

The Unfinished Educational Project of Tzvetan Stoyanov and His “Chinese Chronicle”

Abstract

The article explores the unfinished educational and modernization project by the writer and thinker Tzvetan Stoyanov (1930–1971), who in the most difficult decades of communist Bulgaria managed to create his own large corpus of translations and texts, written in a relatively short period. A project that brought to the fore the concept of “Weltliteratur”, which he borrowed from Goethe to contrast it with the isolationism of “vale thinking”, as well as his fundamental research on the topic of alienation in contemporary culture. The article also attempts to reinterpret the essay “Chinese Chronicle” (1963) – an emblematic example of his “second” or philosophical prose, containing entire cycles of themes: “Dionysus”, “Orpheus”, “Karavelov and Botev”, “Lao Tzu and Confucius”, all the way to the “hippie subculture” and, of course, Dostoevsky – with “Genius and His Mentor”, which was intended to grow into a book about “death and resurrection”.

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Keywords

Tzvetan Stoyanov, world literature, isolationism, alienation, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Ezra Pound, Dostoevsky.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the life of the thinker and literary critic Tzvetan Stoyanov (1930–1971) is the large-scale “spirit of systematicity”. As the philosopher Assen Ignatov claims, he simply did not have a “period of immature youth”, since even at his debut he came “prepared and in brilliant armor” (Ignatov 1971). In a teenage notebook from his archive, which has yet to be studied, I found a long list in which the young Tsvetko Stoyanov (that was his first name) strictly noted the books he had read, as well as the classics he was about to turn to – Byron, Dickens, Daniel Defoe, Goethe, Balzac, Anatole France, the romantics, Edgar Allan Poe. He read a huge number of books during the years of the Second World War, when he was

bedridden for a long time due to a severe lung disease. An impressive range of reading, as well as a rich teenage collection of postage stamps, an expression of longing for the wide and unknown world.

Going “back” to the “Tzvetan Stoyanov” archive, if we use the terminology of Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1995, 5-11), actually takes us to the beginning (*arkhè*), to the core of this intellectual project. In order to analyze the Tzvetan Stoyanov ideological project, we should not simply go back to the beginning, but again referring to Derrida, to dissect this order, to institutionalize it, in order to outline a system. Accordingly, “dearchiving” means not only “to preserve the traces, but to study them, to interpret them and to choose what we actually want to choose.” (Derrida 2002, 129). This same tendency to “go back” that he highlights in his article on “The Mystical Insights of Swedenborg and Blake” (Stoyanov 2006).

In the “Tzvetan Stoyanov case,” the large corpus of translations and texts written in a relatively short period (about twenty years) are particularly emblematic as a personal project in a historical time that, after 1944, brought another decisive turn. Born on January 28, 1930, precisely during the most difficult years of Stalinism, he graduated from Sofia State University with a degree in law. In his home at 6 Gogol Street, where the magazine Zlatorog was founded in January 1920, the “nice conversations” had long since died down. Nevertheless, this shy young man, who witnessed the repressions of the totalitarian regime in his youth, did not lose hope: he completed a journalism course, enrolled in English philology in absentia, and started working in the international department of news agency BTA, from where information about what was happening around the world filtered through. During the “thaw” for himself, he undertook to translate Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver Among the Giants* (the first complete translation into Bulgarian).

He began to form his own “modernization project” and gather like-minded people around him, as if he, and not the authorities professing Marxist-Leninist ideology, were deciding what should see the light of day. In the mid-1950s, he even published in three consecutive issues of the newspaper *Narodna Kultura* (July 27–August 10, 1957) a huge “enlightening article” (Stoyanov 1988a) about the translation tasks in the coming decades – “We are lagging behind in publishing world classics.” In it, he asks which are those classical works without which Bulgarian culture will remain a spiritual desert, doomed to

one-bookness: he directs his gaze to the missing translations of ancient literature (“thousand-year-old graves covered with oblivion”), makes lists of Russian, but also Slavic classics that should be published, and especially insists on Ukrainian classics (Shevchenko, Kvitka-Osnovyanenko, Marko Vovchok, Lesya Ukainka), worries about the fate of Shakespeare’s “darkened brothers”, Spanish authors and “abandoned Scheherazade”. He makes a list himself, insists on translations of Whitman and Longfellow, and a new translation of Dante. He knows that this requires enormous efforts, but he is convinced that “a culture cannot be built without sacrifices”.

