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## **Petko Todorov's Plays and the Poetics of European Symbolism**

### **Abstract**

The paper examines Petko Todorov's five symbolist plays (Masons, Strahil the Redoubtable Haidout, The Fairy, Bride Boryana, and Dragon's Wedding) from the perspective of European symbolist drama to emphasize their common aesthetic principles and their specific originality. The comparative analysis thus defined leads to the conclusion that Petko Todorov's works follows the structural principles of Symbolist drama yet they have their own specifics. The unconventional structure of the dramatic action and dialogue; the wide use of music and painting in the staging of the plays as well as their new genre form make Todorov's works akin to the francophone Symbolist model. On the other hand, the moral dimension and the pervading national atmosphere in the Bulgarian dramas betray their indebtedness to the Russian Symbolist drama. Finally, the devalorisation of the fantastic characters and the playing down of Romantic and realistic elements in Petko Todorov's dramas are totally unknown to the European Symbolist theatre. In this way, Petko Todorov's dramas are a peculiar combination of Symbolist poetics and influences of the Bulgarian national context. They follow their own development and contribute hereby to the specific evolution of the Bulgarian modernist theatre.

**Keywords:** European and Slavic symbolist drama; Bulgarian modernist theatre; rewriting; fairy tales; legends

### **Резюме**

#### **Пиесите на Петко Тодоров и поетиката на европейския символизъм**

Модернистичните драми на Петко Ю.Тодоров (Зидари, Страхил страшен хайдутин, Самодива, Невеста Боряна и Змейова сватба), се разглеждат в контекста на европейския символистичен театър, за да се открият естетическите им прилики и своеобразни различия. Съпоставителният анализ показва че нетрадиционното структуриране на драматичното действие и диалога в изграждането на пиесите, широкото използване на музиката и изобразителното изкуство, както и новата им жанрова форма, ги сродяват с франкофонския символистичен модел. А морално-етичните нюанси и подчертаната национална атмосфера в българските произведения разкриват връзката им с руската символистична драматургия. Но подчертаното принижаване на фантастичните персонажи, както и романтичните и реалистични елементи в драмите на Петко Тодоров отвеждат към националните литературни традиции и са почти непознати в европейския символистичен театър. Така, модернистичните творби своеобразно съчетават редица аспекти от символистичната поетика с влиянието на собствения си национален контекст. Самобитната им стилистика дава началото и очертава насоките в развитието на българския символистичен театър.

**Ключови думи:** Европейска и славянска символистична драматургия; български модернистичен театър; пренаписване; приказки; легенди

Petko Y. Todorov is considered the undisputed reformer of the Bulgarian theatre. He created his innovative drama in the first decade of the 20th century. This was a time when the professional stage was in upswing, and modernism was rapidly developing under the strong influence of European

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*fin de siècle* trends. The Bulgarian National Theatre opened in Sofia in 1904 creating a demand for plays on Bulgarian subjects written by Bulgarian authors. The members of the influential Modernist circle *Misal (Thought)*, Dr. Kristev, Pencho Slaveikov, Peyo Yavorov and Petko Todorov, were no less concerned with the development of the Bulgarian theatre. Their aesthetic goals, however, were far broader than the issue of a domestic repertoire and sought to open up the new Bulgarian literature to the modern tendencies in the West.

After Pencho Slaveikov became director of the National Theatre in 1908, he advocated the idea that art was autonomous and should be free from political propaganda. Peyo Yavorov, then artistic secretary of the National Theatre, expressed the spirit of innovation both as playwright and stage director.

The writers of the *Misal* circle saw Todorov's dramas as an expression of the new poetics; they admired "the dreams of the modern poet seeking to further the cultural and ethical rebirth of the common people by way of novel ideas and new stylistics."<sup>2</sup>

The supporters of traditional realist drama, which prevailed in the immediate post-liberation period, opposed the unconventionality of Todorov's dramas because they destroyed the generally accepted theatrical form, close to European Symbolist stylistics: absence of clear-cut conflict and full-fledged characters, excessive focus on detail at the expense of the whole. The criticism of the realists only highlighted Todorov's innovative aesthetics.

Petko Todorov's contribution to the growth of Bulgarian modernist drama is widely acknowledged by critics. A number of studies focused on the Modernist elements in the dramatic structure and the use of Bulgarian folklore. The parallels with Symbolist poetics draw attention exclusively to certain aspects of Maeterlinck's stylistics<sup>3</sup>, such as the death motif and the static action. However, the works of the Belgian playwright by far do not cover the whole gamut of symbolist trends in Francophone drama. Todorov has not been studied from the perspective of Slavic Symbolism, which emerged at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and had an almost instantaneous effect on the domestic stage. Therefore, a broader comparison between his plays and Francophone and Slavic Symbolism would emphasize their common aesthetic principles and the originality of the Bulgarian dramatist. My analysis will focus on Todorov's five symbolist plays: *Masons* (1899), *Strahil the Redoubtable Haidout* (1903), *The Fairy* (1903), *Bride Boryana* (1907), and *Dragon's Wedding* (1910). (*Зудару*,

<sup>2</sup> Д-р Кръстев, Кр. „Певец на воля и младост”. In: *Млади и стари. Критически очерки върху днешната българска литература*, Тутракан, 1907. <http://slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=308&WorkID=11391&Level=2> (11.05.2018)

<sup>3</sup> Лукова, Калина. *Екстазите на времето. Морис Метерлинк и българската утопия за символистична драма*. Бургас, 1999.

*Страхил страшен хайдутин, Самодива, Невеста Боряна, Змейова сватба*). Special emphasis will be placed on plot, typology of dramatic personae, dramatic action and genre characteristics.

