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Vladimir Zarev's Novel *Pop Bogomil i savarshenstvoto na straha* as a Postmodern Alchemy of Historiography and Bogomil Mythology

Abstract
The article offers an analysis of the novel *Pop Bogomil i savarshenstvoto na straha* (*Reverend Bogomil and the Perfection of Fear*) by the contemporary Bulgarian writer Vladimir Zarev. The novel is seen as part of a Bulgarian literary tradition that depicts the medieval heresy of Bogomilism. Zarev's text can be linked to earlier works by Bulgarian writers such as Nikolai Raynov and Emilian Stanev, but its interpretation of history is also reminiscent of works by Thomas Mann and Umberto Eco. I argue that the novel can be read as a postmodern fictionalization of the Bogomil heresy or a postmodern alchemy of historiography and Bogomil mythology. While it is largely a postmodernist experiment, it is also a lengthy philosophical meditation on Bulgarian history.

Keywords: historical fiction, Vladimir Zarev, Bogomil heresy, postmodernism

"A Book not read is a deal missed forever."
Vladimir Zarev

The Bogomil theme has always been an essential part of Bulgarian Studies, not only because the Bogomil heresy was the best known and most important heresy associated with Bulgaria during the Middle Ages, but also because it has become an integral part of Bulgarian religious and political traditions, both defining and negating them. The novel *Pop Bogomil i savarshenstvoto na straha* (*Reverend Bogomil and the Perfection of Fear*)[1] (1998) by the contemporary Bulgarian writer Vladimir Zarev (b. 1947) can be read as a postmodern fictionalization of the Bogomil heresy or as a postmodern alchemy of historiography and Bogomil mythology. Zarev's new postmodern myth incorporates elements of medieval culture, specifically referencing Bogomil mythology through unofficial and apocryphal saints' biographies, folklore legends, and fairy tales. Simultaneously, it employs techniques for crafting neo-mythical narratives influenced by internationally acclaimed authors such as Thomas Mann and Umberto Eco, as well as by the Bulgarian writer Emilian Stanev (1907–1979), who produced his own Bogomil novel *Legenda za Sibin, preslavskiya knyaz* (*A Legend of Sibin, Prince of Preslav*) in 1968.

[1] The title of the novel will henceforth be designated as Pop Bogomil, as will the eponymous main character.

This essay examines how Zarev's novel employs a variety of mechanisms to create historical myths, focusing on and toying with the antinomies of faith and heresy, good and evil, or, in Biblical terms, the letter and the Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3:6). What makes the novel a postmodern historiography is above all the collage of structural elements that it employs while playing with "official" mythology, as well as the intertextuality which permeates its concluding sections.

The Bogomil heresy has long been part of debates about Bulgarian history and what some scholars have called the Bulgarian mindset or mentality. Works of fiction have frequently participated in such debates and attempted to arbitrate between the debating parties. Significantly, the Bogomil heresy is still the subject of ongoing discussions in Bulgarian culture because Bogomilism appears to have been a very influential sectarian movement in the Middle Ages and is therefore deeply rooted in a number of Bulgarian institutions as well as in Eastern Orthodox Christian thought. Traditionally, the Bogomils have been viewed from two utterly different perspectives. The fist view holds that their heresy arose from weak governmental and church policies in the Middle Ages, thus highlighting the subversive character of the sect. According to the second viewpoint, Bogomilism was the result of a distinctly Bulgarian worldview created at the crossroads of East and West, with the Eastern element eventually taking precedence. It has been suggested that in the tenth century, only about a hundred years after the introduction of Christianity into Bulgaria, a revision of beliefs and doctrines started. The Bogomil heresy retained its strength over time, spreading throughout Europe in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Such countries as Serbia, Bosnia, France, and Italy were affected by it. What is more, it became an energizing factor eventually leading to the European Reformation.

