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## THE GREAT FOUR IN MARA BELCHEVA'S MEMOIRS

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***Abstract:** The paper examines the memoirs of Mara Belcheva dedicated to the four writers from the famous Bulgarian circle "Misal" ("Thought"). As a close observer of the group Belcheva gives an intimate and precise look at the inner world and characters of each one of the participants. The text surveys the way the author presents the artists, pointing out their main features throughout her stories. The conclusion comments on the mythologizing strategies Mara Belcheva uses in her memoirs in order to perpetuate the image of the four distinguished authors. Giving a detailed understanding of their significance both as individuals and as a group, Mara Belcheva highlights their merit for the ascent of Bulgarian literature at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

***Keywords:** "Misal" ("Thought") circle, Mara Belcheva, Petko Todorov, Pencho Slaveykov, Peyo Yavorov, Krustyo Krustev.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the history of Bulgarian literature the "Misal" circle functions as the first professional literary group which initiated modernism and played a significant role in the overall Europeanization and modernization of our cultural life. The four creators are often described as controversial and conflicting figures, and with their elitist views and high artistic standards they earned the discontent and hostility of a large part of Bulgarian elite at the time. Nevertheless, their place and significance in the field of our national literature remains undeniable up to this day.

Some of the most intriguing portraits of the members of the group, left by their contemporaries, can be found in the memoirs of Mara Belcheva, whose close friendship with Pencho Slaveykov provided her with the opportunity to interact closely with the four authors and to see them in different, everyday, and even domestic situations. And although many critical articles have been dedicated to the members of the "Misal" circle over the years, we rarely get the chance to perceive them as ordinary people, which they undoubtedly were, despite their exceptional qualities as creators<sup>5</sup>.

### EXPOSITION

#### **Petko Todorov – the Saint from Ancient Christian Times**

As the youngest and least experienced, Petko Todorov is often perceived as the favoured child of "Misal", nurtured and educated in the ideological views of the great four. His image, created by Mara Belcheva with exceptional love and warmth, is that of an ascetic and saint, a young idealist completely devoted to creativity and literature. Even his appearance reveals his unique "otherworldliness", highlighting his pure and spiritual nature. The author's first impressions of him are of a *young, slender, tall man with a bright, peculiar gaze*<sup>6</sup> (Belcheva, 2018: 65). With his overall presence, Petko Todorov makes the impression of a person who has no ties to earthly matters, that he is gazing into another world – the world of literature and creativity. This dedication to his work imparts a special charm to his personality. In addition to

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<sup>5</sup> The study is based on the text "On the Great Four" published in Belcheva, M., 2018. *Prose and Translations*. Sofia: Kibea, vol. 1, pp. 65-81. In the collection, it is noted that the memoirs could be found in the archive of Mara Belcheva, kept in the Central State Archive, and that the first publication of part of the memoirs is in the book "Pencho Slaveykov, P. K. Yavorov, and P. Todorov in the Memories of Their Contemporaries".

<sup>6</sup> All translations from the memoir of Mara Belcheva are mine – P. A.

this, his illness<sup>7</sup> seems to further nourish this image of *something unearthly* in him, which makes everyone admire his noble presence.

One of Petko Todorov's key characteristics is his spiritual asceticism, his constant dwelling in other worlds, which often leads him to neglect his health and appearance. Mara Belcheva recounts how, during a visit with Slaveykov to Munich, where Petko Todorov was also residing at the time, her companion had to take Petko to a bathhouse and barber so they could all attend the theater in the evening, because as Slaveykov put it: *Doctors send him to the fresh air, but he has tucked himself into a dark house opposite the chicken coops, where no sunlight penetrates, and writes, and writes night and day in his room* (Belcheva, 2018: 67).

In Mara Belcheva's memoir, Petko Todorov is often presented in the company of Pencho Slaveykov, who acts not only as his like-minded companion but also as his mentor and guide. In their conversations, they frequently discuss literary topics, debate on various works, and comment on the endeavors of prominent writers. They are both thoroughly absorbed in their discussions, where they live a much more intense and meaningful life – a life devoted to high ideals that alone can satisfy their spiritual needs: *On the streets of Munich, everyone turns to look at them: Slaveykov as the Jeremiah from the Sistine Chapel fresco, while Petko looks like a saint from early Christian times. They walk everywhere as if at home, they stop absorbed in their conversation, oblivious to passersby, or stand in front of a shop window without noticing anything. For nothing visible was real to them* (Belcheva, 2018: 68). Thus it is precisely life beyond the visible realm – life in the magical worlds and visions of his idylls and plays – that is the true, authentic life of Petko Todorov, which he carries along everywhere he goes.