### **Petko Todorov's Aesthetic Views and Symbolist Poetics**

Similarly, to the bulk of Bulgarian writers after the liberation from Ottoman domination in 1878, Todorov acquainted himself with European literature (including the Symbolist movement) during his studies in France, Switzerland (1896-1897) and Germany (1898-1904). In addition, he developed a strong interest in Slavic literatures while working on his doctoral thesis (on the contacts between Slavic literatures and Bulgarian literature) which he failed to defend for administrative reasons. Belonging to that period are his articles on Ibsen, Shakespeare, Herzen and Tolstoy demonstrating a thorough knowledge of European and Slavic writers.

Todorov's aesthetic views crystallized in association with the theoreticians of the *Misal* circle Pencho Slaveikov and Dr. Kristev. He shared their idea that Bulgarian literature needed modernization without thereby sacrificing its authentic originality. In a letter to the Ukrainian writer Kobilyanska, Todorov points out that in the beginning Bulgarian literature came under the influence of the Russian *narodniks*, French novelists and Italian and German poets. Being a Bulgarian, he had to fight foreign influences so as to restore the spirit and originality of the national culture<sup>4</sup>.

The individualism of the Bulgarian dramatist based on his readings of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer ran counter to the strong social elements and moralizing tone of the post-liberation Bulgarian literature. The young writer criticized the trend on the ground that its short-term political objectives were closer to journalism. Also, he rejected Naturalism, then dominant in France, since, in his words, “the documentation and imitation of reality's ugliest aspects tells little about the truth and meaning of human existence”<sup>5</sup>.

In line with the European Symbolists, the Bulgarian author argued against vaudeville and melodrama, which, in his opinion, avoided major philosophical and ethical issues. Designed for “the mere entertainment of the crowds”, they offered simple dramatic action instead of “inner poetic depths”<sup>6</sup>. Todorov shared the Symbolist tenet that genuine art has to be directed inwards, towards the soul. This, according to him, is best exemplified by Russian and Scandinavian literatures. The Bulgarian modernist was captivated by the “gentle touch of humaneness” and “natural simplicity”<sup>7</sup> in

<sup>4</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Събрани съчинения в 4 тома. Писма*. Т. 4. Ред. Л. Георгиев. София: Български писател, 1981, с. 445.

<sup>5</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Славяните и българската литература*. София, Хемус, 1944, с. 125.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, с. 193.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, с. 125.

Tolstoy's work. He was also strongly impressed by Ibsen's dramas and their characters. In his words, they represent the most intimate recesses of the mind searching for truth, freedom and beauty.

The Bulgarian playwright repeatedly acknowledged his indebtedness to the innovative techniques of the Symbolists whose aim was to suggest ideas to the empathetic reader rather than impose them didactically. He valued highly Maeterlinck's stylistics and the poetic atmosphere of his symbolic dramas but disagreed with their tragic subjects. In his opinion, the tragic lot of Maeterlinck's protagonists haunted by death was not a subject of lasting interest for literature. This recalls the ideas of the Russian symbolist Alexander Blok.

Todorov did not share the Francophone belief in elitist art created for the initiation of the chosen few into mystic secrets. Similarly, to most Slavic Symbolists, the Bulgarian Modernist addressed his works to larger audiences to encourage their cultural and spiritual transformation. He thought that eternal beauty, love and the religious feeling in art could engender faith in a nation that had lost its morale and spiritual power during the five centuries of Ottoman bondage. In an attempt to turn his art into a "national religion"<sup>8</sup> capable of creating a new culture of its own, Todorov turned to Bulgarian folklore. According to him, "folklore is the secret repository of the Bulgarian soul" that "never failed to strike a chord in the heart of every Bulgarian."<sup>9</sup>

The use of folklore motifs is common to European Symbolist drama as well. Both West European and Slavic writers associate the naïve simplicity of folklore with the lost pristine sensibility of primitive man and his ability to decipher the mysterious messages of the invisible world. Therefore, the fantastic folklore stories about miracles, fairies and supernatural heroes were conceived by the Symbolists as a key to the cryptic knowledge of antiquity.

Whereas European playwrights, who sought universal truth in folklore, turned to samples from remote lands, most Slavic writers turned to oral literature in relation to their own context using their national folk tales, myths and legends. Thus, Petko Todorov's interest in Bulgarian folklore associates him more closely with the Russian and Polish symbolism than with the West European representatives of the trend.

His special contribution in this regard was however his conviction that Bulgarian literature originated in folk traditions. His search for the genesis of individual writing in folklore aimed to develop some of the hidden aspects of it and recalls the Symbolist approach to the world, which sought to go beneath the visible rind of phenomena and penetrate into their secret essence.

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<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, 323.

<sup>9</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Събрани съчинения в 4 тома. Писма*. Op.cit., с. 309-397.

### Folklore plots in Todorov's Dramas and the European Symbolist Theatre

Todorov claimed that true art is concerned with the “re-working and nuancing of folklore”<sup>10</sup>. He himself drew freely from the then popular collection “Bulgarian Folk Songs” compiled by the Miladinov Brothers<sup>11</sup>.

The plots of his five symbolic dramas are indebted to the same source. The play *Dragon Wedding* recalls the folk song *Rada and the Dragon* which tells about the abduction of a girl by the dragon who is in love with her. The motif of love between a fairy and a shepherd, which figures in a number of folk songs, is at the core of the intrigue in the drama *Fairy*. The legend of Strahil the redoubtable voivoda who is captured by the Turks underlies the plot of the eponymous play. The folk epic about the immuring of a young bride or her shadow into a building to make its foundations stronger is reinvented in the play *Masons*. The plot of *Bride Boryana* is not borrowed from a folk tale, yet the idea of the big cask, “even God could not imagine”<sup>12</sup>, which was able to transform the entire world bringing joy and happiness to people, recalls the magic objects in the fairy tales.

