Valeri Petrov
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As a teenager enthusiastically encouraged by his father, Petrov unsuccessfully tried drawing and guitar-playing before turning to literature and creative writing. He read voraciously in several languages, participated in literary organizations, and, in collaboration with his father, wrote two juvenile novels that were never printed. At this time Petrov was influenced mainly by French and Russian poetry. He was published for the first time in the journal Zhenshchini podem (Publ. 'Uplift') in 1936. He also contributed to the journal Khronika (Khorov Leader). Petrov's first book, Pitsi bism renor (Birds Flying North, 1938), was published with the help of his father's money and connections. It is a naive poem about the landing of the Russian scientist Otto Yuilevich Shmidt at the North Pole in 1937. The newspaper Literaturna glas (Literary Voice) characterized the book as a complete failure. In 1939 Petrov became a member of BONNS (Bulgarian Common People's Students' Union), a university students' organization led by the Communist Party.

The early maturity of Petrov's talent shines in the works published, although some were censored, in the journal Ikastvo i kritika (Art and Criticism) between 1939 and 1943—especially the cycle "Noshtsi v Balkana" (Nights in the Balkan Mountains, 1940) and the narrative poem Jyuzni dven sanitizeri (1943). From 1940 to 1948 some of the highest poetic accomplishments of Petrov were written: the narrative poems Detstvo (Childhood, 1940), Padecho (Tom Thumb, 1943), Na pati (On the Way, 1943), Vlas vo mel (By the Blue Sea, 1941–1947), Tavanski spomen (Remembrance from the Attic, 1942–1948) (the poem circulated in manuscript and was published only in 1962), and the cycles "Neznosti" (Enlightenments, 1940–1943), "Stari nekha malko po nomu" (Old Thing) Retold a Little Differently, 1945), "Mehdu agitacie" (Between the Propaganda Plays, 1944–1946), "Presti freshi" (Motley Frescoes, 1946), and some others. These works constitute the pivots of Petrov's artistic view of life and poetry, to which he has remained faithful throughout his life and which, remodeled, are the bases of some of his best plays, filmscripts, children's tales, satires, travelogues, and translations. The most striking feature of these early works is the freedom with which Petrov tackles traditional poetic themes, images, and values in both Bulgarian literature and culture in general. What is considered sacred and central there—the struggle for political freedom and social justice, the sublimity of heroic death, the national and
communist ideals, and so on—is often parodied and allotted only a peripheral place by Petrov. His poetry, at its best, is witty, plays with the hierarchical hierarchies of the Bulgarian cultural universe, and in this broadest sense it is anti-authoritative and liberating through laughter. Petrov and other poets are not merely ironic or satirical, but their meta-physical and ontological inferences to a monopoly on truth. Petrov's view of life balances the extremes through irony, detachment, and erudite skepticism. For him nothing is usually good or totally bad, completely elevated or completely vulgar, irrevocably tragic or irrevocably comic.

In Petrov's art all phenomena are in the making, their meanings are always complexly revealed, they are always unanticipated, and they can easily become their own opposites. This is an imaginative world of fluidity and change where no ultimate meanings and answers exist. Here every object speaks, literally, and this anthropomorphism is not solely a technique that makes a bridge to Petrov's works for children but, on a deeper level, a polyphonic device that epitomizes his reluctance to underscore a single dominating voice. Petrov's poetry rests on ambivalent identifications and oppositions between the concrete (he is the supreme master of the minute, even bizarre, detail in Bulgarian poetry) and the infinite. This is why his works more often than not have synthetic connotations (which, however, under certain conditions become allegories verging on didacticism). Petrov, more consistently than any other Bulgarian poet after World War II, stands by the aesthetic self-sufficiency of the verbal artistic play; he is an unsurpassed demigod of "storms of coloured words," a super formal craftsman, and one of the great innovators of Bulgarian rhyme. He, in fact, has published no unrhymed poems; his lifelong love for rhymes is spelled out in the poem "Shogom na vikama" (Barefoot to the Navel). Petrov formulates three requirements for his rhymes, which are, in ascending importance, exactness, freshness, and expressiveness. It should be recalled that in the early 1950s poetic criticism was a banner under which Marxist dogmatism was challenged.