And institutionally he is a “nobody” – at that time he was a very ordinary editor in the newspaper *Literaturen Front*, later an editor in the “Criticism” department of the magazine *Septemvri*. But around him and his wife Antoaneta Voynikova gradually gather the brightest figures of that “lost generation”, whose paths are so divergent: Georgi Markov and Vasil Popov, Konstantin Pavlov and Lyubomir Levchev, Ivaylo Petrov and Georgi Mishev, Atanas Slavov, Toncho Zhechev and Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev, Asen Ignatov, Blaga Dimitrova and Yordan Vassilev, the director Metodi Andonov, the artists Ivan Kirkov and Alexander Denkov.

On July 12, 1962, the party authorities reacted sharply and broke up the editorial staff of the magazine *Septemvri*, which had become an “island of dissent”, similar to the magazine “*Novy Mir*” by Alexander Tvardovsky in the Soviet Union, which dared to publish “*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*” by Solzhenitsyn. For two or three years, Tzvetan Stoyanov and his wife were left without work and a secure income. Then, according to the testimony of Antoinette Voynikova, he gathered his circle of friends and told them: “Now we will translate. We will not be able to get by otherwise”. He climbed the mountain for many months – to the Orpheus hut in the Rhodope Mountains. There he translated Shelley and Byron, and began to study the poems of Emily Dickinson and TS Eliot.

Meanwhile, Tzvetan Stoyanov began writing his “second prose” – the dialogues “*Orpheus*” (“*Rabble with Mythology*”) and “*The Second Part of the Conversation*” (the dispute between Karavelov and Botev). Without caring whether or when these texts would see the light of day. Then he also conceived his incredible “*Chinese Chronicle*” (Stoyanov 1988b) – about the eternal tensions between East and West and the man-mass conflict.

And he is always in a hurry, he is in haste. It is as if he is aware that he has little time left. And he is about to become a pioneer (together with Assen Ignatov) on the topic of alienation in Bulgarian culture – to justify what alienation is in his book “The Threads That Break” (1967) and to further develop this topic in his PhD thesis, which he defended in 1970. At the same time, he is thinking about his masterpiece – “The Genius and His Mentor”, a book revealing Dostoevsky’s clash with the censor Konstantin Pobedonostsev, which rethinks the work of the great Russian writer from a very peculiar angle. He did not manage to finish it, but, paradoxically, his death “helped” it to be published in 1978. Tzvetan Todorov would write the following about it in the afterword to its French edition: “In this book, as if by miracle, the official ideology in Bulgaria of those years is completely absent, the plot itself seems to have patronized the author, protecting him from any kind of compromise” (Todorov 2000). But this also has its high price.

The idea of Tzvetan Stoyanov’s unfinished project was truly “global”. We can judge its contours from Toncho Zhechev’s famous text “Sadness for Tzvetan Stoyanov”, in which this unwritten and “dizzying critical trilogy” is likened to the Cologne Cathedral: “It begins at the beginning of the eighteenth century – Defoe, Swift, Sterne, Fielding, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Sade (in England and France), Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Gozzi (in Germany and Italy), through the depths of romanticism and classical philosophy – Hoffmann, Poe, Shelley, Joseph de Maistre, Chateaubriand, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Marx, Engels, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, through English and French historicism and realism, through the mysteries of Russian literature – Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, of Russian religious philosophy – Solovyov, Fyodorov, Leontiev, Rozanov and the decadence at the end of the century” (Zhechev 1988d).

The beginnings of this project are difficult to reconstruct even in the many notebooks and plans in the author’s archive. But in Tzvetan Stoyanov’s “globalism” philosophical prose plays an exceptional role, as we can judge from both published and unpublished works (two of which – “The Water of Aquarius” and “The End of Myths” are published for the first time in this issue). But through each of these “philosophical novels” (from “The Brocéliande Forest” to “The Chinese Chronicle”), whose Aesop-like language is emblematic of Eastern Europe of the 1960s (Czeslav Milosz, Ivo Andrić, Miroslav Karlezha,

Andrei Sinyavski, etc.), one can glimpse the essence of the “Tzvetan Stoyanov’s project”.