Originating in Bulgarian folklore, the above elements also resemble the fairy tales and legends used in European Symbolist drama. For example, the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* by the Brothers Grimm is similar to the plot of four francophone plays: Maeterlinck's *Les Sept Princesses*, Trarieux's *Le Songe de la Belle au bois*, Bataille and d'Humiere's *La Belle au bois dormant* and Lorrain's *Yanthis*. The plot of *The Sacred Blood* by the Russian Symbolist Guippius recalls Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*. The legend of Merlin the Wizard underlies Schure's *Merlin l'Enchanteur* and Lorrain's *Brocellande*.

The mode in which Petko Todorov rewrote the folk tales carries overtones from the Francophone and Slavic Symbolists. He retains the general outline of the plots, dispensing with details, and sticks to the straightforward action, the stereotyped protagonists and the stylized language. At the same time, he introduces modifications, which allow for a new interpretation and add a symbolic dimension to the folkloric action.

The departures from the folk tale become most prominent in the changed denouement of the familiar stories. Similar to the European Symbolists, Todorov offers a new finale to the fairy tale thus infusing it with new life. In this way, he sought at once to uncover the secrets of life buried in the fairy tales and to bring them in rapport with the specific historical moment, thus linking them to the present

<sup>10</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Събрани съчинения в 4 тома. Статии*, Т. 3. Ред. Н. Тодоров. София, Български писател, 1980, с. 323.

<sup>11</sup> In 1861, Dimiter and Konstantin Miladinov published their famous collection of 665 folk songs, proverbs, riddles etc. The collection marks the peak of Bulgarian folklore studies during the National Revival period.

<sup>12</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Събрани съчинения в 4 тома. Драми*, Т. 2. Ред. Н. Тодоров. София, Български писател, 1980, с. 176.

day problems and the future development of their country. For example, whereas the girl from the song *Rada and the Dragon* outwits the enamoured dragon and returns home, Tsena in *Dragon's Wedding* is attracted by the carefree life with the strange beast and follows him against her family's ban. In many folk tales, the dragon's love for the maiden leads to her illness and eventual death; in *Dragon's Wedding* Tsena is killed by her own brothers. She dies in an attempt to protect her dragon lover from her brothers. Her death becomes a symbol of the backward social conventions in the patriarchal society.

Unlike the fairy in oral lore, who escapes into to the forest after finding the dress hidden by her husband, Fairy Gyurga in the eponymous play is quite happy in the village and has no desire to go back to the mountain. What she finds suffocating is the outdated patriarchal way of living, which has thoroughly changed even her own husband, the shepherd Stiliyan. In most folk tales, the fairy destroys the person she is in love with; in *The Fairy* the evil force that ruins the lover and destroys his spiritual yearning for beauty, turns out to be the very environment he lives in. As the protagonist admits at the end, "You have won the bet, after all, you did not kill me, I was undone by the people around, now I am looking and do not see, I am listening and do not hear"<sup>13</sup>. This new ending of the fairy tale reveals Todorov's individualistic views. In contrast to most post-liberation writers who associated society's moral values with the collective interests, Todorov stresses the individual's striving for self-fulfilment and freedom and his rebellion against the age-old conventions, customs and traditions. That is a new motif in Bulgarian literature reflecting the specific national context of the late nineteenth century - a time marked by the break-down of old moral norms and mores.

The flight of the free spirit that has rebelled against the constricting environment carries strong romantic overtones. But the portrait of the man yearning for the new and the unknown in the face of inexorable fate contains however certain Symbolist motifs. They are characteristic of the Slavic variety of the movement and are absent from francophone Symbolism which foregrounds the mystical and the occult. For example, Russian Symbolists borrow heavily from folk legends in order to express the strong desire to break old-fashioned moral norms and emancipate themselves from the shackles of social conventions. In a similar fashion, Todorov rewrites the folk legends in an attempt to explain the specific historical destiny of his country.

The drama *Masons* tells the legend of master Manol who finally succeeds in completing the collapsing bridge by immuring the shadow of his wife into it. The folk legend ends with the completion of the bridge and the woman's sacrifice. However, Todorov's play continues with the detrimental consequences for the masons who break their vow to immure the first woman who comes to bring

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<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, p. 129.

lunch to her husband. Instead, they immure the bride of their bravest friend who is away fighting the looting gangs of kurjaliis. Besides, he never took the vow with them. In this way, the completed church meant to strengthen the faith of the community, becomes instead the locus of contention and discord. Fearing the shadow of the immured Rada who haunts the church, the peasants would not set foot inside. The bridegroom Christo, who returns home after defeating the plunderers, leaves the village in despair because of his friends' betrayal.

The theme of trespassing conventional moral norms emerges as a leitmotif in the modernist drama. It is treated as a dilemma both within the family and in the community. Doncho, the main culprit for Rada's death, breaks loyalty to family traditions<sup>14</sup>. The peasants' decision to nominate Christo for the leader of the band fighting the brigands triggers Doncho's envy and jealousy because Christo is his rival in love. Doncho refuses to join the band and even surrenders his weapon, which he has inherited from his grandfather, the founder of the village community. The act of surrender is read as a gesture of renunciation of the community itself and he is excluded from the village.

