

Tzvetan Stoyanov and the Utopia of World Literature

Abstract

This article explores Tzvetan Stoyanov's intellectual utopia of *world literature* as a counterpoint to the *vale literature* (*kotlovinna literatura*) debate of the 1960s. While contemporaries such as Toncho Zhechev and Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev defended the rootedness of national identity, Stoyanov envisioned Bulgarian literature as a participant in a “concert of nations”. Drawing on Goethe's Weltliteratur ideal, he criticized three threats – global homogenization, cultural isolationism and market-driven exoticization – while practicing resistance through translations, critical and philosophical essays to bridge Bulgarian literature with the world literature canons. By reading the novel *The Extraordinary Biography of Budi Budev* (1969) as a parodic Bildungsroman, the paper reveals how Stoyanov transforms the Enlightenment ideal of education into a self-ironic allegory of intellectual resistance.

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Keywords

Tzvetan Stoyanov, world literature, vale literature, alienation, utopia of dialogue, translation, Bildungsroman, resistance, cultural isolationism, market-driven exoticization

1. Vale Literature, World Literature

What Tzvetan Stoyanov wrote about alienation and Dostoevsky, his novels and translations, his philosophical dialogues and critical essays, should be read in scale and depth – an entire monograph could be dedicated to them.¹ Here, I focus on his vision of world literature,

¹ The most systematic work on the thought of Tzvetan Stoyanov and his legacy was carried out by Miglena Nikolchina not only in a series of her articles in Bulgarian and English, but also in the organization of the three-day conference “Enlightenment versus Ideology” (2013) and the collection published by her “Aesthetics and Resistance” (2022): Nikolchina 2015; Nikolchina 2019; Nikolchina 2022 a; Nikolchina 2022 b; Nikolchina 2024. It is worth noting that this year “Culture” (issue 1, 2025) and “Literary Journal” (issue 9, 2025) dedicated issues to the figure of Tzvetan Stoyanov.

which in the context of the 1960s can be seen as a counterpoint to “vale literature”, and today can be recognized as a critical perspective on the contemporary debate in the field.

Tzvetan Stoyanov did not emigrate to the West like Julia Kristeva, Tzvetan Todorov or Georgi Markov, but his project is marked by a cosmopolitan attitude, a longing for communication between cultures, a thirst for polyphony and diversity. His ideal is connected with a journey among world literature, the fluctuating between different languages, the translation of great contemporary European authors. In general, an intellectual utopia that communication with knowledge is stronger than communication with the services: it is what can bring out Bulgarian literature as sympathetic to the world in a two-way dialogue between East and West. In the debate in which horizon we should think about whether Bulgarian literature as world literature or as vale literature, Tzvetan Stoyanov resolutely defends the first view.

The notion of “vale literature” leads to the discussion about the uniqueness of national literature in the mid-1960s, where Tzvetan Stoyanov was against being confined to national particularity. In this debate, Toncho Zhechev took the opposite position, defending the regional, the vale, the patriarchal. Tzvetan Stoyanov’s cosmopolitan attitude is clearly stated in a series of articles “Bulgarian, truly Bulgarian” (1963), “On the ‘spirit of the place’” (1965) and “The ideal of world literature” (1970). His vision openly disagreed with the positions of critics from his circle of friends, such as Toncho Zhechev [“Ivo Andrić and the End of a Ghost” (1964), “On National Identity and Literary Development” (1966)] and Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev [“National Tradition and Innovation” (1964), “And Another Opinion about ‘Vale Literature’” (1972)]². Ivo Andrić’s Nobel Prize in 1961 inflamed the passions on the question of how much the “original”, “primitive”, “vale” is that through which we can be recognized by the world literary community. Although Toncho Zhechev and Tzvetan Stoyanov were close friends, their views diverged, the emphasis placed on a diametrically different place: on *folk embroidery* or *world measures*. While Tzvetan Stoyanov raises the ideal of open culture, Toncho Zhechev insists on the closed and vale as the preservation of roots.