Because a new thing, which in a time of lack of freedom could not be expressed out loud in any way, naturally turns into a parable. We know from Plato’s dialogue “Phaedrus” that the same thing can be told with *logos* or *mythos*, without the mythopoetic narrative losing any of its meaning (*logos*). On the contrary, it thus receives another, unsuspected surge of spiritual energy, which enhances the dynamics of words, and language begins to sound not only *or* sparks of meaning, but also to communicate. Not in the vulgar sense of communication killed by abuse, which Tzvetan Stoyanov warns about in “The Brocéliande Forest” (Stoyanov 1988c), but by diving into the depths and discovering the very bottom of that bag of pearls that must be taken out in order to reach everyone. In this Tzvetan Stoyanov sense, the parable is “self-expression with an address”. Sometimes we realize this immediately, but more often the communication becomes a fact after decades, when it suddenly reaches us, as if thrown out by the surf of time, having preserved more than one wonderful text like an ocean of meaning. And we find ourselves in the role of that savage, whom Alexander Solzhenitsyn talks about in his Nobel lecture – frozen in bewilderment by the ocean of time, we hold in our hands this unusual text, a gift of fate, at first relying on its usual use of words, without suspecting the higher one (Solzhenitsyn 1972).

In light of the overall Tzvetan Stoyanov project, it is worth paying attention to one of his most unusual and most neglected texts – “Chinese Chronicle, or Another Chronicle of the Meeting between the Two Wisest Men”. Miraculously emerging in the rift of historical times, this parable is at first passed over in silence, only to settle at the bottom of historical time in anticipation of other times, when its “self-expression with address” will sparkle anew in the fullness of its meanings.

It all started in 1963, when Tzvetan Stoyanov, unlike the great Chinese sages, did not stay in the mountain for long, but came down from it. He was 33 years old then, drawing strength and inspiration from his beloved Rhodope Mountain, surrounded by the legends of Orpheus and Eurydice, from the Dionysian mysteries. It was there, in the Orpheus hut near Devin, that he wrote his first “delirium with mythology”, called “Orpheus” (probably from this time also dates “The End of Myths”); it was there that he conceived the “second part of the conversation” between Karavelov and Botev about the eternal

misfortune of Bulgarian “deterioration” and the impossibility of getting out of the mud of everyday life; it was from there, in November 1963, that he came down with the manuscript of “Chinese Chronicle” – an incomprehensible parable for the time, in fact far ahead of its time. An emblematic text for the 1960s, released by its author as a “bottle of co-message” and tucked away inward, to emerge now as a task for reflection. Like a mysterious Eastern parable, the meaning of which we must decipher.

And why China? The answer, at first glance, lies in the classic opposition between rational Europe, increasingly a “world without secrets” (Ernest Renan), and “old China”, the guardian of an ancient civilization. Just as another great European, Paul Claudel (1959), put it in a letter to the poet Stéphane Mallarmé: “China is ancient, stunning, untamed. Life there is not stricken by the modern disease of the spirit, which is concerned with itself, seeks the best and gives itself up only to its own dreams... Here, on the contrary, everything seems natural and normal.”

This somewhat explains the historical format of the parable. The other is the circumstances of its creation, which are shrouded in mystery. It is simply impossible to imagine how in the most faithful satellite of the Soviet Union, albeit in the years of the thaw, a Bulgarian thinker dared to write a dialogue about the clash between the wisdom of the free spirit and the uniformization of the mass man, between “natural” and “artificial” selection, between the ideas of the Enlightenment and the bloody revolutions with their barracks order. And all this transferred to the field of ancient Chinese thought through the meeting between Lao Tzu and Confucius, between the ideas of “Tao Te Jing” and “Confucian Treatises”.

