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Balkan Routes: Sofia – Athens. Literary interpretations of the 1920s and 1930s¹

The paper will focus on different literary interpretations of the 1920s and 1930s that thematize travelling routes from Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, to Athens, the Greek capital. It explores little known Bulgarian literary texts that give the opportunity to construct a relatively conditioned poetical image of the road to Athens (that follows the methodology and proposed theory of the term “poetics” by the Bulgarian-French historian and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov). The aim of the research is to examine how one Balkan culture (the Bulgarian one) interprets another (the Greek one) through the eyes of the travelling person in the interwar period. In this article I argue that the Balkan route to Athens is construed by Bulgarian authors in two senses: on the one hand, as an enthusiastic experience with the dynamics of the new; and on the other hand, as a desirable escape from the anxiety of the modern world in the silence of antiquity.

Key words: Balkan routes, travelling, interwar literature, Athens, 1920s, 1930s, steamship, airplane

Introduction

With its geographical location Greece has a relatively central place on the Balkans. From historical point of view Greece has “distinct cultural physiognomy” and is also placed as “central for the Balkan cosmos” (Todorova 2009: 44). During the past half century Greece has politically positioned itself as the first Balkan country and Orthodox member that entered the European Union in 1981 with the feel of “a particular responsibility for the stability of the Balkans” (Todorova 2009: 45). However, Greece is not seen as a typical Balkan country; it is also not so widely connected with

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the orientalism² despite of its shared borders and historical proximity to the Asian continent and culture. 19th and 20th century Greece is most often seen through the idea of philhellenism, given the retrospective of its ancient past – “the shared solidarity of public opinion in the West during the years of the Greek national uprising [which] affected various domains, from political activism, art and literature to aspects of social and even everyday life, given that it became something of a vogue” (Tolias 2016: 52). Although Bulgaria stands aside from the philhellenism ideas of the West because of historical, political and social reasons, its cultural interest on its southern “neighbour” is kept alive through the centuries. This paper will focus on the Bulgarian viewpoint of the Greek capital from 1920s and 1930s. The image of Athens is preserved in the Bulgarian interwar literature. The cultural significance of the capital is endorsed by the well established Balkan route Sofia – Athens.

Bulgarian-Greek relations – historical and cultural context

The Bulgarian-Greek relations during the modern era are marked by large common history as both countries were part of the Ottoman Empire. Their coexistence with the religiously and ethnically different Ottomans as well as within the Ottoman millet system caused various intergroup tensions. During the Bulgarian National Revival at 19th century an independent Bulgarian Exarchate was promulgated in 1870 as a result of many difficult quarrels, caused by the fact that the Bulgarians were previously subordinated to the Greek Orthodox Church. Additional tensions were caused by the nationalistic tendencies of both peoples and the Greek claims over the Balkan territories as part of their Megali Idea during the 19th century. It was aiming at reviving the Byzantine Empire by establishing a Greek state, which would include the large Greek populations. The Megali Idea created even more animosities, because within the Ottoman Empire the Greeks and the Bulgarians were mixed and shared the same territories. Nevertheless, various diplomatic efforts as well as many political and commercial endeavours originating from both sides tried to establish close, albeit difficult at times, Bulgarian-Greek relations.

As part of these relations there was a steady and noticeable interest to visit the neighbouring country and experience its cultural atmosphere. Between the two World wars Athens is seen by the Bulgarian travellers as a key European cultural area with its historical and ancient Greek heritage. At that time Athens is a modern and developing European city with a population of almost one million. The Greek capital outstands with its specific cultural identity which

² In his book “Orientalism” Edward Said explores the presence of Classical Greece in the Western representations of the Orient (Said 1977).

attracts many international visitors – tourists and explorers, who are fascinated by its multiplicity and the diversity of its ancient architectural monuments. For the Bulgarians Greece is both geographically close but also culturally distant/different. Its ancient history contributes to the space of Greece as a loaded with rich myth-making potential that is linked to European roots and generally to the primacy of humanity.

The Bulgarian interest to the Greek mythology is revived in the inter-war decades – this statement can be proven by the fact that in the Bulgarian artworks the Greek cultural reality becomes a highlighted motif of many described literary travels. The 20th century Athens through the sight of the Bulgarian traveller is depicted as a place of a flourishing intercultural dialogue and as a synthesis of antiquity and modernity. Many of the city's temporal and cultural vibrations are layered and interconnected on its territory. Athens is an area, just like any other urban area, that boils from “spraying forces from which the most unexpected new worlds appear” (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 2000: 260).