² On the debate between the “vale” and the “world” in the Bulgarian critical context of the mid-1960s, see: (Nikolov 2024; Penchev 2023, 142-157; Alipieva 2010). Toni Nikolov carefully traces the exact divergence between Tzvetan Stoyanov on the one hand and Toncho Zhechev, Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev and Zdravko Petrov on the other, pointing to Stoyanov’s article from “Bulgarian, Truly Bulgarian” (1963) as an anticipation of the debate.

Zhechev and Kuyumdzhev perceived the cosmopolitan as dangerous, insofar as it destroys the boundaries of the national and leaves the artist rootless. Such an attitude is well expressed in the following passage: “With cosmopolitanism, with the destruction of national borders, with the capitalist industrial leveling of life – the artist is naked and shivering. [...] And what is an artist without a homeland? Artistic talent is not only national: if you like, it is even regional, it is connected with the spirit of the place, with ‘its own vale’, with the land that has nourished it with the poetic visions of the people.” (Kuyumdzhev 1964, 134). Toncho Zhechev delivered a report in December 1974 “Regional – National – Universal Humanity in Literature”, in which he stated his recapitulation of the debate about the vale of the 1960s: “We introduced the concepts of ‘regionality’, ‘vale’, ‘spirit of the place’, ‘genius of the place’, etc. with a perfectly defined purpose, with a specific historical meaning. It was about the fact that with the inevitable and powerfully occurring scientific and technological revolution in our country, with the inevitable urbanization and mass migration from villages to the city, with standardization and mechanization, which threaten man with depersonalization and deprivation of blight local and national colors (...) that he suddenly became a man of humanity, without previously belonging to his kin, to his region, to his homeland.” (Zhechev 1986 (1974), 116). In this lecture, Zhechev recalls Cavafy’s verse “you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean”. For him, Ithaca will become a figure of the homeland, and Odysseus a conservative hero of the return to the past and tradition. Reflections and theses that Zhechev is about to develop in the influential book “The Myth of Odysseus” (1985). However, the context has already changed: if in the mid-60s the battle for the embroiderers against the world measures did not seem a foregone conclusion, then already in the mid-70s root-seeking and the vale line began to be the dominant ideological trend, both in view of the party postulates and in the direction of the emerging Thracology. The vale line prevails, the death of Tzvetan Stoyanov in 1971 prevents us from following how he would have responded to the changed situation.

Stoyanov criticizes Zhechev’s exotic reading of the regional as a spatial characteristic through which to ensnare the reading of a given writer. In contrast to thinking of Shakespeare through the spirit of the green hills of the English countryside, Stoyanov recalls Goethe’s ideal

of world literature as an open dialogue between cultures. However, he sees very clearly that in the global battle for supremacy, market tastes dominate over aesthetic ones. Stoyanov warns that there is a danger of world literature being understood as a “folklore panopticon” in which we must present our Balkan-Bulgarian embroidery. The dominance of the geographical principle leads to the reduction of individual literatures to *the ornamental-exotic*, and this, in his opinion, turns culture into international tourism. The problem for Stoyanov is that individual nations are forced to show their local specificities, folk dances and local dishes, while “Paris, London, Rome will deal with the great questions of the planet – you, dear good nations, deal with the ‘genes of the place’. [...] Give us something that is only found in your vale, bravo, that’s what we want, that’s what we buy on the market – come and embrace us!” (Stoyanov 1988a, 192). This ironic tone emphasizes Stoyanov’s criticism of the exoticization that turns culture into a commodity. Thus, in his insistence on a dialogue between East and West, Tzvetan Stoyanov maintains the intellectual utopia that Bulgarian intellectuals can undermine the dogmatic statements of socialist criticism from within, but more importantly, they can provide their perspective on the great philosophical and social issues in a supranational debate. Exclusion from this dialogue, according to Stoyanov, is the real danger to Bulgarian culture, not the spirit of the place.

