Radoy Ralin
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BOOKS: Shtkhovareniya (Soﬁa: Narodna mladez, 1949); Chetirnadset dni (Soﬁa: Politichesko upravlenie na voyvoda, 1950); Planinata se irma (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1954); Veynisska eternitsa (Soﬁa: Narodna kultura, 1955); Strego poveritelo (Soﬁa: Proizdat, 1956); Istoria i lev (Soﬁa: Proizdat, 1968); Poro vazduane (Soﬁa: Proizdat, 1939); Negredvi denti chetvrtina (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1969); Brepsami igli (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1960); Khulosni putni (Soﬁa: Proizdat, 1961); Primarni selyeteni (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1963); Livka (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1965); Lisem smotat (Varna: Georgi Bakalov, 1965); Molya, vsepovadaytse (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1966); Dukhlet i storo thabae (Soﬁa: Biblioteka Storshel, 1957); Lyzit chushki (Soﬁa: Bulgarski khadozhnik, 1968); Erenni skafan (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1972); Sklyapchelka (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1972); Vrasko mi genor (Soﬁa: Narodna mladez, 1975); Kulab i partokali (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1975); Nyana nachin, Kharelir (Soﬁa: Biblioteka Storshel, 1978); Apolutri (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1980); Kharkhiri khorski (Soﬁa: Biblioteka Storshel, 1980); Dvosvetka tereto ﬂyga (Soﬁa: Biblioteka Storshel, 1980); Shto doyda deteto (Soﬁa: Proizdat, 1991); Pouya i mir vo tri stranosti (Soﬁa: Biblioteka Storshel, 1982); Epigrampki v ranaki (Varna: Georgi Bakalov, 1983); Ezagorange (Soﬁa: Bulgarski pisatel, 1987); Sadoentski Trudast (Ploddiv: Kristo G. Danov, 1987);
The status of Radoy Ralin in Bulgarian literature and culture is enviable paradoxical: his admirers greatly outnumber his readers. Ralin’s political satire, coupled with his histrionics, have made him extremely popular even among people with no taste for literature, and his work has been given an extra luster by anecdotes about him, some of which are authentic and some of which are apocryphal. Ralin’s creativity unites the lyrical poet with the satirist, a peculiarity that has confused many critics who approach Ralin either as a poet only or as an exclusively satiric writer. Last but not least, the evolution of Ralin’s ideological commitments poses a question to the literary and cultural historians, because in him “verses and politics” are entwined, which means that his political preferences leave a direct mark on his work and public persona. Like many other Bulgarian intellectuals from his generation, Ralin was deeply influenced in his youth by communist ideals and activities. However, he grew increasingly skeptical of communism until, in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, his name became inseparable from the anticommunist forces in Bulgaria despite the fact that for decades he had been a devoted member of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

Radoy Ralin, whose actual name is Dimítrí Stefanov Steyanov, was born on 23 April 1923 in Sliven. This city near the Save Plains Range is renowned as “the city of the one hundred captains,” a name commemorating its merits in the struggle against the Turkish rule that dominated the region for nearly five hundred years from 1356 to 1878. Ralin’s father, Stefan Karadzha, a legendary captain from Sliven, Ralin’s father, Stefan Dimitrov, was a well-known printer, publisher, and bookseller who personally knew such outstanding figures in the international and Bulgarian communist movement as Georgi Dimitrov, Georgi Bukovski, and Dimitar Poyanov. At the age of nine Ralin became a member of a children’s group, of RMS (The Workers’ Youth Union), and learned about the social struggles of the proletariat in his home city. Ralin’s first printed work is the poem “Esen” (Autumn), which appeared in 1931 in the children’s newspaper Igrev (Sunrise), published in Sliven. He studied in the Boys’ High School “Dobri Chintulov” in Sliven (1936–1941). In 1938, as a member of RMS, he participated in the Communist Party’s initiatives to use the legal provincial periodicals for its goals. During this time he carried on a correspondence with young leftist intellectuals. In July and August 1941 Ralin collaborated with the illegal bulletin Izinata po antinatsionalata voina (The Truth About the Anti-Soviet War), a project of RMS, of which only a few issues appeared. From 1941 to 1945 he studied law at the University of Sofia “St. Klement Ohridski,” and he became acquainted with many of the finest writers of his generation. Ralin was introduced to Nikolai Vaptzarov, an outstanding communist poet who actively participated in the anti-fascist struggle during World War II, whom he semilegally sheltered in October and November 1941. In the fall of 1942 Ralin was arrested for his RMS activities, and in the police headquarters he conceived some of the poems later to be included in the cycle “Zapiski ot aresa” (Notes from the Detention).