The departure from moral values characterizes the behaviour of quite a few young people. As some of the masons bitterly emphasize, their children betrayed their Christian faith by even adopting Islam. Some of them fight on the side of the Turks and the kurdjali invaders and are described in the play as "our children that dared set fire to their own homes"<sup>15</sup>.

In Todorov's Modernist reading of the folk legends, the theme of apostasy ruining the ideas of one's youth is part and parcel of the leitmotif of betrayal of moral values. Unlike the folk legends about Strahil the Redoubtable voivoda, which celebrate his bravery and defiance of the oppressors, in Todorov's eponymous drama Strahil takes to arms after an unhappy love affair. Milkana, whom he loves and who loves him, elopes with another man to secure herself a safe existence. Thus, she betrays her own youthful ideal for freedom and independence. With Todorov, the idea of betraying love and self-betrayal is matched with the motif of beauty that will rejuvenate the world. While the folk legend ends with the capture of the brave haidout, the drama's finale leads to Strahil's dream to die a beautiful death behoving a haidout's honour - wearing a white shirt and the wind blowing into his hair. Todorov commented that the hero's beautiful death is one of the most fascinating motifs in Bulgarian oral lore<sup>16</sup>.

The device of mixing legends and Biblical stories, fiction and historical facts is another way in which modernistic plays modified the folk story, giving it more general symbolic meaning. The theme of love, which transforms the fearful dragon into a noble man, carries romantic overtones in *Dragon's*

<sup>14</sup> Иванова-Гиргинова, Мариета. *Блянове по модерна драма. (Драматическият проект на Петко Тодоров)*. Изд. център Боян Пенев, София, 2010, с. 147.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Събрани съчинения в 4 тома. Статии*. Op.cit., p. 193.

*Wedding*. The Christian motif of predestination underlying the drama *Strahil the Redoubtable Haidout* is modified into the theme of the morally weak person who wrecks his life.

The syncretism of Todorov's dramas aligns him with the Symbolist poetics. While the francophone authors use syncretism to step up the a-temporal and metaphysical elements in their works, Todorov, similar to other Slavic Symbolists, introduces customs, rites and rituals to add national colour. The working-bee round the bonfire, the festive horo dance on the village square or the lad snatching his lass's bouquet are set in fictional rather than geographical spaces borrowed from folklore. Yet the decor in his plays places their action in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bulgarian village and not in an indefinite past, as it happens in symbolist dramas. This strategy of bringing folklore stories closer to contemporary audiences is unknown neither to the Francophone symbolic drama nor, in a large measure, to the Slavic modernist works.

### **Typology of Dramatis Personae in Petko Todorov and in Symbolist Drama**

Todorov's dramas are inhabited by two types of *personae*: life-like characters and supernatural creatures. They recall the Symbolist drama distancing the works of the Bulgarian author from the local environment and lending them a deeper philosophical meaning. Nonetheless, similarly to Russian and Polish Modernists, Petko Todorov preserves some of the authentic Bulgarian atmosphere. The characters wear national costumes; the fantastic dragons and fairies borrowed from oral lore, live in the Pirin and Balkan Mountains or appear in local villages. The national characteristics of the protagonists is further underscored by their speech, punctuated by archaic, old Bulgarian or dialect words creating the atmosphere of the bygone world of legend.

The tendency to use fantastic beasts from folklore is characteristic of other Slavic writers, but in Todorov's dramas the supernatural creatures resemble real-life humans which detracts from their mystical halo. Thus, the dragon from *Dragon's Wedding*, who rides a miraculously fast green horse, which takes him to his cave in no time, wears an ordinary peasant garb. His human clothes hide the fish scales covering his body and enable him to engage in typically human activities, for example making a bonfire, preparing breakfast or milking the goat. The life of Fairy Gyurga is not very different from that of peasant women either. She tidies up her house, minds her baby and cooks dinner for her husband. The common daily routine humble down the supernatural element, which can be explained with the strong realistic tradition and the underdeveloped Romantic aesthetics in Bulgarian post-Liberation literature. Yet, in the stage directions in the first version of *Masons*, Rada sings a folk song; in the second version, the silhouette of the immured girl is totally silent and vanishes in the darkness.



This change manifests Todorov's intent to enhance the mystical effect quite in line with the poetics of Symbolism.

As far as the human characters, they too fall into two groups in the plays. In the first group are the parochial old-fashioned people with no imagination and dreams who lead a grey and monotonous life. The other group are men of free spirit yearning for the new and the unknown. Christo from *Masons* is one such character who dreams of building a tall church, which will reach the skies instead of the dug-in temple the masons are building, which symbolizes the slave mentality of the people. Rada has had enough of the sheltered life and is fascinated by the call of the wild. Nikola from *Bride Boryana* is haunted by the idea to change the world order by building an enormous cask holding the happiness of all people. Tsena from *Dragon's Wedding* is strongly attracted by the wilderness where no one has set foot; she wants to touch the sunrise and sunset and learn the language of flowers. Strahil wants to hear "the wordless tales of the Balkan Mountains"<sup>17</sup> overwhelming him with their intensity and making him forget reality. It is at such a moment of contemplation that he is caught by the Turks. In the legend, he is killed in a battle, fighting alone against the enemy troops.

The contemplative stance of the dramatis personae and their striving after the unknown recalls the protagonists of the francophone and Slavic Symbolist theatre. Elkana from *Elkana's Parables* by the French Symbolist Gabriel Trarieux leaves her rich home in search of the unknown. German from *The Song of Fate* by the Russian poet and dramatist Alexander Blok is drawn by the invisible force of a mysterious song and takes to the road to find the unknown singer.

