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Lyuben Dilov's Humorous Science Fiction: Literary Historical Contexts

Abstract

The report focuses on satirical prose of Lyuben Dilov as an important part of literary-historical processes in Bulgaria between 1960 and 1989. It also traces the development of the science fiction image in literature which uses humor and satire as a key to analyzing the clash between progressive science and backwardness in thinking and living; as a resource of expressing underdeveloped civilization – the inability of people to deal with new technology acceleration and their old understanding of progress.

Lyuben Dilov's prose also uses the unlimited possibilities of science fiction (scientific hypotheses, dreams, etc.) to reveal the metaphorical origins of the genre characteristic of the New Wave in sci-fi, the over-realization of the world in which we live. Turns the science fiction image into tool of social and cultural analysis.

Kew words: Bulgarian contemporary literature, science fiction, Science, Lyuben Dilov, humor, satire

Ключови думи: Съвременна българска литература, научна фантастика, наука, Любен Дилов, хумор, сатири

Laughter is older than culture, Vihren Chernokozhev states in his book „БЪЛГАРСКИЯТ СМЯХ“ (lit. Bulgarian Laughter) (1994), and it was not before "the appearance of a society that laughter gradually began shifting from an innate psychophysiological instinct into an all-pervading substance, into a conscious social need which creates culture"¹.

During its development Bulgarian laughter culture is under the influence of objectively historical, ethnical, social as well as socio-psychological conditions which determine its distinguishing features. By tracing the place of laughter in Bulgarian literature throughout certain periods we could construct an ideational coordinate axis which marks the spiritual growth of our nation, its mentality and worldview. Because laughter is not only humor or a harmless joke; it is not only satire, but also a mirror whose position of assessment — placed between the physical concreteness and the reflection — triggers the psychological paradox of the simultaneous strengthening and problematizing of one's own identity; it undermines the foundations of our human, imperfect, contradictory, incomplete, constantly changing world.

Literary Historical Contexts

This paper will focus on a portion of Lyuben Dilov's works in which the writer not only reflects the problems of his contemporary world, but also smiles at the scientific and technological efforts of society to keep up with the modern times. He achieves this by adding the themes, ideas and problems typical of science fiction to Bulgarian reality.

Laughter in Lyuben Dilov's science fiction is a sign of civilization's fatigue which civilization itself is the cause of; laughter is a sign of humankind's inability to handle the new technological push and to overturn their conservative convictions. This is prose which reveals the moral position of the intellectual, humanist, individual and writer Lyuben Dilov towards the social, personal and psychological consequences of the technologization. This is prose which sets the inevitable anthropocentricity of human knowledge against the unknown and reflects Homo Sapiens's eternal dream of wearing the crown of nature.

The theme of the relationship between new technology and man makes its appearance as early as the 30s in Georgi Iliev's works „О-Корс“ (lit. O-Kors) (1930) and „Тейт се

¹ Vihren Chernokozhev, *Balgarskiyat smyah*, Sofia: Balgarski pisatel, 1994, 7.

бунтува“ (lit. Teut Rebels) (1933). It is no coincidence that exactly during this decade the figure of the robot enters Bulgarian literature. The appearance of the mechanical being in our national literature coincides in terms of time with the post-war introduction of new machines and technology into our literature as an element of modernization. The robot (or silodey as the writer names it) is not a central figure in Georgi Iliev's works, in contrast to, for instance, Svetoslav Minkov's (in the short story „Човекът, който дойде от Америка“ (lit. The Person Who Came from America), 1932). It is not so strikingly mechanical either, Penka Vatova states: "(...) as Minkov's typical human figure; in the context of the novels, it is not a scientific and technological wonder which is intended to leave the reader amazed"². The silodeys are organically integrated in the futuristic world of Iliev's works; their presence as well as their functions therein are unremarkable, but it should be noted that this is the first appearance of a robot in our literature.