Ralin’s poems from 1940 to 1942 (some of which were banned by the fascist censors), appeared in a dozen or so periodicals and miscellanea; they echoed the poetics and themes of the revolutionary social Bulgarian poetry of Khrísto Boyt, Khrísto Smitzanski, and Vaptzarov. The lyric hero is young and strong but choked by social passivity and injustice, so he makes rebellious gestures and appeals to his readers: “Let us never get accustomed to the darkness” (“Vizeva” [Time]), exiling on them to struggle for a better life, and reminding them of the heroic past.

After 9 September 1944, when the pro-Soviet government of OF (Oxevitch Ophich, or The Fatherland Front) took power in Bulgaria, Ralin, for three months, headed the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Sliven District Fatherland Committee. Disagreements with some “revolutionary” actions of the committee led to his quitting, and he enrolled as a volunteer to fight against the Nazis. At the front he contributed to the newspapers Protstavok (Front Fighter) and Chauwuy (Sentry). He returned with a golden military cross and material for poems that constituted his first mature work, the volume of poetry Pomnikha istrada (Soldier’s Notebook, 1955).

After World War II Ralin settled in Sofia. In 1949 and 1950 he lived in Czechoslovakia. He participated in the youth festivals in Bucharest (1959) and Moscow (1947), and at the farmer he
fall in love with an Italian woman, Laura, who became a recurrent topic and image in many of his works. In the following decades he held various editorial positions, the usual job for a professional writer in Bulgaria during socialism. Ralin worked for the magazine Slavyni (Slava) from 1946 to 1947; for the newspapers Literaturni front (Literary Front) from 1946 to 1949 and from 1987 to 1990, Strachev (1952 to 1961 (he was dismissed from this paper for his criticism of the Communist regime), and Literaturni avangard (Literary Avant-Garde) from 1962 to 1963. He also worked in the Studia za igrali filmi (Fenure Film Studio) from 1965 to 1964 and in the Studia za dokumentalni filmi (Documentary Film Studio) from 1964 to 1966, where he created the popular satiric movie series Fokat (Focus). He worked at the Belgarski pisac (Bulgarian Writer) publishing house from 1967 to 1976, and in the Bulgarska kinematografija (Bulgarian Cinematography) from 1976 to 1987.

Since 1992 Ralin, together with his lifelong friend, the artist Boris Dimovski, and Lin Stoyanov, Ralin’s elder son, has been publishing the satiric newspaper Statisticki (The Lucky One). Ralin has translated Russian, Czech, French, German, Hungarian, Greek, and Romanian poets. He wrote the scripts for more than a dozen feature, documentary, and animated cartoon movies, and the drama Kofrana (The Text for the Entertainers, 1979). Among Ralin’s several satiric plays, Improvizatia (Improvisation, 1962, in collaboration with Valeri Petrov) stands out. The book Apofroshi (Apophthegms, 1980) was awarded the national prize, Georgi Kirkov-Maystor, at the thirteenth Festival of Humor and Satire in Gabrovo, Bulgaria in 1981. Ralin is a member of the Bulgarian Writers’ Union and an Honored Cultural Worker (1980), the second-highest artistic title given to a socialist Bulgarian. In 1983 he became the first recipient of the award for satire, Rayko Ahtkev, for his lifelong achievements. Works by Ralin have been translated into many languages.

Ralin’s first mature literary work appeared in 1935, the collection of poems titled Vojnichka tetradka (Soldier’s Notebook), which presents the experience of an ordinary soldier. Patriotic, romantic, and humanistic rhetoric occasionally surfaces, but in some of the best poems, such as “Poeti” (Poet), “Spozeni” (Recollection), “Khu- dozhnikite” (The Painter), and “Gurban priyatel” (Grave of a Friend), the rhetoric is subverted by the development of the poetic theme. With its inner attitude toward war—which some critics in the mid 1950s castigated as “misunderstood realism,” Vojnichka tetradka follows the traditions of depicting military life set in Bulgarian literature by Dimitro Debelyanov and Vodan Yovkov.

