropriate socio-cultural context. The pauses also have an important functional role, and the sharp comments and malicious characterizations inserted as stage directions intensify the effect. And what is the significance of the dialogue and the audience? Geo Milev strives to build the idea of truthfulness of his theses with pronounced internal and external dialogicity. On the one hand, he enters into direct communication with the reader, who responds, presents counterarguments and poses questions. He provokes the prolongation and subsiding of tension, the uncovering of hidden meanings and overt emphases. On the other hand, each of the polemical articles is situated in a complex time-space and imposes imperatively formulated theses, especially when the emphasis is placed on the fate of Bulgarian literature and on outlining its "Posoki i tseli" (Directions and Goals) (Milev 1919b) for its equal integration into European modernity. The expected prospect is reinforced with "must": "The shore of art – pure art – must be reached"; "Bulgarian literature must go beyond itself, beyond the tradition of the national, the contemporary and the popular"; "Efforts must be made. Because Bulgarian literature has fallen behind. We must catch up with the others – those who have overtaken us. We must make the maximum effort we can – and as far as we can – to do so". This sometimes traumatic, painful and difficult breaking of national complexes of backwardness, isolation, authenticity and self-sufficiency is what Geo Milev not only polemicizes with but also manages to refute skillfully and radically with each of his creative acts.

Not only as an author, but also as a person, Geo Milev does not know how to play the game of compromises, and does not accept the smooth and con-

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[3] *Nar. Teatr* is from the Bulgarian *Нар. Театр* (*Народен Театър*), an abbreviation deliberately used by Geo Milev to refer to the National Theatre in Bulgaria.

flict-free transition between generations and aesthetics. Expressionism is radical and intolerant towards tradition and its patriarchal figures. And there is hardly a more dignified embodiment than Ivan Vazov "of an era that was not yet in the past, but was by no means in the present" (Konstantinov 1981, 279). He is the last representative of the past which carries within itself the memory of the Revival ideals, the reverence for patriarchal traditions, which requires art to be social and realistic in its depiction of everyday life. To push Bulgarian literature away from this ideological paradigm, to bring it forever out of the closed field of national authenticity – this is Geo Milev's existential and creative mission. He is unequivocal: "Vazovism must leave both the theatre and literature" (Milev 1920a, 172). He sharply and unreservedly accuses Vazov of all the "misfortunes" in contemporary cultural reality, of the disastrous situation of our theatre, and ridicules his fame as a national writer. For him, during this period, "Vazov's aesthetics" are a synthesized expression of what must be rejected as useless and unnecessary in Bulgarian literature, so that the latter can enter unburdened into the synchronous rhythm of the European avant-garde.

And let us answer one more question. What is the setting for the polemical dramas in which Geo Milev eagerly participates or creates himself? For him, it is not just a matter of emotional disposition or aesthetic motivation but of objective possibilities. It is known that he is the editor of two of the most prestigious journals of his time. Both *Vezni* (1919–1922) and *Plamak* (1924–1925) were created with the ambition to stimulate, guide and enrich the cultural and intellectual life of the 1920s with innovative ideas and trends. They are fully focused on the present of their time, tracing the dynamics of the artistic developments in Bulgaria and Europe. Retrospective references to events and facts are employed only as supporting arguments. Polemicism is latently embedded in their very conception and repeatedly manifested within the cultural space of that period. This presupposes one of the essential features of Geo Milev's style in discussions – absolute freedom from pre-set or imposed literary norms, from compliance with someone else's ideological positions or pragmatic commitments, which is a prerequisite for collaboration with other periodicals. Therefore, his polemical discourse is a complex conglomerate of personal motivation as impulse and analytical objectivity, of the subjectivity of reflection and the aesthetic deconstruction of other people's arguments. To this we should add the emotional energy of the bias that he puts into each of his articles. His polemical "I" is most often pathetic. He grows angry, exposes, demands, especially when he justifies the diachrony between the modern inventions of expressionism and the aging aesthetics of symbolism or the anachronism of the realistic tradition. His style is a colourful mosaic of allegories, metaphors, colourful similes and amusing puns. Such are all his articles discussing the problems of the Bulgarian theatre, his negative literary reviews, and the texts with which he participates in the polemic on language.

More detached, calm and neutral, but not dispassionate, is the tone of the survey articles "Balgarskiyat narod dnes" (The Bulgarian People Today) (Milev 1921b), "Rodno izkustvo" (Native Art) (Milev 1920b), "Poeziyata na mladite" (The Poetry of the Young) (Milev 1924b), etc. In them, he skillfully employs classical rhetorical techniques, convincingly mixes cultural layers, makes sharp

temporal transitions and weaves a unique network of intellectual arguments and subjective interpretations. At any given moment, Geo Milev's polemical position is always monolithic. His conclusions are precisely and effectively formulated, his opponents' characteristics are presented as memorable epigrams, and his evaluations of cultural and political events sound like ritual incantations. But just as his aesthetic and ideological convictions change over time, so does his attitude towards friends and opponents undergo complex metamorphoses. This is natural, because every new verbal conflict has its own logical meaning and every new response to old problems is different. For example, after Vazov's death, Geo Milev's personal and aesthetic attitude towards him and the literary tradition in general becomes more objective and even positive. He admits: "After 50 years of writing, Vazov had the right to celebrate an anniversary", but he cannot refrain from making a bitter comment on the noisy rituality and political ostentation of the celebrations: "What a mockery of the old man's white locks, who is now deceased? Was the nation truly celebrating their poet? May his bones, now at rest, forgive me – but then he was paraded like a bear through the streets and taverns, from town to town. And speeches... what speeches! And everywhere beside him, minister Omarchevski, beside him Derizhan, and so on" (Milev 1921a, 45).