Todorov underscores the polarization of his protagonists by the symbolism of their names and by their specific speech. The proud and courageous Christo from *Masons* who was the first to take up arms against the plunderers bears the name of the Saviour, sacrificed his life to redeem the sins of men. The name of the heroine Rada evokes joy.

The speech of the characters is rich in metaphors and reflects their complex inner life. It carries references to the golden light of sunrise, the joyful laughter of spring and the cool fragrance of the deep forest. It is not by accident that they manage to establish an invisible spiritual contact with both mysterious supernatural creatures and with one another.

Even before meeting the Dragon, Tsena could feel the spell of his invisible presence. The moment she lays eyes on him, she voluntarily follows him. The mysterious attraction of souls, characteristic of Symbolist poetics, is emphasized by the Forest Dragon himself, "We only exchanged glances... no words were needed."<sup>18</sup> Such an invisible glamour sparks instantaneously between

<sup>17</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Събрани съчинения в 4 тома. Драми*. Ор. cit., p. 148.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*, p. 229.

Stilyan and Guyrga in the play *The Fairy*. The shepherd enchants the wood nymph with his magic pipe and succeeds in outplaying her and even marrying her. She, for her part, spellbinds him with her fairy eyes so that he completely forgets the world around him.

Unlike them, however, the representatives of the conservative patriarchal world often use traditional folk wisdom, handed down from generation to generation. Their borrowed discourse deprives them of individuality and implies that they do not have an idiom of their own. Sometimes, these characters lack proper names and are generally referred to as “mason one” “mason two”, “boy one”, “girl one”. In this manner, their belonging to the collective is emphasized.

The francophone Symbolist drama also makes use of folk proverbs and sayings but their function is to bring the characters closer to the lost sensibility of the past rather than to convey a moral message, as is the case with Bulgarian drama.

The repetitive, rigid and unchanging patriarchal norms have also a moral dimension, which is quite different from the Symbolists’ philosophical view of life as a series of recurring cycles. The peasants who safeguard the patriarchal mores repeats the life pattern of their ancestors whereas for the spiritually elevated characters repetition involves some evolution as well. By being ready to shelve his family in order to help others, Nikola from *Bride Boryana* takes after his proud father. However, he also dreams of making a huge cask and thereby change the world; something that his father never thought of.

The growth of the creative personalities is mirrored in several pairs of secondary characters. For example, the love between Mad Cap and Kalina in *Strahil the Redoubtable Haidout* recalls the relations between Strahil and Milkana in their youth. Whereas Milkana, who is in love with Strahil, is unable to rise above the patriarchal traditions and continues to live with the memory of her unrealized love, young and bold Kalina stands by Mad Cap’s yearning for a free and unrestrained life. Not only is she determined to follow him, if he goes to the mountain to become a haidout, but is also ready to serve as a standard-bearer of his band. Thus, the spiral-like movement upward marking the actions of the creative individual expresses Petko Todorov’s idea that only the strong and worthy individuals can contribute to human evolution.

The polarization of spiritually developed characters and those representing conservative traditions is absent in francophone Symbolist dramas, but it can be found in Ibsen’s and Blok’s works. However, in Russian drama, the juxtaposition of the two types of characters is on a social rather than on a moral basis, as is in Petko Todorov.

Blok’s characters probe into the unknown and preserve their spiritual purity because they remain close to the ordinary people. Contrariwise, the Bulgarian characters are typically the wealthiest

and most prominent young men and women in the village. They come from respected families and despise the rigidity and stagnancy of patriarchal traditions. Their behaviour expresses Petko Todorov's view about the individual as a bearer of a new morality.

The freethinking Russian characters do not give up their yearning for the unknown notwithstanding the grey monotony of the surrounding world. In contrast, some of the Bulgarian characters do change under the pressure of the daily routine, which reproduces centuries-old patterns. Thus, Stilyan from *The Fairy* completely loses his taste for beauty and forgets all about his yearning for the unknown after he comes back to the village accompanied by his wife. Always frowning and grumpy, he neither feels joy at his young child, nor even talks to his pretty wife, because, as he himself says, "all that we had to say to each other, we already did."<sup>19</sup> His life seems to exemplify his thought reminiscent of a folk proverb, "once you take root in the ground, you may reach the sun up there but sooner or later you will fall over your roots."<sup>20</sup>

The picture of the community is more complex in Petko Todorov's works. Even though its members have adopted patriarchal conventions and customs totally rejecting the individualistic dreams, they are not estranged from moral virtues either. For example, having spared their wives and sacrificed innocent Rada in the church, the masons from the eponymous play are tortured by remorse. Doncho who brought Rada to the church in order to avenge Christo realizes that he has sinned and hangs himself.

The opposition between the strong and independent individual and the patriarchal environment, characteristic of Todorov's individualistic views resembles the Romantic conflict between the hero and the faceless crowd. For its part, the influence of the environment on the character betrays the aesthetics of Realism. This peculiar mixture of diverse aesthetic doctrines in Bulgarian Modernist drama is absent in the francophone Symbolist drama and almost imperceptible in the Slavic symbolist theatre. It is this particular distinction that sets apart Todorov's characters.

### **Dramatic Action**

The dramatic action in Petko Todorov's works follows the structural principles of Symbolist drama yet it has its own specifics.

Unlike the traditional play, which abounds in logically related events, the action in Todorov's Modernist dramas does not develop in a clearly defined pattern. There are no strong dramatic clashes

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<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, p. 109.

and conflicts between the characters either. The external dynamics so characteristic of the conventional stage are superseded by the inner tension, anxiety and undefined aspirations of the dramatis personae.