We know little about the circumstances that made this “Chinese Chronicle” possible. The writer’s wife, Antoaneta Voynikova, recalled that no one was privy to the idea of this philosophical dialogue. The work on it coincided with the defeat in 1963 of the magazine “Septemvri”, where the editor-in-chief Hristo Radevski, although a convinced communist, opened the pages of the publication to the generation of the 1960s – Konstantin Pavlov, Georgi Markov, Stefan Tsanev, Vasil Popov, Toncho Zhechev and of course Tzvetan Stoyanov himself.

At that time, like Lao Tzu from the Chronicle, he naturally sought the solitude of the mountains, where he felt most free – “wandering along the paths, talking to woodcutters, picking blueberries”. He

was disappointed by the scandals in literary circles, as well as by the failure of the Reforms, which the whole country was talking about. He withdrew to reflect, because he was writing his dialogue, in which he wanted to synthesize the eternal tensions between the East and the West, the man-mass conflict. With the intention of offering what he had achieved to like-minded friends, so that those “nice conversations” could begin again, no matter how much “philosophers-junkies try to convince us that humans resemble oases lost in the desert, with no connection between them”.

But when Tzvetan Stoyanov came down from the mountain, the Bulgarian intelligentsia, after the fragile thaw, had shrunk into its shell and he read his “Chinese Chronicle” amid complete silence at a gathering of his closest people. No one uttered a word. The reading of the Chronicle took place in the large living room of his father’s house, in the home of the co-publisher of the magazine “Zlatorog” Sava Stoyanov, in the atmosphere of old furniture and among good friends. They were all silent. As if they did not understand or really did not want to understand what it was about. Thus, the dialogue between the “two wisest” was sent to mature in the black chest of drawers in the corner and remained there for another four years – until 1967.

Then Tzvetan Stoyanov proposed it again in the magazine “Septemvri”, which was no longer the same: the liberals were expelled, in their place the authorities brought in orthodox dogmatists. To the author’s astonishment, the editor-in-chief Kamen Kalchev, after three or four months of silence, announced that the text would be published. And published it without cuts. Complete silence reigned again, although Tzvetan Stoyanov had warned his relatives to expect the worst, that they could arrest him for this text. Because, as an Eastern proverb says, the spoken thought, this frivolous woman, has turned into a written thought, that is, into a warrior with a sword. At the same time, the Soviet-Chinese conflict escalated and not only were “a hundred flowers not blooming” anymore, but the “cultural revolution” was underway and Mao himself had problems with the Red Army Faction. The whole world is watching with wonder this strange awakening of China, from which the earth trembles. On the horizon around the world are also the youth riots that broke out in 1968. But this work is not limited to political current affairs. Tzvetan Stoyanov’s cultural plan is incomparably larger, it suggests a deeper reading. And here another comparison is in order.

In the late 1950s, Tzvetan Stoyanov, who is also one of the greatest Bulgarian translators from English, discovered Ezra Pound's "Cantos", according to the testimony of his wife, Antoaneta Voynikova. He began to make partial translations for himself, because it would have been madness to think that he could push even a fragment of this "cursed son" of 20th-century modernism through the eyes of the censors, whose monstrous reputation was further aggravated by his collaboration with the Mussolini regime.

It seems to me that what most attracted Tzvetan Stoyanov to Ezra Pound was his particular "cultural universalism". Pound believes that the tragedy of modern culture lies in the absence of a "universal myth", a glue, which is why, deprived of their universal language, people are in a state of war and human civilization is threatened with destruction. The way out is in returning to the archaic and forgotten ancient cultural language, the only one capable of connecting the West with the East – that is, the Eleusinian Mysteries (Dionysus and Orpheus) with Lao Tzu and Confucius. Only in this way can the past become present. The basis of Ezra Pound's "Cantos" is the "song of the tribe", insofar as his entire new epic is a "poem that includes history" (Kenner 1971, 17-41).

All of this is incredibly reminiscent of the introduction to "The Brocéliande Forest":

"The beginning can be taken from many places and will be more or less the following: ...then the singer of the tribe stood up, raised his head and touched the lyre. What was the song about? About campaigns and migrations [...] and it was as if the boundary between reality and what was speech melted completely, as if they were already living in the song..." (Stoyanov 1988c).