His relationship with Prof. Aleksandar Balabanov is no less complex and problematic. As a student in Sofia, Geo Milev maintained close ties with him and evidently held him in high esteem, as evidenced by his correspondence with his father: "Not to mention Balabanov, who is a very intelligent, learned and insightful critic", he writes to his father from Leipzig (Milev 1964, 223). Dissatisfied with his professors, a little later he again shares with Milyo Kasabov: "Now I understand why Balabanov used to tell me back then to go to Berlin and what there is for me to see there" (Milev 1964, 234). Graduates of the same university, deeply influenced by German literature, in their homeland, Prof. Balabanov and Geo Milev become exponents of opposing aesthetic positions – traditional realism and expressionism – which strongly drive them apart. Sometimes, due to certain similarity in their temperament and unconventional tastes, their views converge, but these are momentary points of contact that highlight the contrasts more clearly. For Geo Milev, the *Razvigor* newspaper and Balabanov become "a peculiar chapter in the book about the confusions in Bulgarian literature – the chapter of the completely superfluous" (Milev 1921c, 83). *Vezni* marks the end of the newspaper's first anniversary (1921) with a devastating article in which the writers of *Razvigor* are accused of imitation, of illiteracy – "absence of Bulgarian language and Bulgarian grammar" (Stefanov 1921, 291). The newspaper itself is not spared either. It is described as a "refuge of conventionalities" and the criticism it publishes is "lacking in depth and insight, crude and vulgar". The author goes so far as to recommend that *Razvigor* become a dogmatic newspaper, as long as it does not "promote the professor's personal opinion to the world". In such cases, comments are unnecessary – especially given the temperamental style characteristic of the time when such verbal skirmishes take place, the strong biases of the two editors and the radically different literary tastes they defend. Since every dispute has an initiator and a more active side, in this case, that "honour" falls to *Razvigor*. "Kak ehoto zaglahva" (How the Echo Fades) – this is the fate predicted for *Vezni* by Milev's former collaborator Lyudmil Sto-

yanov. He rather ironically characterizes the journal, which is at the beginning of its third year, as "a defeated and scattered army, a miniature booklet, badly wounded in battle, almost disabled, in some small, thin format" (Stoyanov 1921). Another sharp article against Geo Milev is also published in the newspaper, provoked not by a text of his but by a speech delivered at Trapkov's Gallery in April 1921 "...and directed mainly against Balabanov and Elin Pelin, but also against Vazov and Pencho Slaveykov" (Borov 1921). We do not know what exactly the poet said in his speech about the authors mentioned. We can judge the then very modern form of communication between intellectuals and the general, often diverse, public only by the responses that appeared in the press, prompted either by someone's wounded pride or by enthusiasm. Speakers usually improvise on a previously announced topic and the merits of the talk are determined by the extent to which the speakers manage to captivate their listeners. We cannot obtain any objective information from Todor Borov's sharp comments and offensive remarks. Considering the poet's understanding of art, we could assume that he was quite critical of the realistic line in our literature. In all likelihood, it is not so much the "verbal blows" directed at the writers listed by Borov that prompted him to denounce "the horror of an ambition without any talent" but rather the harsh words directed at his friends Balabanov and Elin Pelin that made him so fierce. Geo Milev is called "a maniac, gifted only with ambition", "a random person in our literature" and "this misunderstanding". There is no need to list more examples to convince ourselves that the urge to accuse without taking into consideration real creative qualities and without using specific facts is unworthy when the only desire is to humiliate a person and satisfy the wounded creative egos of friends and like-minded people. After more than sixty years, Todor Borov recalls self-critically: "I wrote a terrible, nightmarish article, the result of youthful thoughtlessness and underestimation" (Borov 1983).

Ethics also fail Dimo Kyorchev, who publishes not merely a negative but also an abusive review of the translation of *The Twelve* by Aleksander Blok. Konstantin Konstantinov recounts the story behind the translation and how the poem was received by the intelligentsia: "This was probably the first copy of *The Twelve* and *The Scythians* in Bulgaria, and it circulated among all my friends who loved Blok. We were astonished and delighted by the completely new perspective of the poet – one of the standard-bearers of Russian symbolism – by the original and bold plot, as well as by the poetic form resonating deeply with it. Upon learning about the book, Geo Milev asked me to lend it to him for a few days so he could translate it. I gladly gave it to him and in the next issue of *Vezni*, he published excerpts from his translation, and a little later, the entire poem was published in the *Vezni* library with some of Goncharov's illustrations" (Konstantinov 1981, 293). The poet's encounter with Blok's new work comes at a time when his aesthetic positions begin to change. Expressionism now serves him as a means of taking a sharper look at the pressing social and political problems of the time. Geo Milev feels close not only to the style of the poem, but also to its ideological and emotional power. This enables him to vividly and accurately recreate its innovative artistic conception. The poet renders the characteristic poetics of *The Twelve*, preserving the folk-song rhythm of the verses. This is also the focus of Dimo Kyorchev's acrimonious, albeit meant to be well-argued,

accusations. According to him, Geo Milev failed to grasp "the ideological, symbolist and poetic desire of the work he was translating". The critic is right that some of the verses are more the result of the poet's own creative improvisations and stray too far from the original. Yet, his condemning assessment, "A bad, barbaric translation, a misinterpretation of the symbols and an ugly arrangement of words" (Kyorchev 1921), has been refuted by time – the strictest judge of translation attempts.

In these radical or more tolerant polemical texts, we find subjective motivations, universal national and psychological codes, and cultural signs. Without diminishing Geo Milev's canonical image, they complement it with little-known or forgotten but colourful touches and situate him in the authentic cultural context of his time.

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