For all those reasons, Bogomilism invariably emerges as a topic in literary works by Bulgarian writers that deal with medieval history. Certainly, what appears to be clad in secrecy, prohibition, semi-oblivion and lacks a canonical status often appeals to the literary imagination. Zarev's *Pop Bogomil* is one of the fictional products of that imagination. As already remarked, his novel can also be read as a postmodern alchemy of historiography and mythmaking connected with the Bogomil heresy and, most of all, with the myths surrounding Bogomil himself, the most prominent heresiarch of the Balkan Slavs. The only thing historical sources mention about him is that he was a contemporary of the Bulgarian Tsar Peter the First in the tenth century. A sort of a neo-myth has been produced about him through the stylization and transformation of the few available sources about the Bogomils. In particular, those include official documents and apocryphal writings, such as *Liber sancti Joanis* (*St. John's Gospel*), *Liber scoretue* (*The Secret Book*), *The Vision of Isaiah*, *Cathar Prayer Book*, dualistic folk tales, and legends. Zarev's preference for these sources in his novel informs his creative approach to his characters. A relevant example is provided by the dispute between the two religious leaders, Bogomil and St. John of Rila. St. John of Rila was a hermit, who was canonized by the Eastern

Orthodox Church and recognized as Bulgaria's celestial patron. The clash between these two important representatives of tenth-century Bulgaria and their conflicting doctrines of anchorism and Bogomilism raises a discursive challenge which is summed up in the sentence "two truths are too much for one single nation" (Zarev 1998:131).[2] The dispute between the two spiritual leaders delineates the differences between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and the originally Manichean idea of asceticism, which was also at the heart of Bogomilism.[3] Other significant characters in the novel include the stupid and morally compromised Mary, whose portrayal mirrors the Bogomil repudiation of the Virgin Mary, the prophet Jeremiah, a historically debatable author of apocryphal texts, and the fictional alchemist Epitaphios, who combines all of the Bogomil heresy's esoteric roots – Neoplatonism, Orphism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism. Methodologically, the dialogue between all these characters is brought to life through the use of modern "recipes" for mythmaking that have been repeatedly tested ever since the Romantic era. We recognize typical features such as the stylized discourse of the narrating chronicler and the overlapping of disparate points of view in the process of narrating. By employing literary models provided by authors from modern and postmodern Western European and Bulgarian literature, such as Thomas Mann, Nikolai Rainov, Emilian Stanev, and particularly Umberto Eco, Zarev's novel may be said to contribute to the mythopoetic strand in world literature with its interpretation of Bulgarian history.

The choice of Pop Bogomil as the novel's main character is of paramount importance. Zarev was undoubtedly cognizant of yet another semi-historical, semi-mythical person, Boyan the Magus, who was no less fitting as a Bulgarian cultural hero. Ever since the Bulgarian National Revival period (late 18th century – 1870s), Boyan's identity has been in the focus of literary and cultural debates. The Bulgarian modernists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused on Boyan's intriguing figure, with theosophists perceiving him as the clandestine originator of Bogomilism and its true leader who operated in the shadows.[4]

Pop Bogomil, on the other hand, appears to be the focus of historical interest and research, considered as the preeminent propagandist, orator, and "spokesperson" of the medieval sectarian movement. Interestingly, Boyan the Magus is also a character in the text, but as a mystification of Nikolai Rainov (1889 – 1954), a Bulgarian writer who also produced mythopoetic narratives about the mystery son of one of Bulgaria's greatest medieval monarchs, Tsar Simeon the First. The only known historical reference for Boyan is that unlike his father, the great king, he devoted himself entirely to alchemy and magic. The combination of a twentieth-century writer and a medieval magus appears to be one of the novel's most intriguing postmodernist features, definitely aimed at "the insiders" of medieval history.

[2] All quotes from Zarev's novel are in my translation. S. S.

[3] See Dimitar Angelov, *Bogomilstvoto*.

[4] See Boyan Boev, *Missiyata na bogomilstvoto*..