Ralin’s next book of poetry, Nepredvideni chusht (Unforeseen Feelings, 1859), was warmly received and was awarded the prestigious annual prize of the Central Committee of DKMS (The Dimitrov’s Communist Youth Union). Here and in his later volumes of poetry, Lirika (Lyric Poetry, 1946; Eesti kiidin (Autumnal Blackberries, 1973), Vichka i pataki (Bread and Oranges, 1973), Polzden speciale (Last Monday, 1988); Kolei-galena treta (Kolei—Crested Grass, 1989), Ralin outlines several permanent poetic topics, the pivotal and the most multifaceted of which is the theme of the relationship between historical time and personal time. He, like many of his peers in the 1950s and 1960s, took up the tradition, set by Ivan Vazov with the cycle “Epopeya
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na zabravenite” (The Epeope of the Forgotten, 1881–1884), to reflect on the ignoble metamorphoses of the revolutionary and patriotic ideals after the struggle. A generation after the achievements had been won. The communist youth, the sacrifices in the name of freedom from fascism, the sweet dreams for social equality and justice, the enthusiasm with which a whole generation of young Bulgarians worked on the first socialist construction sites (in 1947 Ralín himself participated in the Youth Brigade Movement in Yugoslavia—all this was gradually distorted into empty clichés and put in service of a small group of communist bureaucrats (this is the theme of the story “Ve- likoto utrči!” (The Great Tomorrow)).

In this sense, from the 1950s on, the historical time was perceived by Ralín and many of his contemporaries in a paradoxical manner: the past and the ideals of the youth were felt as an unachievability, whereas, the present, that once had been the awaited bright future, was a bitter disappointment compared to the lofty criteria of the past. The gradual reversal of the temporal perspective of socialism after the 1950s, which consisted in stressing nostalgia for the past and accentuating the belief in a meaningful future, provides the soil for both Ralín’s lyrical appeals for preservation of high human values, on the one hand, and the vitality of his satire, on the other hand. This temporal reversal, which the “thaw” in the 1950s and 1960s and the perestroika in the 1980s delayed but proved unable to stop, is one explanation of Ralín’s abandonment of the communist ideals in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In this respect he is representative of the mental development of a whole generation of Bulgarian intellectu- als. The theme of the inverted historical time is central for poems such as “Ele-giya” (Elegy); “Balada za vruštinitse za geroja” (A Ballad for the Peers of the Hero), where one reads that “the old age becomes our ideal”: “Balada za Zora” (A Ballad for Zora); “Vajz-dikha” (A Sigh); “Epizod” (An Episode); “Balada za Robert Pere” (A Ballad for Robert Perry); “Balada za osnovashvareneto” (A Ballad for the Sur-vival); and “Oglodalco” (Mirror). In the early 1960s the inverted historical time in Ralín’s poetry was counterbalanced by the theme of the present time of the individual: the passing of personal time is felt in these works as a maturation of manhood, as a readiness for giving birth and the joys of fatherhood. Ralín’s poems “Aprēl” (April); “Povir” (Impulse), which asserts that “The cre is nothing better than becom-ing a father”; “Na Kita” (To Kit); “Na Stofo” (To Stano); “Sanimentala elegiya” (A Semi-mental Elegy); “Novorodenite” (The Newly Born); “Udro po aritmetika” (A Lesson in Arith- metic); “Nasledstvo” (Heirloom); and “Balada za bashinštvoto” (A Ballad for Fatherhood) aug- ment the somewhat exotic theme of fatherhood in Bulgarian literature with insights of rare sensi-tiveness. The sophistication of these works of Ralín comes also in works such as “Razminavanе” (Passing Each Other) and “Balada za may-chinštvoto” (A Ballad for Motherhood), which depict the experience of a divorced father who takes care of his two sons without their mother, and which are, perhaps, unparalleled in Bulgar- ian poetry.