2. The Ideal of World Literature

On the question of cosmopolitan or national, at the end of his life Stoyanov gives a categorical answer and takes the side of the supranational in his short text “The Ideal of World Literature” (1970). In it, he already conceptually brings out three dangers to Goethe’s ideal of *Weltliteratur* as diversity and communion between national languages and literatures. These dangers are: a/ cosmopolitan homogenization (Alexandrian lifelessness). b/ cultural isolationism and nationalism (vale logic). c/ exoticism and global markets (folklore panopticon) (Stoyanov 1988 b, 65-66). Toncho Zhechev’s valley logic fits into the danger of cultural isolationism, which according to Stoyanov is an effect of “the bacchanalia of the dividing forces, the erupting nationalisms, the racial hatred” (ibid.). This leads to a break in the

dialogue between East and West or to the atomization of the world, which opens up the great theme of alienation. Stoyanov, however, also criticizes the rejection of the national, which leads to a process of universal unification, which he calls *Alexandrian lifelessness*. The third perspective of exoticization “sells” small literatures on the global market like strange animals in a zoo.

Despite his awareness of these three difficulties, Stoyanov continues to uphold the ideal of world literature as a conversation, a polyglot, a “concert of nations.” He upholds this ideal not only with words, but also with concrete *practices of the self*, which play the role of a counter-disciplinary instrument of resistance during totalitarianism. His struggle not to lag behind in publishing world literature, his work as a translator of contemporary world literature, his attempt to join the great philosophical debate on alienation with his essay “Ideas and Motives of Alienation in Western Literature” are part of these micro-practices of the self.

The totalitarian system of socialism in Bulgaria requires a double pedagogical regime from intellectuals. The Enlightenment effort to fill gaps in the lists of absent names and works from world literature is accompanied by the “translation” through the ideological filter of Western names. The power apparatus must be convinced or trained in *the trustworthiness* of the respective authors. This dialectic of *geniuses* and their *mentors* is, however, always a dangerous game. One of the pedagogical techniques in connection with the ideal of world literature, which Tzvetan Stoyanov practically implements, is the expansion of translated titles in the world classics series, and this is also related to convincing the relevant bureaucrats in the ideological machine of the significance and harmlessness of these titles. Following the ideal of world literature is a warlike *micropractice of oneself* as a counter-disciplinary tool of resistance in a Foucauldian sense.

Tzvetan Stoyanov maintained a similar Enlightenment ideal of catching up with European trends without the catch-up complex, but with a detailed plan of what should be translated and by whom. The lists of absent and untranslated authors from the Western canon, which he commented on in his 1957 article “We Are Lagging Behind in Publishing World Classics” (1988c) is a transition from his theoretical statements on Western European literature to the practical introduction and formation of audiences. We can also read it as a canon of world literature as imagined by the Bulgarian intellectual, his approach is

not Eurocentric, but is directly related to the utopia of a world dialogue of cultures. Stoyanov shows skill in reviewing publishing plans and translation strategies. He knows what is available and what is not. He serves with factual accuracy, even specifically indicating how much the translation fee is for translating poems by Goethe. The review was done against the background of a large-scale plan to fill in the gaps. Publishing a classic was declared an “urgent cultural task” and a duty to future generations. The fruits of the fulfilled duty are available and read today.

Stoyanov adds to the article “We Are Lagging Behind in Publishing World Classics” a table, a statistical comparison of translations and editions before and after 1944 of authors such as Byron, Moliere, Goethe, Shakespeare, Zola, Daudet, Anatole France, to support his conclusion that “world writers and classics are now published less than in the past by private publishing houses!” (Stoyanov 1988 c, 252). If we look carefully at Stoyanov’s plan, even just at the colorful subtitles in the text, stating the main gaps (“Moliere will remain silent until 1961”, “Shakespeare’s brothers sunk in darkness”, “The unfortunate Lope de Vega and the abandoned Scheherazade”), we will notice that the indicated absences have to date almost been filled³.