I am mentioning Georgi Iliev's name with a view to the first more serious attempts in Bulgarian science fiction to not only think of industrialization as an effect of the technological innovations, but to also incorporate the typical of the genre images (like the spaceships, flying saucers, extraterrestrials, robots and others) into our national literature, by adding to them something characteristically Bulgarian, for example, an environment, dispositions and the like.

The origins of the theme of the machine-like man in Bulgarian literature may be traced to as early as Expressionism in the depiction of the depersonalization of the human being; in the appearance of the man-puppet in Chavdar Mutafov's works (the collections „Марионетки“, lit. Marionettes, 1920; and „Технически разкази“, lit. Technical Short Stories, 1940) as a reflection of the crushing weight of the industrialization processes. In the collection „Технически разкази“ (lit. Technical Short Stories), the machine, Aleksandra Antonova notes it: "(...) in its particular matter is not deformed, but lyrically endowed with spirit; the motor wears a cast-iron helmet and nickel bracelets, it is "a brutal and beautiful being, with an iron head and a gluttonous stomach, overfilled with ink"³.

This article will not include the development and perception of the technical innovations (the radio, automobile and others) in Bulgarian literature. I am making a note of the interest of writers, like Chavdar Mutafov, in the innovations and their positive role

² Penka Vatova, *Za parvia robot v balgarskata literature I drugi izobreteniya na Georgi Iliev*. In: *Literatura I tehnika*. Sofia: UI Sveti Kliment Ochridskiq 2018, 256.

³ Aleksandra Antonova, *Chavdar Mutafov*. V *tarsene na xudozestvenia lik*. Sofia: Karina-Mariana Todorova, 2011, 229.

regarding the contemporary man's change of outlook in order to present another viewpoint concerning the perception of technical discoveries.

What is of interest to me, with a view to the set topic, is the relationship man and machine (computer, robot, android, cyborg), and the appearance of the robot, as a parody of man; as an important sci-fi image; as an expression of human fault in the machine's "diversions" and the humorously grotesque games between the markers characteristic of science fiction and the ways in which our writers "lampoon human ethics and biology, and the irrationality of cultural values" (Saparev 1990: 134). For example, in L. Dilov's short story „Поредният номер“ (lit. The Following Number) the AI created by scientists comes into contact with an extraterrestrial kind, which recognizes in the robot a similar to their own form of reasoning, and this kind travels to planet Earth in order to meet the only reasonable representative — an 18th-generation robot's new electronic brain.

In the 30s Svetoslav Minkov's short story „Човекът, който дойде от Америка“ (lit. The Person Who Came from America) appears. The robot is directly dubbed the devil's creation, and the engineers who create robots — "evil creators". The robot's image is described as split between the human and the "mechanical"; the robot perceives itself as a man of the new time and as such, erases the line between man and machine. The gradation of man's transformation into a robot and the materialization of the metaphor man – machine is very clearly portrayed in this work of Minkov's.

I am mentioning Svetoslav Minkov's name because through his satirical grotesques he introduces modern intellectual problems and forms of artistic generalization — atypical of the 30s — by using the conventions of science fiction in order to outline problems provoked by the scientific and technological revolution and, naturally, the development of biotechnology (in the short story „Маймунска младост“, lit. Monkey Youth). Exactly these problems, making up the satirically grotesque tool kit, will manifest themselves clearly and consistently in L. Dilov's works.

The period during which Lyuben Dilov's literary artistry strengthens and reaches its artistic maturity (between the 50s and the 80s) reveals an attitude towards, on the one hand, the political and cultural changes in Bulgaria after 1948, with the aesthetic and ideological control over literature; and, on the other hand, towards the global diffusions in the development of science fiction.