The inverted historical time is counterbal-anced in another respect as well: the expectations of a grandiose future and the nostalgia for the collective heroic past are surpassed by a striv- ing for a meaningful individual present. “I would like to be simple as breathing,” the poet writes in “Yuri Gagarin 66” (Yuri Gagarin 66). “Molitva” (A Prayer), one of Ralín’s highest poetic achieve- ments, reads: “Freedom is like bread. Every day it is kneaded, baked, eaten up.” This theme is also present in “Milčalivo slobodstvo” (Taoist Con- sensus). “Nay-pot” (At Last); “Križenata” (Hy- giene), “Pecedno ne seativata” (The Devotion of the Senses), and “Prichinata” (The Reason). Staring in the mid 1960s, the theme of pri- vate time in an individual’s life takes on more somber overtones: elapsing time does not bring maturity and does not root one in the present but wears away; old age creeps upon one unan-swers; deeds are abortive; and one’s destiny is physical and artistic impotence: “Umorata” (The Fatigue) reads, “We live in order to die. The fa-tigue is a rehearsal for death.” This is also the poetic mood in “Epos” (Epos), “Elegiya po po- vo” (An Occasional Elegy), “Postiditata” (A Consequence), “Starostata” (The Old Age), and “Diklitash.” In works such as “Balada za kraya” (A Ballad for the End), “Izakshinalo dětro” (Withered Tree), or “Chetvûrta emblêma” (Fourth Emblem), the problem is whether it is possible to die with dignity. In the context of this theme, Kalo-galanina treu, a collection of love poems written between 1937 and 1987, exudes beautiful but tragically doomed nostalgia for youth and love.

Interlinked with the theme of the destructive private time is the theme of the limits of art and poetry: in a world of impending death where the past is no more, the future is impossible, and the present is meaningless, poetry is superfluous. Po-
A noteworthy event, crucial for the semi-legendary status of Ralin and representative of the atmosphere in which satiric existed in socialist Bulgaria, happened in 1958 when Radin's collection of epigrams, Lyuli chashki (Hot Peppers) appeared. Dimovski, the illustrator of all the satiric books of Ralin, had drawn a pig whose tail was removed from the signature of the party and state leader at that time, Todor Zhivkov. Lyuli chashki was banned, and a campaign against Radin, Dimovski, and other satirists was opened in which the Communist Party taught the writers and the artists what and how to criticize. Ralin was put under house arrest and later interned in the city of Silistra for his book and for sympathizing with the writers in Czechoslovakia during the events in 1968. The campaign had an unexpected effect. Lyuli chashki became immensely popular, and so did Ralin and Dimovski.

Ekmanki plakat (Ekimo Beach, 1993) gives an indication of Ralin's truthfulness to the ideals of social justice after the breakdown of socialism. The time after the communist "Golden Period" is ironically presented as an Ekimo Beach, or, as in the poem "Pojkotku" (Post-Ice Age Period/Consequences), as a deluge caused by the sudden thaw that destroys the world. The book is a collection of satirical and post-socialist epigrams and satric poems that, in a similar way, castigate the incompetence, grossness, servility, and superficial existance of the rulers, both old and new. The message of Ekmanki plakat is that between these two eras in Bulgarian history a sad continuity exists, one that undermines the hope for positive historical development, or, as the epigram "Telegrama" (A Telegram) reads, "They again lied to us."