Thus, the action in *Strahil the Redoubtable Haidout* and *Bride Boryana* is reduced to a long conversation in which the beginning and ending almost coincide. The only event in the first play, the meeting between the haidout captured by the Turks and his once beloved Milkana, happens at the very outset of the play. The dialogue between the two constitutes the centre of the play but does not result in any additional action. No new characters appear that may generate further change. All five dramatis personae, priest Nikola, his daughter-in-law Milkana, his daughter Kalina, her lover Mad Cap, and Strahil vojvoda stay on the stage until the very end of the scene. The lack of external events is substituted by the nostalgic story about youth that has passed and hopes that have been frustrated. This story causes rising anxiety in Strahil and Milkana's souls.

There is no external dramatic tension in *Bride Boryana* as well. The play opens with Nikola's absence from his native home and closes with his decision to leave it again. Thus, the only event, Nikola's return to his young wife Boryana and their young child, his mother and his foster father, ending with his departure, harks back to the initial situation. The conflict between the cask maker, who wants to make the whole world happy, and his family clinging to the routine of patriarchal conventions, does not change either. Yet, this conflict determines Boryana's growing anxiety and torments later in the play. She is unable to understand the aspiring soul of her husband. The young wife does not realize that the reason for his alienation derives from the monotonous routine of the patriarchal traditions rather than from lack of love for her. The psychological gap between Nikola and his family is deepening and this is what steps up the inner tension in the play. The rest of Todorov's dramas also centre on the emotional tension between the characters thus lending a static quality to them. The main events happen outside the stage.

In *Masons*, all important elements of the intrigue - the atrocities of the kurdjalis, the invasion of the village, the heroic resistance of the Bulgarian band led by Christo, which makes possible the completion of the church, even the immuring of Rada into its foundations - they all are told by the characters rather than shown on the stage. In *Dragon Wedding*, the audience cannot see the fantastic dragon riding a winged horse and leading Tsena away from the village. The peasants' approach to the Dragon cave that the enamoured couple is watching with growing alarm is not shown either.

The preponderance of narrative over action is clearly visible in the way the dramatist reworked his own dramas. As critics<sup>21</sup> point out, Todorov reduces events in favour of the dramatic tension in his characters.

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<sup>21</sup> Иванова-Гиргинова, Мариета. Op.cit., p. 102.

The new dramatic structure mentioned by the first students<sup>22</sup> of Todorov's plays suggests the influence of Symbolist poetics. It foregrounds the subtle trepidations of the human souls, their mysterious attractions, their relationships with unknown forces and worlds rather than the visible reality that Symbolist artists tend to deemphasize.

Nonetheless, unlike the francophone Symbolist plays, the events outside the stage, albeit hidden from the audience, are not totally detached from the stage either. They are usually told by the participants in them or by accidental eyewitnesses and not by stories heard by someone quite by chance as it happens in Maeterlinck's plays. For example, in *Masons*, the onslaught of the Turks is represented through the appearance of a large group of peasants running away from the intruder. In *The Fairy* the fantastic wood creatures tell about the life of the shepherd in the mountain but the stage only shows life in the village.

The plethora of events concentrated in a short span of time also contributes to the dynamic unfolding of the individual scenes. Thus, in *Masons*, all actions, from the threat of invasion hanging over the village to the deceit of the builders who sacrifice the bride of their brave friend, are packed into three consecutive days in September. The contrast between the three acts full of external events and the static fourth act strengthens the sense of external dynamics in the beginning of the play. The ending is fraught with inner tension: it takes place a month later when the church is already completed and the masons are full of remorse because they are becoming increasingly aware of their sin.

Similarly, to Symbolist poetics, the events of the action hidden from the audience de-emphasize the actions of the behaviour of the Bulgarian characters and shift the attention towards the Symbolist view that one is unable to attain the invisible truth of being; appearance is all one can see.

In *The Fairy* Stilyan's decision to leave his beloved fairy Gyurga instead of going back to life in the mountain is hard to explain all the more so that earlier on Stilyan rebels against his mother who stands for the patriarchal family. Gyurga's behaviour is no less strange. She has waited for the return of her husband more than a year before she decides to go find him. Besides, it is she, not the shepherd, who is used to life in the woods. She needs his support badly because she is carrying his child. Later on, she takes care of the baby herself.

The absence of clear motivation in the characters' behaviour is emphasized in the peculiar kind of dramatic dialogue. It is dominated by small talk about everyday life and the patriarchal routine and is not in any way connected with the dramatic intrigue. Against this background, the important verbal conflicts between the characters are not highlighted. Rather, they are strangely played down. In *The Fairy*, the relations between the shepherd Stilyan, the fairy Gyurga and young Boiko are quite fuzzy.

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<sup>22</sup> *Idem*, p. 96.

The audience is at a loss about whether Stilyan wouldn't let his wife dance a horo because he is jealous of Boiko or because he resents her free spirit and is vexed by her desire to have fun. Even the conflict between Doncho and Christo in *Masons* rooted in love and morality, is not developed through long verbal exchanges. On the one hand, the two characters rarely meet on the stage; on the other, even when they do, their dialogue is often interrupted by quarrels between masons.

The new dramatic structure of Todorov's plays close to Symbolist poetics determines the new type of exposition and inception. In Bulgarian Modernist dramas, like in Symbolist theatre the exposition is not only laconic and incomplete but tends to dissolve in the entire text. Instead of explaining the initial intrigue bearing on the relations between the dramatis personae in the past, and motivating the ensuing development, it focuses on the vague beginning hereby implying the illusoriness of visible reality.