Petrov graduated in 1944 with a degree in medicine from the University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski," but his medical career as a physician in the Rila Monastery lasted only briefly. From September 1944 to 1945 he worked at Radio Sofia. In 1945 Petrov participated in the Patriotic War as a military writer and an editor at Svetoto (Stormtrooper), a satiric weekly. In the same year he became one of the founders of the major humorous and satiric newspaper in socialist Bulgaria, Stizhite (Hornet), a weekly, and from 1945 to 1963 (with some interruptions) he was an editor, a deputy chief editor, and a member of the board of editors. In 1947 he became a member of the Bulgarian Writers Union. Between 1947 and 1968 Petrov was a press attaché at the Bulgarian Legation in Rome. From 1961 to 1962 he was an editor at Bulgarski pisatel (Bulgarian Writer) publishing house.

Some of Petrov's early works were collected in his first mature book of poetry, Stichotvoritvata (Poems, 1949), which had the misfortune of appearing in an epoch of rigorous conformity and bigotry. The verdict of the Marxist criticism was that the poet was guilty of incorrect ideological views, intellectual individualism, petit-bourgeois and decadent sentiments, and formalism. At one point Petrov thought that his artistic principles might indeed be wrong and his critics might have been right. The next two collections, Dune, kato chiven (The Days We Live, 1952) and Tani na Zagora... Over There, in the West... , 1954), satisfy in Petrov's efforts to conform to the literary requirements of the time. The reproachable result was a poetry that satisfied his critics but not Petrov's muse; these works are not included in the later editions of his poetry, with the exception of the poem "Rimski ploshchadi" (The Squares of Rome, 1954). After this compromise he spent several years in a relative poetic silence, restoring his artistic self-confidence. During this period he traveled to China (1955) and published the travelogue Knge za Kina (A Book about China, 1958). Petrov's second travelogue in Afrika (Africa) (African Noobook, 1965), which tells about his six-month journey in Africa by invitation of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization) from 1961 to 1962. These two works are undeservedly neglected by literary critics and historians. The openness of the travelogue genre enables Petrov, by means of his elegant, humorous, and knowledgable prose, to demonstrate in a new form the freedom and unpredictability of his pen. The poetic silence was broken by V nekata... (In the Mild Autumn, 1961), Petrov's longest lyric work, containing some two thousand lines. He started writing it in the 1957 or early 1958, not intending to publish it. The renewed poetic labors began as a meditation on "personal and
Illustration from the cover of Petrov's first play, Kogato rozicite tantsuvaat (When Rains Dance, 1961), which mixes verse and prose.

social problems which had gathered head and an exploration of a new "poetic utterance and compositional method." Compositionally, V mekata cen is built on loose associations that roam in all temporal, cultural, personal, and social dimensions, and thus do not allow the dominance of a single idea, mood, plot, or point of view. This kaleidoscopic poem contains many of the major themes of Petrov's work: the antifascist resistance, the debase of the communist ideals in a communist dictatorship, the struggle for peace and social justice all over the globe, the split of the world during the Cold War, love, death, grief for the frustrated potential of goodness, the love felt by a husband and father, the work of the artist, pride in communist Bulgaria, the achievements of the Soviet Union in such fields as space technology, and the celebration of communist ideals. Typically for Petrov, the problems are presented as an argument between two equally possible and often witty oppositions: bookish knowledge versus immediate practical reality, the recognition of the talent and wisdom of old age versus the ambition of youth, insignificance of everyday happenings versus events of universal importance, emotion versus reason, appearance versus essence, the poet versus the ordinary man, mortality versus immortality, formalistic poetry versus revolutionary poetry, and ordinary facts versus cultural erudition. Throughout the poem the lyrical narrator is self-reflective, self-critical, and self-ironic, so that even when he admires or curses the things he loves or hates the most, some ambiguous aloofness always exists, resulting in a surplus of meaning beyond what is directly stated.