The unifying principle behind the many themes and styles of Ralin's satiric writings is found in the bonds between his satire and the mental, verbal, and poetic patterns of ordinary, everyday discourse. It is not by chance that Lyuli chashki has the genre subtitle Noevski epigrami (People's Epigrams). The semi-legendary status of Ralin as a sort of waky folklore historian who, despite his weak social position, always succeeds in laying bare any injustice forced by the powerful, would have been unthinkable without Ralin's gift for spelling out and playing upon popular, commonplace social feelings. The wisdom of Ralin's satire is not hokkish, but colloquial; its virility comes not from excitation, but from praxis. In this respect Ralia takes over a long and strong bourgeois and satric tradition in Bulgarian literature, that of Elin Petin and Chudomir. This ex-
Plains why, on the one hand, Ralin’s writings so easily transfer from the realm of literature into the province of contemporary folklore, and why, on the other hand, the vast majority of his best satiric works are based on traditional plots and sayings. *Lyali chushki* contains many epigrams that are, in fact, well-known proverbs; Ralin’s contributions are the titles that breathe contemporary meanings into the wisdom of yore. Many of Ralin’s tales follow a similar principle: “Dzavo na paza” (An Old Man at the Market), “Shururtait i mok-kata” (The Cricket and the Ant), and “Lublivo ovcarche” (The Little Lying Shepherd) are contemporary variations of popular Bulgarian folktales. Time and again Ralin re-writes well-known narratives from world literature and history: “Khamlet” (Hamlet), “Bibleyska legenda” (A Biblical Legend), “Srečitomata svatba na imperator Justinian” (The Silver Wedding of Emperor Justinian), “Knyagi za novice dreva na tsarya” (Patterns for the New Clothes of the King), and so on. The same is true of stories derived from Bulgarian literature and history: “Prikazka za ustilbata” (A Tale for the Staircase), “Is-tina za sčitbata” (Truth for the Staircase), and “Zavetit na Kuhata” (The Precept of Kobar). A favorite genre of Ralin is the “mistake”; in it, proverbs and popular aphorisms, by changing one or two phonemes in them, are unexpectedly remodeled. Ralin is also the author of hundreds of neologisms that express in a concealed way substantial social truths and that contain ingenuous verbal collages; a few of these words have become very popular. Some of Ralin’s plays are also parodic reworkings of folktales like *Zhatata ribka* (The Little Golden Fish, 1982), or of myths, like *Zhatata ren* (The Golden Fleece, 1990). The clash of high literature and colloquial wisdom is extremely effective in Ralin’s apocalyptic well-known works by Bulgarian writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: meanings that seem cast in stone suddenly, when apostrophized, start shining with new light. A similar effect is achieved in *Kadarevski Togfast* (Theophrastus, the Personnel Director, 1987), a collection of thirty-three satirical essays written from 1959 to 1982. Here, drawing on Theophrastus’s *Characters* (319 B.C.), Ralin juxtaposes the tradition of the erudite philosophical essay and everyday chitchat: each essay starts as a treatise on a vice but ends as a sharing of family or friendly gossip. In Ralin’s satiric works socialist clichés are incessantly used in traditional narratives; in this way the hackneyed stories are rejuvenated, whereas the clichés are parodied. The pompous official language of socialism is satirized in many short stories.

*Utešenjenja na Vasil Chetvertenski* (The Consoling of Vasil Chetvertenski, 1994), a “novel of anecdotes,” is another example of how deeply Ralin is immersed in the dynamics of ordinary language. The major character is Vasil Chetvertenski, a real-life humorist who recently passed away; he is a gourmand, his opinions are bizarre, and his emotive consistents are indecent. The topics of the anecdotes are Bohemian, and the language is ćeniono; in this respect, the novel is part and parcel of the rediscovery of the low, even vulgar, layers in Bulgarian language after 1989, layers that the socialist language practise had suppressed.

At. Iam Levski (I Am Levski, 1994) is Ralin’s only lengthy work. Neither poetry nor satire, it is a “movie-novel” that was written between 1971
and 1974, initially as a film script. This solidly documented book depicts the life and death of Vasil Levski (1837-1873), the revolutionary who is considered the quintessential of Bulgarian national spirit. The novel, which at first sight seems to stand apart from anything else written by Ralin, is in reality connected with some of the deepest characteristics of his work. First, it is a historical concretization of the poetic theme of personal time and especially of its existentially most profound variant, that of self-reliance and of finding the meaning of one's life here and now. (Levski preached that the Bulgarians, instead of waiting for their freedom from Russia or from the West, had to fight for their liberation.) Second, Levski traditionally epitomizes the revolutionary who never misuses his power; he incarnates the ideal leader who selflessly serves his people and dies on their behalf. Levski, implicitly, is the measuring rod for every Bulgarian politician; he also provides the absolute criterion by which Ralin the satirist passes his judgments. Finally, Levski, despite his brilliant intelligence, was not a highly educated person, but one whose practical wisdom drew its strength from its immediate connection with the common people. In other words, he is one of the great role models for Ralin's satiric stance, in which Ralin voices, on the borderline between literature and folklore, the feelings of the ordinary people in their own ordinary language.

His enduring literary and cultural importance consists not so much in the thematic of his diverse and politically courageous writings but rather in his lifelong adherence to a deeper principle guiding both his depicting of the world and his acting in the world. Ralin, in literature as well as in real life, plays the role of the idealist who, although occupying a weak social and political position, always tests through his suspicious laughter any ready and allegedly obvious truth inherited either from a cultural tradition or imposed by those who hold power.

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