History is the main heroine of the songs in "The Song". The main and unneglected weapon of Ezra Pound, as well as of Tzvetan Stoyanov, is translation: the amalgam of meanings between the poetry of the troubadours and the tales of Merlin, between the hieroglyphs of Chinese thought and the poetry of European romanticism.

In this respect, Pound's project is in tune with the idea of Tzvetan Stoyanov, whose summaries of unwritten studies and books reveal the scale of another comprehensive cultural project. Yes, *a project* in which translations, texts about alienation and dialogues (this "second

prose” of his) are the archetypal cultural axis around which cycles of themes revolve – “Dionysus”, “Orpheus”, “Karavelov and Botev”, “Lao Tzu and Confucius”, and even the “hippie subculture”. And, of course, Dostoevsky – with “Genius and His Mentor” (Stoyanov 1988e), which was supposed to grow into a book about “death and resurrection”.

Ezra Pound, to conclude the comparison, considered himself a “lone ant in a ruined anthill,” ruined by the destructive pull of totalitarianism. Tzvetan Stoyanov’s task was even more difficult – to leave the stuffy comfort of the Bulgarian valley during the totalitarian regime, daring to set out to bring the East and the West closer together. By turning himself into a bridge that would unite, as he writes in his essay on Beshkov, and not to stretch himself in one direction or another.

For this purpose, he, immersed in Western culture, clearly had to see it reflected in something *else*, as one reads a palimpsest erased by time. Thus, Tzvetan Stoyanov descends from the mountain with a manuscript about the legendary meeting between the two great thinkers – Lao Tzu and Confucius, recreated in more than one Chinese parable.

A meeting between natural harmony and established order, between wisdom and rational logic. In a Taoist parable we find the following version of this meeting.

“Confucius asks: – What is good and what is evil? Give a precise definition. A person needs to rely on something in his actions”.

Lao Tzu answers:

“Definitions create confusion because they all imply division. You say that an apple is an apple, and a man is a man... You divide. You say that a man is not an apple. But life is a single movement, and the moment you give a definition, confusion is created. All definitions are dead, and life is always in motion. Childhood goes to youth, youth to maturity, and so on. Where will you draw the line to separate them?” (Stories of Lao Tzu, Confucius and Chuang Tzu).

In Tzvetan Stoyanov’s “Chinese Chronicle”, the dividing line runs along the entire axis of development of human civilization. Behind the debate between Lao Tzu and Confucius, the totalitarian projects of the 20th century naturally shine through, which in their communist version (Lenin, Stalin, and Mao) aim to “eradicate natural human tendencies” and create a “new man.” In the name of this goal, individuality must be cut off, solitude must be prohibited, which prevents the “happy

multitude from triumphing” (the mass man). And most importantly, in order to be kept under control, this new, mass man must be malnourished, because “the well-fed man is an anti-man, a shame for the human race.”

In the “Confucius” project, described by Tzvetan Stoyanov, the world can become a garden only by force, when the tumor of freedom is cut out with a knife. While Lao Tzu’s objection is the argument of love – the human is not a number, the spirit of abstraction is not love.

As it is written in the “Tao Te Ching” (29):
 “You want to fix the world?”
 I don’t think this is possible.
 The world is a sacred vessel
 and it is impossible to improve.
 When you change it, you ruin it.
 “If you cling to it, you lose it.”

Culture is a special way of fighting time, insists Tzvetan Stoyanov himself in his text about Iliya Beshkov (Stoyanov 2006). Apparently, he comes down from the mountain with the conviction that he brings some of the answers to the questions that torment us and seem to continue to torment us. As it is said at the end of the Chronicle: “even when there will be no dust of us. A meeting until the end of the world.”

On July 3, 1971, Tzvetan Stoyanov died in the Pirogov Hospital from sepsis, as a result of a ruptured appendix. He was only 41 years old. There are many doubts surrounding the circumstances of his death, many are not convinced that it was just a medical error. In an essay read on Deutsche Welle radio, the writer Georgi Markov, who had already broken with the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, described his death as a huge loss, because he was not an “imaginary literary figure destined to decorate the literary stand at a literary fair in Kazan... Therefore, his place will remain empty for a long time” (Markov 1990).

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