V mekata cen was awarded first prize in poetry from the Bulgarian Writers Union in 1961 and the highest state award in communist Bulgaria, the Dimitrov Prize, in 1962. Petrov's triumphant poetic comeback had several sources: the dogmatic period in Bulgarian literature subsidized with the political correctness of the personality cult in the late 1950s and was superseded by more tolerant, if not more sophisticated, aesthetic criteria. The ending of the poem is a sincere and clever praise of communist Bulgaria, the Soviet Union, and the ideals of communism. V mekata cen is a work of impressive artistic energy that voices the indispensible characteristics of the intellectual climate in the country in the late 1950s. It does not openly confront the hierarchies of the communist culture of that time. Last, but not least, the regime had learned by that time to regulate culture not only through force but through awards as well.

The next poetic collection, Dikhid vali—slustie gow (It Rains and the Sun Shines, 1967), and the cycles "... A drugue i s drugi dvama" (... And Somewhere Else and with Two Other People, 1958-1964), "Za kuchta i kotki" (About Dogs and Cats, 1965-1975), "Chipsouno zlontse" (Sunb-Noted Sun, 1975-1977), "Novi stikhove" (New Poems, 1963-1989), "Detki temi za golemi" (Children's Themes for Adults), and "Vuzzrat na strokove" (Age of the Time Limits, 1989-1992) augment the themes, poetics, and artistic view of life in Petrov's poetry.

Petrov's interest in cinema helped him to live through the difficult period of his poetic career in the late 1940s and 1950s. During this time he started writing movie scripts, and from 1955 to 1968 and from 1977 to 1980, with some interruptions, he was an editor at Studija snimqui filmi (the feature film studios) of Bulgarska literaturna kinematografija (the Bulgarian Cinema-ography State Trust). Petrov became an important catalyst for the coming-of-age of Bulgarian cinema. His screenplays fall into two groups: those about the antifascist resistance and those that deal with contemporary issues. The first category is comprised by Na malka otvoreno (On the Small Island, 1958), which was directed by Rangil Vlachanov and won a special prize at the International Film Festival in Karlovi Vary, Czechoslovakia, in 1958; Pervi urak (First Lesson, 1960), also directed by Vlachanov; Vukata (Vas- kata, 1964), which was directed by Borislav Sharaliev and won the Golden Dove Great Award for documentary and short films at the International Festival in Leipzig, East Germany.
in 1964; and Ophide se znam? (Where Do We Know Each Other From?), 1974). The second group consists of Tekkha prava ci dav-major red (Point One on the Agenda, 1956), directed by Boyan Danovski; Sliatite i pastaka (The Sun and the Shadow, 1962), directed by Vlitchanov; Bilzen ko borya (A Knight without Armor, 1966), directed by Sharaliev; S lybok i neobart (With Love and Tenderness, 1978), again directed by Vlitchanov; Edin zamaden den (One Day ofFilming, 1966), directed by Sharaliev; Barva v chara s vino (A Storm in a Wine Glass, 1978); Ye-kho-kho (Yo-ho-ho, 1981), directed by Zako Keshtyia; Esterno fiksture (Autumn Sun, 1986); and Srebrei khrus (Seperate People, 1988). In the 1950s Petrov wrote scripts for animated cartoons as well, which included Grmametod (Lightning-Conductor) and Pridandsa so borovata klinika (Talk about the Pine-Tree Twig). In 1995 Petrov was awarded a prize for lifelong achievements in cinema.