The 50s mark the mature period of the so-termed Golden Era of science fiction, during which the majority of the works paint a picture of the future by stepping on scientific ideas and projects directed towards technological progress, the tools with which man will conquer

the cosmic space, contact with extraterrestrials etc. During this period Bulgarian science fiction is influenced by the ideological shifts in Russia which propagandize a positive attitude towards the progressive power of science and technology in forming the future socialist. Writers such as Stefan Volev („Младите столетници“, lit. The Young Hundred-Year-Olds, 1961) and Dimitar Peev („Ракетата не отговаря“, lit. The Rocket Does Not Respond, 1958) treat this genre as "extraliterary", connected only to the scientific feats in a particular field and their positive effect on society. The scientific and technological terminology turns into an irreplaceable attribute in the works of not a few writers starting out their literary careers during this period. However, it is not incorporated in a particularly successful way. Such are some of the characters of Petar Stupov (in the novel „Гости от Мион“, lit. Guests from Mion, 1965), Boris Svetlinov (in „Един ден на Луната“, lit. One Day on the Moon, 1955) and others. The topic of science, Elka Konstantinova states: "(...) crippled the writers' mind and propelled them towards a dangerous standardization of artistic decisions. In their desire to popularize new data from the different branches of contemporary science, the authors ignored the human character and the spiritual problems of the period"⁴.

The extreme technicity turns sci-fi works into reference books on astronomy, physics, etc., into a means of scientific information and not into a subsidiary element — a décor — on top of which the philosophical and ethical problems of the time and the socio-psychological changes of contemporary society are portrayed and looked into the way they are, not the way they should be.

I am making a note of these important stages in the development of science fiction both in Bulgaria and globally with a view to the following new tendencies which after the 60s question the dominance of science in the fictional structure of the work. In the 60s, a “metaphorical fatigue” in terms of the themes and problems which interested the writers of “hard” science fiction during the Golden Age of the genre can be felt. The excessive fixation on the cosmic space is perceived as something unsound and pertaining to the past. The historical change is accompanied by a change in the language, whose task is to visualize the problems appearing on our planet, and not outside of it. The new wave pulls the desires, fears and problems in towards the space of the Earth. Science fiction’s sensitivity moves its focus from the cosmic space to the earthly one, to the spheres of the subjective, to the realm of the subconscious. The complex relationship between man and technology is portrayed on Earth,

⁴ Elka Konstantinova, *Vaobrazhaemoto i realnoto. Fantastikata v balgarskata hudozhestvena proza*. Sofia, UI Sv. Kliment Ohridski, 1987, 153.

and the writers examine their interaction, most often by outlining the effects of dehumanization.

The question "How do I interpret this world I belong to?" transforms into "What is a world?". The interaction between science fiction and the contemporary humanistic concern expands the capacity for cognitive isolation, pushing away knowledge as well isolation to lands unknown so far. The negations, sublimations, transformations, deconstructions etc. are part of the genre's explosion.

In Bulgaria a process of reformation — an upsurge in the field of literature and culture — may also be noticed after the Bulgarian Communist Party April Plenum (1956); which lead to genre transformations and from there, to genre diversity as well: the appearance of borderline cases of genre forms, of hybrids and new genre structures. The fiction of this period makes its way more and more confidently into the sphere of the unknown, in spiritual, social and philosophical dimensions unknown so far. The strengthening of the subjective, creative, artistic beginning, and the process of reassessment of values influences science fiction as well, which pulls the scientific and technological wonders in towards the characters' inner world. It moves the focus from the chimeric cosmic travels to the problems of the contemporary world, to the problems of contemporary man's psychology and science's reflection on it. The tragedy of human alienation, the clash between the rational and the emotional, becomes even more problematic when occurring on our own planet. The isolation from the world, because of the extreme technicity, leads to an isolated consciousness which searches for support in the inner space of the persona and unlocks unknown powers that often act as catalyzers for self-destructive processes.

Writers such as Lyuben Dilov, Yordan Radichkov, Aleksandar Gerov and Emil Manov, for example, each with his own means of expression, defy the technological "dictatorship" by opposing the nashenets (fellow countryman), "the crown of nature", to the unrestrained drive of scientific and technological progress. Radichkov's ambivalent and grotesque world weaves "scientific knowledge" into mythology and folklore — while fusing the mundane with the extraordinary — by presenting the cohabitation between the little man's backwardness and the overdeveloped science and technology. This is the laughter of the contemporary Bulgarian who distances himself from the absurdities of today's civilization. The evaluation is carried out while taking into consideration the contemporary mind and knowledge. In the short story „До небето и назад“ (lit. To the Sky and Back) (from the collection „Свирепо настроение“, lit. Fierce Mood, 1965) Gotsa Geraskov is sent on a mission to the Moon to the sound of Kalimamitsa Village's woodwind band.