One of the questions in this study is how this neo-mythopoetic novel relates to postmodernism. One way of answering this question is by considering its structure. It can be claimed that the novel was conceived as a (post)modern version of the Four Gospels (*Tetraevangelia*) of Pop Bogomil and because of that we have four "Evangelists," with each of them offering his own version of the "saint's" life. Such a pattern, however, glossed over by the quasi-medieval style of narration, does not put the character of Bogomil into a concrete historical framework but relativizes it. As with a lot of other postmodernist narratives, the final goal is not to tell the "true" life story of a historical figure but to present a possible interpretation of human life in general and a possible philosophy of the present. Such an approach is part of the neo-mythological. As Roland Barthes maintains, "myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters its message" (1972: 109).

Gradually, however, the stress shifts towards the text's mechanism for the creation of a (meta-)historical myth. The secret planting of the oak tree in the novel, designed to convince the movement's followers that a world tree has emerged from a solitary acorn overnight, exemplifies such metafictionality, and is reiterated in the four narratives. Everything develops following a pattern that all the characters are aware of. The persecution of the Bogomils in one of the versions is represented as part of the "accomplishing" of a feat, as the "creation" of an aura of martyrdom, as the "achievement" of the longed-for brotherhood, which can be only done through death. Speaking about the foundation of Bogomilism, the narrator remarks: "[t]his is only the building structure of the teaching, its secret remains hidden" (Zarev 1998: 86).

The secret can be unveiled only through the Word. The novel is therefore about the mythologizing and mythologized Word, which gives form to the world whereas inarticulateness creates a void, a non-existence, which equals death. The novel further tells us that "[t]he man deprived of words is half a man, in him what lies beneath sinks in darkness forever*"* (Zarev 1998:87). Such a claim brings immediately to mind the psychoanalytical interpretation of the human mind in which the unconscious is inarticulate and unchanneled; before being articulated, it is just an accumulation of dark potential. Dualism, which is at the heart of Bogomil teaching and is exemplified by the idea of "creative Evil" and "inactive Good," is part of the canvass of the novel: "[i]t is in the Word that the power of God and the power of Satan have been combined since the Word is always recorded by the two" (Zarev 1998: 131). Paradoxically, the Word describes the visible as "split-out fragments of reality," but it is also the progress of Evil. Only the recorded Word is said to have an immortal essence: "[o]ne of the eyes of the scrivener is satanic, but the other is divine" (Zarev 1998: 69). The Word is likewise part of the novel's imagery: "[t]he swiftly descending evening was like a field that he had been planting with words and sorrow*"* (Zarev 1998:175).

It is not accidental that the Word, Knowledge, and the Labyrinth have become interchangeable in the novel. The reader is entangled in words as in a labyrinth and

that is the beginning of the postmodernist game. The historiographic material is seen as pieces of stained glass. The first three "biographers," Stan, Matthew and Emmanuel, (supposedly) recorded the life of Bogomil in the same year, 957, while the fourth, a novice at a Benedictine monastery, did the same four centuries later, in 1327, obviously after the movement had spread throughout Western Europe. At the end of the novel, however, we have another marginal note, which pushes the historical time even closer, making a connection between the ideas of the heresiarch Bogomil and Giordano Bruno's theory of celestial movement. This can be seen as an allusion to the significant role that Bogomilism played in the European Reformation. The commentaries of the writer of the fourth life story in regard to the previous three, the search for which repeats, very provocatively, the criminal intrigue at the center of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, including Brother Umberto from Bologna as a character in the text, refers this last part back to the other three and solidifies the strategy of "suspended narrative" which is central to the game that the narrator plays:

> The Three Gospels astonished and hurt me because of something else. In them, one and the same person was described, but he seemed infinite, in the sense of being every time different…the saint was one and the same, all the time he was this unknowable through words Bogomil, the events were the same, but compared one to another, they contradicted each other, becoming indistinguishable and, most paradoxically, destroying each other. The shining Bogomil began to appear impossible and indescribable just like the very Beginning of Things. (Zarev 1998: 332)