In this article I argue that the Balkan route to Athens is construed by Bulgarian authors in two senses: on the one hand, as an enthusiastic experience with the dynamics of the new; and on the other hand, as a desirable escape from the anxiety of the modern world in the silence of antiquity. In the article “Man and machine” (1933) Nikolay Berdyaev points as one of the leading human traits the ability to “contemplate the eternity”. Berdyaev emphasizes the rupture, “the mismatch between the mental organization of man, inherited from past times, and the new, the technical, the mechanical reality” (Berdyaev 1945: 25). According to him, technical civilization destroys the personality: “The technical civilization, by its being, is impersonalistic, [...] *it wants the activity of the person, but it doesn't want him to be a personality*” (Berdyaev 1945: 55, cursive – N. B.). It can be said that the image of ancient and modern Athens in Bulgarian literature context is established as a specific type of magnetic area that helps to protect human personality from the dehumanizing effect of the new technical reality.

Theoretical framework and methodology

The aim of this article is to explore little known Bulgarian literary texts from 1920s and 1930s that give the opportunity to construct a relatively conditioned poetical image of the road to Athens. I will briefly outline the theoretical approach that will be used. It relies on the term “poetics”, proposed as a theory of the structure and functioning of the literary discourse by Tzvetan Todorov. The poetics is both an “abstract” and an “internal” attitude to literature:

Initially there are two attitudes to be distinguished: one sees the literary text itself as a sufficient object of knowledge; the other considers each individual text as the manifestation of an abstract structure. [...] These two options are not, as we shall see, incompatible, we can even say that they achieve a necessary complementarity; nonetheless, depending on whether we emphasize one or the other, we can clearly distinguish between the two tendencies. (Todorov 1997: 3)

The famous Bulgarian-French historian and philosopher Todorov states that each work should be seen as the manifestation of an abstract and general structure, of which it is but one of the possible realizations (Todorov 1997: 7). Todorov proposes that the goal of the analyst is not the description of the particular work and the designation of its meaning, but the establishment of general laws of which this particular text is the product. Moreover, “the object is no longer the particular phenomenon but [...] the law that the phenomenon illustrates” (Todorov 1997: 6). This article will not interpret the artworks solely as an example of a static, complete image of the road – it will examine them in the terms of their potential to model and document how the poetical image of the road to Athens changes in the Bulgarian literary and historical context. Moreover, the analysis focuses on the details in the description of the path in the literary texts, as it aims to identify the uniqueness of the travelling experience, which actually assumes every single journey that is taken.

The journey to Athens – sea and air voyages

In the Bulgarian literature from the 1920s and the 1930s the interest in the Greek capital Athens as a popular tourist destination is illustrated by a number of works of literature, a selection of which will be discussed in this paper.

In 1926 the travel book “An excursion to Constantinople and Athens” („Една екскурзия до Цариград и Атина“) is published by the author Anton Dinev. In 1930 the travel notes “In southern countries” („Изюжните страни“) by Andrey Markovich are issued in three parts – the first of which entitled “From Sofia to Athens” („От София до Атина“). In 1937, in the first issue of “Covenants” („Завети“) magazine, is printed “With “Lot” to Athens” („С „Лот“ до Атина“) from the famous Bulgarian writer Dora Gabe, which includes her travel notes to the Greek capital. In the same year yet another author, Boyan Bolgar, publishes his travel book “Alive or dead Athens, or, We, the People” („Жива и мъртва Атина, или Ние Хората“). A few months later in 1938, the book “Dreams near Acropolis” („Блянове край Акропола“) written by Dimitar Shishmanov is announced. Greece – “oeil du monde habitable” – eye of the habitable world, according to Pierre de Ronsard’s definition

(Ronsard 1623: 713), brings the focus of the Bulgarian tourist, explorer and reader in the conceptual center – the Greek capital Athens – “*imago mundi*” or a generalized image of the world that is capable of embodying the whole cosmic reality (Colina 2002: 214).