Humankind's dream of leaving traces behind on a cosmic object is fulfilled. A few years before Radichkov's short story appears, the first flight in space takes place (in 1961 the astronaut Yuri Gagarin completed the first human flight into outer space with his capsule Vostok 1) and in 1969 Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin set foot on the Moon. Having set foot on the moon, G. Geraskov is disgruntled about all the dust and wonders how his wife would be able to do the laundry outside under such circumstances.

In the short story „Коженият пъпеш“ (lit. The Leather Melon) (1969) representatives of another planet's civilization decide to make a stop at our planet en route. A break-down in the equipment delays their take-off, and everything is fixed in the following way: "What is closest to mind is to sneak into a house where a TV can be found, to take the parts from the TV to fix the spaceship, and to place these two wire rods in the TV itself" (Radichkov). According to another rumor, exactly the same extraterrestrials appear in front of moma (used to address a young woman who is yet to get married) Sofrona from Bibino Litse Village, who notices a red string between one of the boys' teeth (in compliance with the short story's mythology, if a person's spirit returns to earth after their death, they are resurrected; in appearance the brought back to life is just like any other person, but they feed on blood and have a red string between their teeth).

The intertwining of national superstitions, the new mythology constructed in Radichkov's works and the scientific impulse to rationalize, to provide a definition of the unknown, are artistic and ideational constructs, with which the writer puts the language of contemporary technological progress up against the memory of national mythology.

Aleksandar Gerov also succeeds at overcoming the "main shortcomings" of our sci-fi literature, at breaking the forced limitations with works placed in the book „Фантастични новели“ (lit. Fantastic Novellas) (1966). The first one, „Неспокойно съзнание“ (lit. Uneasy Conscience), is a psychological confession, a keen and anxious human spirit's revelation of a dynamic period, a spiritual reevaluation of a period in history, and the second one — „4004 година“ (lit. Year 4004) — is a work of science fiction with an original idea and entertaining content. In both novellas there is a lack of adventure — which is inevitably present in almost all of the time's works of science fiction — and the suspense, the feverish agitation, is a product of the writer's thoughts and his original philosophical ideas. The fantastic scientific element on which the second novella is constructed — resurrecting the dead and turning them into artificial living creatures — is the base on top of which the writer depicts the awfully distorted images of the man of the future.

After Alexander Gerov a number of writers begin using this type of literature as a means of humorously satirical exposure of different contemporary vices. Science fiction in the period between the 60s and the 80s turns into a safe haven for a significant part of Bulgarian writers who understand that this is a genre (perceived by the authorities as children's literature as well) through which they can discuss their contemporary world slightly more freely, discuss the cultural and social problems through the prism of Aesopian language intertwined with sci-fi imagery. In this field significant success reap the attempts of Lyuben Dilov, who achieves kaleidoscopic inclusiveness and broadness of the sci-fi depiction in his works and skillfully makes use of the genre's resources in order to give the upper hand to the subjective, the random reconstruction of reality.

How Lyuben Dilov smiles at the contemporary world

Between the 60s and the 80s, through his works Lyuben Dilov systematically depicts the game between man and the scientific topics and problems with which he is faced; he parodies famous facts and cultural motives through the "wide range of jokes on the ordinary and the fantastic, through a grotesque movement towards the absurdity of human imperfections, towards cruel irony"⁵. What is more, he transforms the codes of the fantastic into an instrument for social and cultural analysis.