In *Bride Boryana*, Nikola's frequent absences from home, where his young wife and young kid expect him, describe him as an irresponsible guy, a drunkard and a good-for nothing. It is not until the very end of the play that it becomes clear that his behaviour has been driven by his ambition to make a huge cask that will hold the entire world, and rivers of human happiness will flow therefrom.

The first scene of *Masons* does not make clear how the construction of the church was started; nor is it mentioned that it was destroyed by the kurdjalis. It is not until the second act that the rivalry between Doncho and Christo for Rada's heart surfaces to become the main line of the dramatic story. In *The Fairy* it is only after the dialogue between the fairies in the second act that the love between Stilyan and Gyurga is revealed and ultimately leads to their marriage.

The denouement of the dramatic action in Todorov's works is ambiguous as well. Its function is to show the tragic lot of the characters, their shattered hopes rather than resolve the conflicts between them. This explains why the absence of a clearly defined finale has invited so many different interpretations.

The fate of the builders in *Masons* who complete the church but immure an innocent victim into its foundations appears undefined. True, they realize the sin they have committed but the question whether their remorse will unite them or separate them remains unanswered. Therefore, Dr. Kristev's view<sup>23</sup> that the characters have undergone a change of heart cannot be unequivocally accepted. The ending of *The Fairy* is ambivalent too. The fairy Gyurga leaves the shepherd Stoyan and her child, joining Boiko on the village horo but her future remains open. It is hard to predict whether she will stay in the village and continue to have fun or will go back to her sisters in the mountain.

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<sup>23</sup> Кръстев, Кр. Op.cit.

The new structure of the intrigue in the Bulgarian plays where the exposition and denouement are not clearly delineated resembles the poetics of Symbolism and creates the impression of action that has neither a beginning nor an ending. Rather, it is part of the eternal cycle of life.

On the other hand, similarly to the rather unclear exposition, a number of elements of the Bulgarian dramas shift the emphasis onto the dramatic action and strengthen the fragmentariness and incompleteness of the denouement. Such elements can be excerpts from folk songs repeatedly sung on the stage, individual lines uttered as if unconsciously by the characters, accounts of dreams that subsequently are shown on the stage etc.

In the first conversation with her mother, Tsena from *Dragon Wedding* reveals that she is going to elope with the Forest Dragon who will take her to his cave. Her casually uttered words can be found in the folk song that she sings later on at the working bee.

Why are you marrying me, mother,  
Without first asking me  
If I want to marry?  
A forest dragon, mother, has fallen in love with me<sup>24</sup>.

These words will be confirmed by the dramatic action that ends with the picture in the dragon cave where Tsena dies saving her beloved dragon from her brothers who have come to kill him.

The folk song that opens *Strahil the Redoubtable Haidout* introduces the theme of death. The two lines sound like a summary of the entire play, which is about the wasted love between Milkana and Strahil. Strahil is on the brink of death, whereas Milkana loses her first child. In *Masons* Christo often refers to the church, dug into the ground by the builders in observance with the Turkish laws, as “a grave”. Initially, he uses the word metaphorically but towards the end of the play, it is literalized anticipating the tragic ending. The church becomes a place of death: Rada is immured into its foundations, Doncho hangs himself on the cross, and the unity of the village is destroyed. In other words, the church and the immured victim completely fail to accomplish their moral mission.

In sum, this type of structure changes the customary place of the denouement. Also it highlights the motif of the predestination of life which is driven by unknown forces the characters are unable to oppose. This view common in Symbolist dramas incorporates the Bulgarian plays into the context of European aesthetics.

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<sup>24</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Събрани съчинения в 4 тома. Драми*. Op.cit., p. 198.

### Genre characteristics

The new type of dramatic structure in Todorov's works transcends the conventional division of literary forms and brings them close to the European Symbolist drama.

On the one hand, the Bulgarian Modernist plays employ lyrical and epic elements, untypical of the theatre, that supersede the conventional theatrical event. On the other, these elements also rely on various auditory and visual effects that often suggest the course of the action and have an emotional impact, following Wagner's principle of the synthesis of music, dance and painting.

Each of the five dramas by Todorov are centred on one basic picture with a symbolic meaning. The latter sums up the main theme and makes the message clearer. Similarly, to the European Symbolist dramas, in the Bulgarian plays the symbol has multiple meanings and carries a philosophical message. It contains various oppositions and fuses the real and the fantastic, the earthly and the unearthly.

The entire content of *Masons* is synthesized in the symbolism of the church under construction. In observance with the Turkish law, it is below ground level and only the cross is above ground. Thus, from the very beginning the church has a twofold and rather contradictory reference: a temple of God erected to support spiritually the Bulgarians during the Ottoman rule and a metaphor of the community, but also a grave implying death. The latter association is further strengthened by the immuring of an innocent victim into the church's foundations in violation of the masons' oath. It is no accident that Doncho, abandoned by everyone as the main culprit for the girl's death, hangs himself on the cross. Rada's shadow the peasants see after the church is completed lends the temple a mystical and fantastic aura. The fact that the people are afraid to enter it implies that it cannot perform its designated function. Instead of turning the people to God, the church strengthens their growing sense of guilt for the sin they have committed. The church fails to perform its religious and moral mission<sup>25</sup>.

The drama *Dragon Wedding* uses the symbolism of the cave tucked in the deep forest recesses and inhabited by a dragon. The first act describes the cave as a fantastic place where one can never feel hungry because of the incredible beauty surrounding it. In the morning, the sun shines on it first; in the night caravans of stars pass over it. In the second act the cave provides the main scenic background and its fairy tale nature is emphasized by its interior, composed of black rocks, tree trunks covered with moss and fern, the herbs sticking out of the rock's cracks.