The paper will observe the existing traveling routes from Sofia to Athens in the 1920s and 1930s, which were used by Bulgarians to reach and explore the Greek culture. The primary source of our discussion is the Bulgarian interwar literature. The books mentioned above show us what are the available and preferred routes to Athens and by what means the modern man travels to Greece. In the earlier texts from the 1920s by Anton Dinev and Andrey Markovich Bulgarians reach the South after a three-day sea voyage as it was popular to travel by a steamship. The texts from the second half of the 1930s, written by Dora Gabe and Dimitar Shishmanov, offer an alternative, which allowed the traveller to overcome the distance in a few hours by air. Thus the air travel in 1930s became more popular. The texts illustrate that in the interwar period there were two Balkan routes that offered the traveller different types of *road experience*.

The sea voyage in Anton Dinev’s book starts from the Bulgarian city Burgas, then passes through a number of key geographical locations: Bosphorus – Istanbul – The Dardanelles, and finally, reaches the Greek port city Piraeus, also known as the “harbour” of Athens. From Piraeus “with the electric railway for half an hour under bridges and tunnels we arrive in the centre of Athens”³ (Dinev 1926: 20). In Andrey Markovich’s travel notes “From Sofia to Athens” the journey starts from the Bulgarian city Varna, through Anhialo (Pomorie), to Burgas, and after that the route follows the former one mentioned above.

The description of the steamship in the two books differs in the way the ship is understood. In Andrey Markovich’s book the steamship is described as subordinate to the sea: steamship “Bulgaria” is “pleasantly swinging”, it is “slightly sliding through the smooth surface of the calm sea”. On the other hand, Anton Dinev’s book suggests that the steamship rules over the sea: “King Ferdinand” not only “slowly curves”, but also “progresses rapidly”, “pores the waves” and fights with them. Moreover, the steamship “King Ferdinand” gives a sense of security to the passenger: “the stormy sea is very scary at night, but when a person knows that he is in a safe place, the fear is replaced by wonder” (Dinev 1926: 7).

While on the steamship the tourist gazes the horizon and the panorama. The eyes follow the merger of the blue sea and the brighter blue sky, and the twinkling stars in the background. The tourist gaze also notices every landmark

³ The translations from the Bulgarian travelling texts are made by me.

that the steamship passes. In Anton Dinev's book these are, among others, Terapia, Yeniköy, Sarayburnu between Istanbul and Skoutari, the Prince Islands. Moreover, in Andrey Markovich's book the reader is introduced to the Medieval fortress of Rumelihisarı and Haydarpasha on the Asian coast. The tourist eyes carefully follow every detail and change that appears while the steamship is moving. It should be noted that the two books emphasize two different types of tourist behaviour. In Anton Dinev's book the traveller is enthusiastic about the sea: "I am going to the deck and, nailed to one place, I am watching the silent sea" (Dinev 1926: 14). Also, the tourist exclaims: "There is hardly anything better than the sunrise at sea" (Dinev 1926: 8). In Andrey Markovich's book, the explorer focuses on the Bosphorus panorama: "For almost three hours the steamship moves between wonderfully beautiful places that are lushly covered with splendid flora. One simply wonders where to stop his sight." (Markovich 1930: 16). The tourist is delighted furthermore by the equally beautiful view of Galatasaray, Istanbul and Üsküdar on the Asian coast.

These two books about traveling to Athens by sea can be seen as a representation of one common route. However, in each one of them the tourist perceives the exciting role of an explorer in a unique way. The "lightning swell" of the sea and the "pleasant swinging" of the steamship from the texts of the 1920s shifts in the later texts of the 1930s by the impressions of the buzzing electric engine of the "light aluminium bird" flying from the sky.

In Dora Gabe and Dimitar Shishmanov's texts a similar and distinctive tourist route can be noted as well. Travelling to Athens with an airplane named "Lot" in Dora Gabe's text is described with some key geographical topoi – "caught" by the eye of the travelling person through the airplane's window. After departing from Sofia airport the airplane flies over the Bulgarian mountains Vitosha, Rila and Pirin and reaches Thessaloniki airport. After a short break the tourist is back in the air where he sees Mount Athos, Skiathos island and he finally arrives at the main destination – Athens. In Dimitar Shishmanov's "Dreams near Acropolis" the reader gets familiar with a similar route, described in a reverse order, while the tourist flies back from Athens to the Bulgarian capital Sofia. The tourist's eye spots successively the Skiathos island, the peaks of Olympus, Mount Athos, and again after a short break on Thessaloniki's airport the human eye focuses on the peaks of Pirin and Rila mountains before the traveller reaches Sofia airport. The journey to Greece and back to Bulgaria, on the one hand, takes place on a well-established and technically tailored routes. On the other hand, the above-mentioned geographical landmarks are helping the Self to tune up to a different type of cultural perception. Moreover, they sharpen his sensitivity to the "known" and "foreign", the present and past.