Vihren Chernokozhev writes in the foreword to Lyuben Dilov's „Избрана фантастика“ (lit. Selected Science Fiction), entitled „Да избереш себе си“ (lit. To Choose Yourself), that by making a laugh out of the future in his satirical science fiction the writer has been hinting at the future's feverish trajectory: "Is not the man-robot from the short story „Осъзнаването на роботите“ [lit. The Realization of the Robots] a disease of the flesh in its final form"⁶. With a freedom in fantastic detail, Dilov ironizes the contemporary cases of philistinism, professional spite, vanity and credulity. At the same time, he makes use of the available scientific ideas, desires and projects in order to reveal man's irrelevance, insurmountable anthropocentricity and fear of the unknown.

In the short story „Наше доказателство за летящите чинии“ (lit. Our Proof of Flying Saucers) (from the book „Моят странен приятел – астрономът“, lit. My Strange Friend — the Astronomer, 1971) the writer seeks confirmation of the rumors about flying saucers in the atmosphere of uneventful Sofia by intertwining a few human fates into one comical event, presented in a protocol-like form. The incredible situations in which the employees of a prestigious institute in Sofia are caught are provoked by cosmic reasons, but in their

⁵ Ognyan Saparev, *Fantastikata kato literatura*. Sofia: izd. Prosveta, 1990, 78.

⁶ Vihren Chernokozhev, *Da izberesh sebe si*. In: Dilov, L. *Zelenoto uho*. Sofia: Trud, 1997, 5.

essence they reflect the modes of conduct characteristic of some contemporary fields. Comrade Petrov gets kidnapped by another civilization and then returned to the place of "abduction" with a flying saucer. Quite comical seems to be the "historical" moment in which flying saucers are indeed proven to exist while the characters are overwhelmed by their human desires. The presence of a higher civilization and an impending cosmic coup d'état cannot put a stop to the banal stories, provoked by pathetic plotting.

In the short story „He пушете! Затегнете коланите!“ (lit. Do Not Smoke! Fasten Your Seatbelts!) a UFO lands on our planet at the same time when the UN are discussing the new article in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. All the eloquence, wisdom, and passion with which such meetings are carried out do not manage to reach the ones whose rights are in question, "since the media had grown tired of reporting about them"⁷.

Humankind's desire to meet an extraterrestrial species is not merely fulfilled; this species is who first decides to establish interracial contact. The UFO is sometimes perceived by the Earth's population as a gigantic jelly-fish with its shining tentacles; sometimes as something resembling a tub gurnard; and other times — as a 50-metre-long egg, blindingly white and pulsating. Above Kurilo (part of Sofia region) the UFO is spotted only by patients at the new psychiatric hospital since in that moment the staff is occupied with celebrating World Health Day. Some foreign civilization (three identical carved out dwarves) has the audacity to interrupt the important meeting at the UN's building.

Contact is established; the extraterrestrial delegation is mistaken for part of an entertaining program, planned for the breaks in between the serious sessions. The message of the "dwarves" — that the Earth is in possession of the Galactic Committee and its population is inhabiting the planet illegally — provokes the third-world countries to wild laughter. The first meeting between the Earth's intelligentsia and the other civilization is ruined and ends with the declaration of war.

Quite intriguing with its absurdity and paradoxes is also the short story „Напред, човечество!“ (lit. Straight Ahead, Humankind!) in which the writer makes fun of the paradoxes of conventional human behavior with the help of the sci-fi grotesque. Patients start missing from a few psychiatric hospitals in the country. The writer Minos Papazyan, lead by entirely literary speculations, writes a short story about this strange incident. His theory is that man is "planted" (he is a scientific experiment which has been left on Earth) in the form of preprogrammed cells from some higher civilization which returns to the planet to choose

⁷ Lyuben Dilov, *Dvoyna zvezda*. Varna: izd. Georgi Bakalov, 1979, 8.

the individuals who have deviated from this experiment and to investigate what this deviation is caused by. The initial fear among men of the normal ones being abducted as well grows into doubt about what actually is normal ("If this is how all the normal ones disappear from Earth, what is the standard for normality then?" (Dilov)) and from there (after the planet sending a whole movie about the luxury which the crazy ones are soaking up) into desire to be abducted.

The intertwining of the sci-fi elements with the most ordinary, commonplace relationships raises the question of whether man is cosmically primitive after all and the Earth — a distant, forgotten province of the Galactic Union.