The cave located high up in the mountain commands a magnificent view of the whole world and creates a sense of freedom. It is in opposition to the blackened stubble-fields in the valley

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<sup>25</sup> Рақъовски, Цветан. „Образът на автора и образите на езика, Петко Ю. Тодоров (1879-1916)” - Електронно списание *LiterNet*, № 12 (109), [http://liternet.bg/publish4/crakiovski/p\\_todorov.htm](http://liternet.bg/publish4/crakiovski/p_todorov.htm) (11.05.2018)



standing for the stagnant and conservative patriarchal ways of life that will destroy Tsena who elopes with the dragon.

In *The Fairy* the symbolism of the barred windows at once wide open to the external world stands for the main conflict in the play – that between the stagnant and conservative patriarchal ways followed by the mother-in-law, and the aspirations for spiritual freedom, beauty and liberty characteristic of the young fairy bride Gyurga.

Similarly to the symbolist dramas, the auditory background accompanying the scenes in all of Todorov's plays complements the visual symbols and creates a specific atmosphere which underpins the development of the dramatic action.

Throughout the first act of *Masons*, there is a noise background created by the voices of the arguing builders, now becoming louder, now subsiding, although it is not clear what they are arguing about. The noise creates the impression of cyclic recurrence and anticipates the failure of the builders to reach understanding in the name of unity. Arguing voices coming from without can also be heard during the meeting between Rada and Christo. Those voices suggest that it is the external environment that will ultimately determine the characters' fate.

The sound background of the second act creates a sense of growing menace of the kurdjali invasion. It starts with the slamming of village doors and ends with the clamour of people from the neighbouring village running away from the brigands.

On the one hand, the third act unfolds against the background of gunshots coming with alternating force from the battle between the bravest young men from the village and the kurdjalis; and, on the other, amidst the permanent noise from the construction of the church - blowing of hammers, hewing of stones etc. The mounting danger makes the builders take an oath that they would immure the first woman that comes to the construction site into the church foundations so as to preserve the temple from destruction. The betrayal of the masons who sacrifice the bride of the bravest young man is emphasized by the screams of Rada crushed under the falling scaffolding.

Unlike the first three acts of *Masons*, the last one does not have a sound background. The contrast derives from the main theme in that act: the growing remorse of the builders on All Souls Day when they feel that the shadow of the innocent victim is haunting the church.

Along with the visual and auditory elements that enrich the staging of the plays, their innovative genre form is further enhanced by the unconventional textual structure. Unlike the traditional stage directions, usually concise and neutral, the Bulgarian Modernist dramas contain long and detailed accounts of the inner states of the characters, their behaviour on the stage, their clothes, even their past. There are also detailed descriptions of landscape, the atmosphere they evoke as well as the theatrical

props. This is a new type of stage directions containing epithets, similes and metaphors. They express the subjective approach of the narrator and resemble the lyrical and epic descriptions in fiction.

The specific text structure of the plays made of literary descriptions and dialogues brings them close both to the narrative genre of the novel and lyrical poetry.

The new lyrical-cum-epic dramatic form introduced by P. Todorov in Bulgarian literature accounts for the various definitions the author himself and his followers from the *Misal* circle attach to his plays: “dramatic epilogue”<sup>26</sup>, “song”<sup>27</sup>, “beautiful idyll”<sup>28</sup>, “tragedy with a poetic ending”<sup>29</sup>. As a Bulgarian critic and contemporary of Todorov points out, the lyrical element in Todorov’s plays prevails over the dramatic. If we assume that drama is what can be staged, these are not proper dramas; they are more like folk songs in prose<sup>30</sup>.

The use of narrative and lyrical forms in the Bulgarian Modernist drama brings it close to the Symbolist theatre. The new theatrical structure departs from the traditional division of genres and relies on the artist’s intuition in fathoming the world, unrestricted by formal conventions. Small wonder that Petko Todorov’s contemporaries considered his plays to be Symbolist dramas imitating a foreign model. The playwright himself defines *Masons* created in Munich as “the first modern drama written in Bulgarian.”<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

Petko Todorov’s dramas are a peculiar combination of Symbolist poetics and influences of the Bulgarian national context. What makes Bulgarian Modernist works akin to the francophone Symbolist model is the new interpretation of folk motifs; the unconventional structure of the dramatic action and dialogue; the wide use of music and painting in the staging of the plays as well as their new genre form. On the other hand, the moral dimension and the pervading national atmosphere in the Bulgarian dramas betray their indebtedness to the Russian Symbolist drama, especially Alexander Blok. The de-emphasized role of the fantastic characters and the playing down of Romantic and realistic elements in Petko Todorov bespeak of a connection with the national traditions. All these features were totally unknown to the European Symbolist theatre.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem*, 131.

<sup>27</sup> Славейков, П. П. „Блянове на модерен поет”, in *Мисъл*, 13, г. 1903, кн. 3-4 ; in: Сугарев, Е., Димитрова, Е., Атанасова, Цв. (съст.), *Критическото наследство на българския модернизъм*, том I, Институт за литература, БАН, София, Изд. център Б.Пенев 2009, 63.

<sup>28</sup> *Idem*, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *Събрани съчинения в 4 тома. Писма*, op.cit., 330, 414.

<sup>30</sup> Ганев, Стоян. „Драмата и бъдещето ѝ в нашата литература”. In: *Българска сбирка*, кн. 5, 1911, 301.

<sup>31</sup> Тодоров, Петко Ю. *idem*, 414.

The analysis of Petko Todorov's dramas demonstrates the original style of the Bulgarian author, which paved the way for the development of the Bulgarian Symbolist theatre.