In the later article from 1970 “The Ideal of World Literature” Tzvetan Stoyanov already at a new theoretical level thinks about historical perspectives from Goethe to his own time, which come from the concept of *world literature*. “But I would like to point out that the idea of world literature is very mobile, with rapidly changing, sometimes unclear forms. That despite two centuries of history, it is only at its beginning. It is like a construction that has been started, something unfinished, something in projection – it will yet gain its true face.” (Stoyanov 1988 b: 65)⁴. What I want to emphasize is precisely the thinking of world literature in the light of a future time. The two barriers to world literature that Stoyanov outlines – the excessive homogenization from *cosmopolitan uniformity* and the excessive *hollowness of national literatures*, ultimately both lead to the third main threat – exoticization under the dictates of *the market*. From within to outside, Bulgarian

³ It is worth considering when exactly the “missing points” were translated and which of the points mentioned by Tzvetan Stoyanov have not yet been implemented.

⁴ We can assume that Stoyanov foresaw the turn in comparative literature after 2000, when literary scholars such as David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascal Casanova, and Emily Apter gave new impetus to work with the concept of world literature, with the issue of the dominance of the market and the English language being a central discussion point.

literature presents itself as an exotic animal in a zoo, emphasizing its embroidery, dances, regional specificities. From outside to within, the market establishes its dominance by following the criterion of seeking and selling. The belief that Bulgarian intellectuals have something to contribute to serious conversations about the future of humanity may appear naïve precisely because we have given up on our utopian horizons.

When I think about Tzvetan Stoyanov's cosmopolitan attitude, I cannot find a better explanation than Galin Tihanov's reflection in "Narratives of Exile: Cosmopolitanism Beyond the Liberal Imagination." Tihanov recalls Hannah Arendt's question "Where are we when we think?" in order to articulate the duality of every human situation as inscribed in a certain socio-political context, but also going beyond it: "Because of the act of thinking, to put it somewhat differently, we reside in a mode of concentration that removes us from the world around and invites us to contemplate. [...] Exile, then, is more than an indicator of shifting experiential perspectives. It is a condition of deterritorialisation where presence and absence are negotiable valences" (Tihanov 2022, 81). This duality of situatedness and deterritorialization makes Stoyanov's thought intellectually cosmopolitan, even though he does not leave Bulgaria. His project to translate, read and know the world can be seen as a counterpoint to Toncho Zhechev. Tzvetan Stoyanov's ideal is *res publica litteraria*, the utopia of a dialogue between Bulgarian and world literature without complexes and prejudices.

3. The Pedagogical Province

Tzvetan Stoyanov's novel "The Extraordinary Biography of Budi Budev" (1969) with ironic distance plays out a similar cosmopolitan attitude as a series of comic de-idealizations of the West. In it, the protagonist escapes from his native vale to another vale⁵, illegally leaves the borders of Bulgaria, travels throughout Europe, reaches Greenland and Africa, and everywhere tries to publicize his work "The

⁵ The comic opposition of the Big World against the vale is a narrative axis of the novel, cf. for the place where Budi Budev was born: "As for the house, perhaps the most remarkable of all its remarkable architecture remains the courtyard – and it is closed from everywhere, made as if like a second vale within the vale, so that there would be two vales in total and to overcome the fear that something could happen, appear" (Stoyanov 1969, 6).

Tragedy of the Epoch, Delivered by a Bulgarian!” to the world. Budi Budev, overwhelmed by Columbus’s⁶ *strategy of conquest*, eventually returns to Bulgaria and becomes a librarian. Despite Budi Budev’s collapse being heard on the world’s cultural stages at the end of the novel, Tzvetan Stoyanov’s anti-vale vision is preserved, as the leitmotif resounds: first we must become more cosmopolitan, and then we must look for regional specificities.