In his works L. Dilov presents the thesis that the international, in its most general story and character scheme, sci-fi genre cannot be without a homeland in its concrete realization and will always carry in itself the way of thinking and the exotica of the nation to which the artistic creator belongs to.

Intriguing is the novel *The Mirror's Paradox* as well where the writer provides his interpretation of the problem of laughter. Dilov's character Krasimir Gerchev is invited to the Carnival of Humor in Gabrovo to present a lecture. Humor takes up a significant part of his workday as a literary critic, university lecturer and a research associate at the Institute for Literature. Apart from that, Gerchev is carrying out a research on the topic "An Attempt at a Contemporary Joke Theory". The character's body is "abducted" by a Galactic Immigrant (a research machine with the incredible ability to imitate and transform) called K. The fake human "dresses up" as the bodies and souls, turns into the twin of six more people: the humorous writer Dramov; the gypsy Pompey Tchorbadzhiiski; the local leader Velikov; distinguished citizen of Gabrovo Epifan Pefin; a psychiatrist from the local hospital; and the famous football-player Mutsi.

An import moment for the novel — which exteriorizes the shortcomings, conscience, and instinct of the Other — is when the cyborg presents himself as the humorist Deyan Dramov's twin. The twin reflects the identity like a mirror; he carries it — the whole of it or some of its sides — he finds in it what is unknown or unfound. "We are all automats, bioautomats"⁸, comments the twin. Despite Dramov's reluctance to "listen to himself" and "about himself", the attraction to self-discovery pulls him in like altitude sickness towards the depths of new despair: the despair of realizing the impossibility and unattainability of man's uniformity.

⁸ Lyuben Dilov, *Paradoksat na ogedaloto*. Sofia: Balgarski pisatel, 1976, 68.

The cyborg is only an instant picture of humankind headed towards truth and perfection in accordance with the natural rules of its development. However, simultaneously the novel visualizes the paradoxical superiority of the humorist Dramov over the cyborg — the perfect, encyclopedic mirror of the "human". Although the artificial being knows everything, can turn into whoever it likes, it is no one. It is not a person, it is not an I, it cannot mold itself: "(...) it's scary, it's just scary how you could be anyone, but on your own are no one"⁹.

The *Mirror's Paradox* is a novel about "what is left of man after all the self's masks fall off, when he is left alone, bare and unprotected against himself"¹⁰. In this novel of L. Dilov's, the fantastic is no longer so alien, superhuman. On the contrary, it is humanized, earthly, Bulgarian (even particularly Gabrovo-spirited), without any sharp caricature deformations. The novel is also "an irony of the so typically Bulgarian philosophy of survival; it inevitably turns into mediocrity's identity"¹¹.

Lyuben Dilov's works mark significant problems, as timeless as they are topical: the problems of human responsibility. Man's desire to become "a citizen of the cosmos" is at times presented quite sharply and satirically. The questions of man's inferiority; his historical and cultural limitations; the relations with the Other near us; our intellectual and spiritual expeditions sound more and more topical and search for an answer within our own emotional and physical transformation at a time when the need for responsibility towards our own actions and our attitude towards the world is more and more acutely felt.

Artistically active during a difficult period for Bulgarian literature and culture, Lyuben Dilov did not stand on the sidelines as far as the global trends in the sci-fi genre are concerned. On the contrary, his works depict the changes in the ideational and thematic fields of science fiction by simultaneously adding in the color, desires, fears and spiritual contradictions of Bulgarian reality.

The questions which he implicitly poses are: Are we supposed to suffer because of contemporary civilization or because of highly developed technology, and fear them; or to aim at constructing this civilization within ourselves? To what extent does new technology better human life? Are we in possession of enough emotional and physical resources to adequately keep up with contemporary living's ever-faster pace? The answers to these questions are to be found in the future.

⁹ Ibid., 262.

¹⁰ Vihren Chernokozhev, *Da izberesh sebe si*. In: Dilov, L. *Zelenoto uho*. Sofia: Trud, 1997, 8.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

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