### **P. K. Yavorov – The Free Rebel**

Completely different – polar in character and worldview is the poet Peyo Yavorov. In the history of Bulgarian literature, he remains one of the darkest and most enigmatic figures, still puzzling researchers and critics. This perception concurs with the memories of Mara Belcheva about him: *There is something strange about this man. His hand, hesitant, barely touches yours before he pulls it away. His gaze, timid and dark as night, rarely meets yours. When you speak to him, he responds with only a few words and then falls silent again* (Belcheva, 2018: 72-73).

In Mara Belcheva's words Yavorov is a reserved, unsociable man, distant from empty noise and vanity of daily life. He is introspective, carrying his inner darkness that sets him apart from others, making him strange and incomprehensible to them. The only thing that brings him joy and peace except his art, is the fight for the freedom of Macedonia. That is why, when Mara Belcheva asks why they don't invite him over more often, Slaveykov replies: *He is not an earthly man, don't you see, he is entirely absorbed in his own world. Just let him be with the rebels. That is where he feels free* (Belcheva, 2018: 73). His revolutionary activity, which Yavorov considers his real calling until his very death, embodies his rebellious and freedom-loving spirit, his strong patriotic aspirations. It is the only thing that gives him a sense of belonging in a world that is inherently cold and hostile.

In Mara Belcheva's memoirs the poet's dark, solitary nature seems to foreshadow his tragic fate, which reached him in the last years of his life. The main part of the text, dedicated to Yavorov, focuses on his marriage to Lora Karavelova and their complex relationship, which ended in such a dramatic way. Of particular interest in the memoir is the account of the already blind poet about Lora's suicide and his inability to endure the unjust accusations against him. Tragic in life, misunderstood and alienated from everyone, Yavorov remained unhappy until his very death, which alone brought him relief from his suffering: *He wandered the streets like a frostbitten stalk – as if forgotten by everyone. His friends gathered some help, but it no longer supported him. After a few days, the news of his tragic death spread around* (Belcheva, 2018: 74). This is how one of Bulgaria's greatest poets passed away, alone and rejected by society.

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<sup>7</sup> Petko Todorov's health was fragile since his childhood, and later, as a student in Berlin, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Eventually, he died a painful death from actinomycosis. For more details, see Kirova, M., 2018.

### **Dr. Krustev – the Apostle of Beauty**

In Mara Belcheva's memoirs, Dr. Krustev is portrayed through his rich critical, educational, and cultural work. Not quite impressive in appearance, he provoked the feeling of respect mainly through his dignified presence and his complete dedication to literary activities: *At first glance even unattractive, he attracted people with his gaze, his words, and the warmth emanating from his inspired being. Always on the move, always rushing, barely seated, he would be off again* (Belcheva, 2018: 75). Having taken it as his mission to elevate Bulgarian literature to the highest European standards, Dr. Krustev spared no effort or resources to achieve this goal. For this reason, Mara Belcheva describes him as an "apostle of beauty," a man destined to spread new ideas about highly aesthetic literature which would make it universally significant, more refined, and more valuable.

Belcheva does not miss to mention Dr. Krustev's work related to discovering and supporting talented young people: *This awakener of everyone who is dormant, this apostle of beauty, took joy in every form of spiritual wealth and would pull any capable youth out of the mud. He helped such young people as if they were his own children, sparing no possessions, no time, no ardour* (Belcheva, 2018: 76). In this way we get the impression that despite his strictness, Dr. Krustev was filled with humanity and warmth, that he was ready to support anyone walking the thorny path of literature because he understood that aesthetic taste is cultivated and nurtured with great effort and persistence. All of this reveals that the first professional critic in Bulgaria had a comprehensive vision for the future of Bulgarian literature and was not guided in his work solely by the needs of the specific cultural and historical moment.

This notion is also supported by the deeply philosophical inclinations of the critic, by his desire to reach the very essence of the world and of humanity, to explore the mechanisms of existence: *He loved nature in all its forms. He wanted to grasp the inner meaning of shapes, as well as the manifestations of the human soul. He loved all that is good and used to say: "Without love, a person would freeze. The stronger the individual, the wider his embrace"* (Belcheva, 2018: 76). His love for people, for literature, and for his work as a critic and a teacher formed the foundation of the high morality and ethics that distinguished his entire behavior.

### **Pencho Slaveykov – the Old Testament Jeremiah**

Although he is the closest to her among the four creators, Mara Belcheva does not dedicate a separate memoir to Pencho Slaveykov in her text about the members of the "Misal" circle<sup>8</sup>. However, his personality is present in every narrative for the other writers, because it is he who serves as the unifying, cohesive element, which plays an exceptionally important role in the consolidation of the group. Several aspects stand out in the image of the poet individualist.