*The pedagogical province*⁷ as an enlightening utopia is an allegory through which one can approach the essays and prose of Tzvetan Stoyanov from the late 1960s. Such an allegory is most vividly and critically developed in the dialogue “Chinese Chronicle” (1967) and in the novel “The Exceptional Biography of Budi Budev” (1969). This novel can be viewed as a transformation and parody of the genre of the educational novel. (*Bildungsroman*)⁸. But doesn’t Stoyanov accept the Enlightenment with all the clarity and awareness of the untimeliness of such a perspective, with a subtle and sharp self-irony. Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev emphasizes in his preface to “The Invisible Salon” (1978) a line by Tzvetan Stoyanov, which the latter liked to repeat to friends: “We will remain enlighteners and popularizers” (Kuyumdzhiev 1978, 12). Is this statement literal or self-ironic – is it self-deprecating or self-conciliatory?

⁶ Here too, one can recognize a dispute with the positions of Toncho Zhechev, who stands against *the conquest strategy* of Columbus, preferring *the reverse strategy* of the Magellan expedition of rediscovering the familiar and close, fully connecting the beginning and the end, describing a circle (Zhechev 1979, 145).

⁷ A similar figure is developed in the second part of the novel “Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years, or the Renunciants” (1821), where the already mature Wilhelm leaves his son Felix to be educated in the Pedagogical Province. In the Pedagogical Province, the student is isolated from the world of the burgher. In this place, the principle of acquiring some specific *τέχνη*, which would easily lead the process of education from theoretical to practical skill, is laid down. Such a logic of the kinship of aesthetic and technical in the province should introduce the subject to a certain social applicability and his inclusion in society.

⁸ I open a parenthesis to return to the genesis of the utopia of a pedagogical province in the context of the German Enlightenment and in particular in Goethe. It arose in parallel with the idea of world literature and marked a change in the process of knowledge production in individual national cultures, introducing the utopia of an intellectual community in which there is a free communication of ideas. Goethe is categorical – intellectual dialogue can no longer be conducted with letters, they are no longer an effective tool for establishing a true exchange of ideas. Scientific journeys and lively conversations are needed.

As a kind of transformation and parody of the educational novel, we can point to the last novel by Thomas Mann, “The Confessions of the Adventurer Felix Krull” (1954), where the charming arrogance and trickstership of the main character develop different levels of the funny. Particularly close to the way of storytelling in “Buddy Budev” is the montage cinematic technique of sharp transitions between failures and triumphs, irony and contrasts, comic mismatches between expectations and experiences.

The full title of Tzvetan Stoyanov's novel is "The Exceptional Biography of Budi Budev", which through the matrix of the educational novel can be read precisely as the fusion of biographical and social time, the possibility of their mutual shaping. Thus, the great theme of the two worlds in Tzvetan Stoyanov – the real and the creative, the pragmatic and the fictional – is clearly tied to the possibility of the aesthetic to counteract ideological imperatives. The biography of Budi Budev itself complements his work "The Tragedy of the Epoch, Delivered by a Bulgarian!" – the narrative of the novel comically plays with the utopias of the Enlightenment, but also seriously raises the question of the (im)possible dialogue of the Bulgarian intellectual with world processes.

The intellectual Budi Budev sets out to give "his opinion on the most important issues of the century", he undertakes a journey beyond the Bulgarian vale and, while increasingly developing an external perspective – from the small town to the big city, then to Paris, Vienna, Hungary, Europe, Africa, the world. [...] This external perspective gives him the opportunity to reflect on the ideological premises of his time, while, however, the gangs of power are always on his heels, tightening their grip.⁹ It is clear that Budi Budev is a figure, a hero-example, a hero-illustration, a combination between philosophical and literary, between self-reflection and narrative, between comic and educational.