The repetition of some of the details, such as the planting of the oak, Mary's stupidity (she is called "Mary the Infinite" in the novel), or the donkey used in a very Jesus-like fashion by Pop Bogomil to go from place to place, does not help readers get their bearings: "[e]verything coincided, but just to refute and erase what was earlier" (Zarev 1998: 332). Yet this strengthens the sense of a kaleidoscopic construction, or, to use one of the novel's metaphors, of drowning in the "verbal whirlpool of the biographers" (Zarev 1998: 332), and thus produces a "stained-glass," postmodernist image of the protagonist. It is not by chance that in the end the narrator identifies with an image, with a name, borrowing from Umberto Eco again: "[t]he … rose remained only in the name, we kept only the name.*"* Thus, the novel can be read as both a mythological and a semiotic narrative; the sign cannot tell a story but can unveil the boundlessness of history, resisting the verbosity of time that records a false and distorted account. However, if this novel only dramatizes/plays with the life narratives of its protagonist, what is its purpose?

Despite the assertion made by the sentence that also functions as this article's epigraph, "[a] book not read is a deal missed forever" (Zarev 1998: 319), I would

not dare to assert that the author's sole goal is to distribute roughly the same hands in order to have not just history but the game of history. In fact, the concluding section of the novel indicates that it is much more than a (failed) postmodernist experiment.

In the title, Pop Bogomil's name is linked with the contradictory phrase "the perfection of fear," which serves as the text's leitmotif. Obviously fear is conceptualized as a fundamental philosophical category, as "the spring of being" (Zarev 1998: 27), and there are numerous references to its nature throughout the book: "only the one who can overcome and spiritually rise above the fear of death, is absolutely free*"* (Zarev 1998: 242); "[f]ear is the wittiest weapon of Satan, with its help he turns us into slaves of the visible world*"* (Zarev 1998:185); "[e]ven if we achieve happiness and perfection, they still are just the expression of our fear of death*"* (Zarev 1998:175). The existential messages follow one another: faith and power are anchored in the fear of death, and both are unsettled in the absence of such fear. Sin is also rooted in fear, while laughter is what kills fear and is as dangerous as the ideology of "non-fear" or fearlessness: "[s]uffering and laughter, righteousness and heresy appear to be the same, yet different forms of being" (Zarev 1998:267). This explains why Zarev has chosen to combine, in the plot of his novel, the fourth biographer's search for the three "original" biographies of Bogomil with Eco's plot of the search for Aristotle's book on laughter.

The concept of "the perfection of fear" is equivalent to the perfection of Pop Bogomil himself, who preaches that fear should be mastered, and the novel's entire intellectual force appears to be geared toward this result. The essence of Bogomilism is that "if you fight Evil, you just enlarge and perfect it" (Zarev 1998:65); in the context of the novel, this may as well refer to the fighting of fear, while the novel's prophetic aim at the end, "to renew History and save man from fear," sounds like an authentic utopian goal.

The postmodernist structure of the novel obviously does not come into contradiction with the felt need of the author to send optimistic messages to his readers. However, in order to put them into words, we must collect the scattered pieces one by one and assemble them. As a result, they will appear to us as a dualistic argument over the antinomy of faith and knowledge, universal love and love as a choice, and the entanglement of human passions and knowledge, which overshadows faith in truth.

The novel repeatedly interprets Bulgarian history in philosophical terms and employs a variety of noteworthy metaphors, such as "[a]s if the Bulgarian has become an ominous apocryphal writing, transcribed by a madman" (Zarev 1998: 202). And it never refuses to look into Bulgaria's "abysmal fate," but not in order to reassemble the bits of historical proof, because history, like real life, provokes forgetting more than recollection. In my opinion, the story does not fill in the gaps of a philosophical-historical Periodic Table of Elements. I would rather see it as hanging above "the whole epic of being" in a doomed attempt to perceive its finite meanings.

It is a novel which starts with Bulgaria in the tenth century and heads towards a-historicity: "[i]t is time that is good, it is the chance to be, while History is the Evil that happens within it" (Zarev 1998:127). Zarev is deeply enchanted by Bogomil exegesis, but his novel chisels out its own exegesis of spiritual and physical strivings, thus following the Bogomils themselves, who claimed the primacy of human experience and were skeptical of received ideas.

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