Even in the first text, dedicated to Petko Todorov, Slaveykov is compared to the biblical prophet Jeremiah, who is known in the Old Testament for his sermons and prophecies. This comparison highlights the poet's resemblance to ancient biblical sages, portraying him as a messiah and a leader of the community, which Slaveykov indeed was. His words often sound like aphorisms, carrying depth and insight, reflecting his ability to reach important philosophical conclusions about literature and life: *Pencho, in the depth of his eyes, reflects entire universes. His dark gaze throws sparks, always new, lingers long in you, pours warmth over you, seeking the image of a higher reality* (Belcheva, 2018: 68).

Another important social role of Slaveykov is that of a teacher and mentor – according to Mara Belcheva, both Petko Todorov and Yavorov valued his opinion and read their works in front of him before publication, in order to hear his advice and remarks. This shows the authority the writer held among younger artists, their faith in his judgments, and their trust in his literary insights and aesthetic taste.

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<sup>8</sup> Mara Belcheva wrote several individual memoirs about Pencho Slaveykov, focusing on the poet's final years, his death, letters, and works.

In addition to his erudition and clear ideological stance, Slaveykov is valued by his like-minded companions for his cheerful nature and good sense of humor, which often make him the soul of the company during their gatherings. Mara Belcheva recounts, for example, a memorable visit to Petko Todorov's home, where Pencho Slaveykov quickly composed a humorous poem about the turkey their host served them<sup>9</sup>, in order to entertain his companions and brightened by his cheerful jokes, the gathering ran along with deep conversations about literature and abundant laughter.

Mara Belcheva also pays special attention to Slaveykov's literary legacy, quoting at length a letter from Dr. Krustev, sent to her a few months after the poet's death. In it, the prominent critic expresses his regret that Pencho Slaveykov passed away before completing his "Кървава песен" ("Bloody Song"), for which he gives his exceptionally high professional assessment. Dr. Krustev is one of the first critics in Bulgaria to realize the immense significance of Pencho Slaveykov's work for the development of our national art.

## CONCLUSION

Mara Belcheva's memoirs of the four representatives of the "Misal" circle immerse us in the years of that glorious literary past from the early 20th century, when the face and character of modern Bulgarian literature were being shaped. Although she states at the beginning of her text her desire to depict scenes *from the everyday, ordinary life of those great departed souls* (Belcheva, 2018: 65), Mara Belcheva builds the image of true titans of the spirit, of *chosen ones of their time*, whose primary aim is *to create a temple in free Bulgaria, where all the enlighteners – with hammer, chisel, word, and pen – awaken the slumbering. Make them free themselves from the chains of everyday life and realize that there exists a higher life beyond the realm of base instincts* (Belcheva, 2018: 77). Written after the deaths of the four artists, these memoirs try not only to commemorate their work but also to mythologize their images, turning them into legends and affirming their importance for future generations. This aim is supported by comparisons to prominent biblical figures – apostles (Dr. Krustev), saints (Petko Todorov), prophets (Pencho Slaveykov); the selection of episodes and situations from their lives that reveal their crucial role in the development of Bulgaria's cultural life; the emphasis on their existence in otherworldly, spiritual realms; their asceticism and complete dedication to literature; as well as their solitude and their fate of spirits, ahead of their time.

The conclusion of the final text about Dr. Krustev presents an interesting shift, aiming to perceive the members of the Circle not as separate individuals but as elements of a whole. This approach emphasizes their unity, their shared spiritual ideas, and the strong bonds of respect and reverence that developed among them over the years: *One had to see these four together, to hear how they listened to each other, how their words intertwined: their theme, like that snake from fairy tales, descended into the depths of the soul of all nations, adorned itself with precious stones, reflecting the sky, and came to life in the heart of everyone present – the snake of wisdom. God, nature, and man merge as one* (Belcheva, 2018: 77). Although she portrays them as polar natures corresponding to the four human temperaments (*Krustev – choleric, Yavorov – melancholic, Pencho – sanguine, Petko – sentimental*) (Belcheva, 2018: 79), Mara Belcheva notes that they are *branches of the same tree* (Belcheva, 2018: 79), and that their unity stands out even more intensely in their diversity. It is likely that this mutual complementarity itself is the reason for the strong bond and unbreakable connection between them.

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<sup>9</sup> Mara Belcheva quotes a part of the poem, which is really rather successful:

*And this turkey once was puffed with pride  
For beauty, or perhaps to lead the rest?  
Dreaming of a turkey's joy, he tried,  
Now cause of our grand feast, our honored guest.  
And let us all, here gathered, now recall  
The story of his fate, his final show:  
He died for us, and thus he'll nourish all –  
The good in us, as well as what brings woe* (Belcheva, 2018: 69)

In her memoirs of the great four, Mara Belcheva masterfully crafts the vivid, convincing, and impactful images of the four artists, affirming their place in Bulgarian cultural life at the beginning of the 20th century and mythologizing their presence in our literature. Strong both as a unity and as individualities, the representatives of the “Misal” circle mark a turning point in the development of modern Bulgarian literature and for this reason they deserve to be remembered in all their human grandeur and spiritual idealism.

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