Petrov's interest in drama was spurred by his connections with some of the best young theater directors in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, grouped in the theater of the city of Burgas: Yuliya Ognyanova, Vili Tsankov, Leon Dan- iel, and Metodi Andonisov. Petrov's first drama, Kogato rozite tantsuvat (When the Roses Dance, 1961), is a reworking of an unsuccessful poem. The play is a blend of verse (in the fantastic framework) and prose (in the realistic love episode). The main characters are the Young Man and the Old Man, standing for the spirit of youth and the spirit of old age. In a symbolic, even somewhat allegorical fashion, they argue whether love is possible. The three acts of the play present three incomplete love stories: in youth, in middle age, and in old age, the suggestion being that love is always possible, though not always happy. The play was staged—not without resistance, because of its fantastic character and the taboo against speaking openly about love at that time—three years after it had been written: first in the theater of the city of Kha- skovo and later in the Theater of Saaria in Sofia.

The driving force behind the work is Petrov's belief that "there must not be any canons on the stage; on it quite different forms or mixtures of forms should be played, provided they are written or blended in a talented way." This conviction, coupled with some techniques borrowed from circus and variety entertainment, which challenged the theatrical stereotypes of the time and the desire to create in Bulgaria something that was already being done abroad, put this play on the level of the best of Petrov's poetry and screenplays. It was awarded second prize for dramaturgy at the Second National Review of Bulgarian Drama and Theater (1964). In Bulgar- ian theater history this play is generally classified as a part of the so-called poetic or lyric drama wave in the 1960s, which promoted innovations in Bulgarian drama, after the era of Stalinist-type dogma, through staging plays by poets such as Ivan Peychev, Ivan Radoev, Bojzar Bozhilov, Georgi Dzhagarov, and Petrov. Petrov's other plays are: Strzy (Snow, 1961); Chvatka muskiteka (Up on My Musketeer's Word, 1977), a lyric re- writing of The Three Musketeers in which the four musketeers, somewhat Quixotic figures, are old but continue to fight and die one by one as they are attacked by the intrigues of the royal family and the cardinal, acting in an evil alliance. Another of Petrov's plays is Tsaritsa-lybok myot! (Theater-My Love, 1981).

Petrov's first important satirical work is Im- provisatsiya (Improvisation, 1962), co-authored with Rodjoy Kalin. The episodically structured play is an allegory of Nikita Khrushchev's and the Bulgarian regime's "thaw." Eskimos in their igloos are invited to come out because the spring has arrived. Taken in, they leave their shelter only to be met by a storm and cold weather. They return inside. This is repeated until the Eski- mos no longer believe in the invitations and re- main in the igloo when spring finally comes. The work was staged in the Satirical Theater in Sofia by Grisha Ostrovski and was a great success. The play was repeatedly attacked by the establish- ment press, and the co-authors immediately added new scenes to strike back. The perfor- mance, "an encyclopedia of dissent," according to Atanas Slavov, was stopped in 1963.

From 1965 to 1987 Petrov wrote fourteen narrative poems that can be defined as either hu- morous, satirical, or parodic. Some are collected in Na smed (For Fun, 1970). In these works Petrov's mordant wit informs his poetic virtu- osity: they are ingenious genre, stylistic, and dis- curse parodies in which the writer's susceptibil- ity to verbal playfulness reigns. These satires do not question the social order as a whole but only some of its deficiencies that impede the full blossoming of communist principles. Khadadine po lokatsi (Walking Over the Letters, 1976), in the form of a medieval morality play, criticizes bu- reaucratic delay by presenting the life of Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius, the brothers who in- vented and spread the Slavic alphabet in the ninth century. Bolada sa kontraadmirala (A Ballad about the Rear-Admiral, 1970) parodies a histori-
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The eighteenth-century cycle "Za lchino polovnec" (For Private Use, written over the years from 1955 to 1983) appeared after the fall of communism; it is quite different from Petrov's previous "soft" satire. These poems, which had been kept hidden in the writer's drawer, rank among the best, most bitter, and angriest political satire written in Bulgarian, reminding one of the noble rage of Khrishte Botev and Sotyan Mikhailovski. In them Petrov directly—and with intellectual splendor—addresses "the idiotic stench" (in "Tak i ovdvd" [Here and Over There]) of communism: the idiocy, ignorance, corruption, and cruelty of officials; the servility and avarice of intellectuals; and the lack of civic courage, dignity, and ideals. Petrov demonstrated his own bravery when he refused to sign an official letter against Alexander Solzhenitsyn by the Bulgarian Writers Union and was expelled from the Communist Party; this case is portrayed in the poem "Chayat" (The Tea).