The emergence from the vale is central for Budi Budev, his education takes place through wandering around the political European scene. His acquaintance with the new schools and trends in the European humanities – Marxism, existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis – forces Budi Budev to constantly edit and add to his work "The Tragedy of the Epoch". But they also painfully return the trauma of the de-fashioning of Budi Budev's treatise, he is always slightly late in his reflections from world trends. Thus, the high stakes of Budi Budev's work are reduced to his own life crisis – from the tragedy of the epoch to the personal tragedy, from the desire to conquer the world to contextual incompatibility. The trajectory and fate of Budi Budev can be read precisely as a passage through the theoretical propositions of "Ideas and Motives of Alienation in Western

⁹ In the finale of the novel, Budi Budev tries to explain to the actors of the "Bulgarian Circus" that he is not acting, but that the danger is real, he sees himself through the Dionysian figure of the victim: "No, no, please, it is not a trick, in front of you is a victim of the gangs" – this puts a new emphasis on the self-revelation of the illusion in the complex *tragic-victim-Dionysian*. Moreover, Budi Budev is the author of the work "The Tragedy of the Epoch, Delivered by a Bulgarian!".

Literature” (1973): from the Enlightenment utopia to the bifurcation of the modern subject with the entire schizophrenic disassembly of idealizations in both the West and the East. And finally... a return again to the pedagogical province – is this the lesson of the novel?

After a series of vicissitudes, Budi Budev finally returns to his hometown of Ts. to become a librarian, he humbles his ambitions to the famous “cultivation of his own garden”, if we use an analogy from *Candide*¹⁰:

He will give books to children and adolescents or teach them French – he himself once stated on this occasion that since he had not succeeded in his own creativity, since he had not created anything, he should at least become an educator – after all, that is no small feat! (Stoyanov 1969, 228)

Budi Budev goes through the entire path of self-formation, moving from teacher to teacher and from city to city, to finally return to the vale within the vale. But also to finally take the position of the teacher himself. Budi Budev’s last step is *becoming* an enlightener, accompanied by the entire experience of calming anxiety: that this is not a small thing, that this is also needed. Budi Budev’s finale is reminiscent of the words of Tzvetan Stoyanov to Kuyumdzhiev “We will remain enlighteners and popularizers.”

The refrain in the novel “man is created to create, not to support” refers to the repair and support group at the “XX century” station in Greenland, where people are “repaired”. Support is the work of supporting the regime as a corrective measure imposed by the man in uniform. The allusion to the censorship mechanisms of the communist regime is clear and bold. It is not easy to explain how censorship allowed a novel like “Budi Budev” to appear in 1969, which allows itself to speak boldly with parrhesiastic force and directness.

Tzvetan Stoyanov’s position to remain in Bulgaria can be traced to the final node in the history of Budi Budev. On the one hand, he did not follow the fate of intellectuals such as Markov, Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov, who managed to break through into the Western intellectual environment and realize the cherished ambition of Budi

¹⁰ Compare: “We are disappointed, we are disillusioned and tired! Let whatever happens!... We will do our job, but without much enthusiasm, without quarreling with the superiors and undertaking quixotic raids... Again “Candide – let everyone dig their own garden” (Stoyanov 1988d, 180).

Budev. Their voice and their works became visible on the world stage. Tzvetan Stoyanov resisted the opposite strategy – from within the ideology he would draw the map of world literature, expanding the volumes of the domestic to European scales. Against the ideological imperatives of the regime, he offered the counter-techniques of that “in excess” or “beyond”, which remained incomprehensible both to the authorities and sometimes to his close friends. That *beyond*, which is not simply geographical, but comes from *rising* through the dark, Dionysian abysses, through which a person finds the strength to invent a tomorrow.

From the perspective of an international theoretical exchange, the name of Tzvetan Stoyanov is little known. We may suspect that this fact is part of a conscious choice. That is precisely why we owe him more here and now.

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