Petrov's first work for children is the poem Gast-gery (A Hero as a Guest, 1953), but his fame in this area rests on five tales in prose and verse written in the 1970s and the 1980s, some of which exist in literary, theatrical, and script versions. Bayala prihvatka (White Tale, 1977) and Medo banjano (Put Rather Delicately, 1960) are works with a moral: friendship and honesty require courage and are tested through hardships. Kapche za sini (A Button for Sleep, 1978) and V ionnitata igenya (In the Moonlight Room, 1982) are stories of pure imagination. Pak! (Crack!, 1983; titled Morkho sin's [Navy Blue] in its musical form) has more complex messages: In growing older, one may lose his initial purity; and horrifying ugliness sometimes is a shield for a tender heart. In the era of perestroika Pak! enjoyed enormous popularity among children and parents alike. An explanation of its popularity may be found in the identity between the meaning of the tale and the belief in the poet of perestroika that communism may find its true self by going back to its sources and that the outer deformations of the system hide an inner, frustrated humanistic potential.

After the fall of the socialist system,ardo rated as one of the most prominent Bulgarian translators. His translations of Gianini Rodoni's poems for children and Radujić Kipling's "Jut St Stari", as well as poetry from Russian, Italian, and English, graceful as they are, were still only a harbinger of Petrov's magnum opus in this realm—the translation of all of William Shakespeare's plays and sonnets. This work was inspired—as can be inferred from the cultural situation in the 1960s and from Petrov's poems "Ned prevodite" (Over the Translations), "Viv, otrubshadi..." (You, Who Judge ...), and "Nashe vreme" (Our Time)—by his striving for genuine accomplishment in an age of creative petitions that was more concerned with how to serve the political cliche than how to serve art. The labor on this project took some twenty years, and its scholarly quality was attested by Petrov's editor, Professor Marko Mihailov, an internationally renowned Shakespearean scholar. The translations, comprising seven volumes that were published from 1970 to 1981 (not including the sonnets), won the Grand Award of the Union of Bulgarian Translators and of the Press Committee (1975). Not enough critical work has been done on these translations, but some critics believe that Petrov renders Shakespeare's comedies better than the tragedies, historical plays, or romances. A comparison of Petrov's Horatio with the classical translation of the play by Geo Mitev, in 1917, at the zenith of Bulgarian symbolism, and with the original play shows that the Shakespearean imagery is more substantial than the eternal imagery of the symbolist Havat of Mitev but less substantial than Petrov's imagery, which is replete with concrete details. Petrov has been and continues to be a member of many Socialists Party and professional institutions. He has received many awards and decorations for his contribution to literature, theater, film, and culture in general, among which are the title of Honoured Cultural Worker in 1965 and the title of People's Artistic and Cultural Worker in 1977. These were the two highest artistic titles in communist Bulgaria. From 1990 to 1991 Petrov was a deputy to the Seventh Great National Assembly chosen by the Bulgarian Socialist Party.
Petrov's artistic principles crystallized in his works of the 1940s and matured in his diverse accomplishments in the following decades. Petrov's work has enriched Bulgarian culture by its quest for tolerance and its intellectual sophistication, creative audacity, cheerfulness, independence from ideological dictatorship, and inner freedom that is not intimidated by questions that cannot be unambiguously answered.

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