Flying on an airplane gives a completely new perspective to the tourist's gaze. When travelling by sea, the human sight is shifting upwards (towards the sky): "We look up, it is yet blue, deep, transparent and infinite sky, which merges with the blue colour of the sea" (Markovich 1930: 35). When travelling on air, the human sight is focusing downwards (towards the ground): "We fly over Struma river, but I do not see it – my eyes are focusing in the royal chain of Pirin mountain" (Gabe 1937: 5). While travelling by steamship the person finds himself in/between the changing landscape and manages to "photograph" the geographic landmarks from a certain but always partial angle, whereas when taking the route Sofia – Athens by airplane, the human eye manages to get the distance that is needed to observe the geographical objects with an approximate completeness.

Changing the perspective also changes the person's understanding of the world. Andrey Markovich's work places an emphasis on the sense of the human insignificance in front of the natural elements: "Something is trembling in your soul when you remember that you stand in the midst of two elements: sea and sky; and how minor, how little we are in this vast sea" (Markovich 1930: 35). In addition, it should be noted that travelling by sea calls for human exhilaration and admiration both to the "big ocean giants" and the "small coast steamers" that meet on the Piraeus port "the flags of marine countries from all over the world" (Markovich 1930: 37). While travelling on air, described in Dora Gabe's text it can be noticed that emotions of enthusiasm and excitement again are transmitted. Unlike the sea voyage the Bulgarian tourist seems to "catch up" and to feel equal with the natural elements when traveling by an airplane: "The white peaks lean on the white clouds. We swim beside them as equals and take part in a solemn air procession" (Gabe 1937: 5).

One travels in order to "multiply the worlds within the Self, to compare their fragile existence" (Stefanov 2000: 153), to enrich and widen the horizons of its sensitive perceptiveness. The Balkan route Sofia – Athens by airplane changes the reflection of time by enlarging the feeling of short-termed human existence in the world as well as the culture timelessness of the places visited: "I had breakfast in Sofia, then lunch in Athens, and by evening I will climb to Acropolis and for a few minutes only I will have travelled two and a half thousand years back in time" (Gabe 1937: 10).

Inside Athens urban area and ancient routes

The image of modern dynamics is continued naturally on Athens territory where the Bulgarian traveller goes on tours by different means of transport, e.g. trams and cars. The image of Greek capital through the Bulgarian tourist's

gaze is a result of many impressions of the Greek buildings and architectural monuments which are seen, and the streets and boulevards which are crossed.

In Bulgarian literary works Athens is defined solidly as a well-planned city with “straight streets, wide asphalted boulevards, with marble curbs” (Markovich 1930: 41). Moreover, it has “beautiful buildings, [...] clean and smooth as mirror streets” (Dinev 1926: 27). According to Boyan Bolgar’s work “Alive or dead Athens”, “the current Athenian street with the tram of its trams and buses, with its distinctive breath of petrol and tar, with its asphalt and advertisements in light, with its innumerable crowd, it acquires the taste of a big city” (Bolgar 1937: 113). The notion of the “big city” connects organically in the perception of the Bulgarian tourist with the turbines and the Diesel engines, which take away the person’s tranquillity. They provoke the narrator to say that “we and our “aerodynamic mechanics” behave like savages in front of the ancient [Greek] statues that teach us to feel that peacefulness that is actually the humanity itself” (Bolgar 1937: 73). The numerous Greek monuments and buildings, which preserve the wisdom and experience of the ancient person, distinguish the Greek capital from the universal image of the technical city, that is immanent to the “mechanized society” (N. Berdyaev). They lead to the natural build-up of balance and harmony between the old ancient and the new modern. Thus, on the Athens territory the travelling person gets the opportunity to blend in with the crowd of the big city as well as to find solitude within the magnificence of the ancient temples.

The tourist route, represented in the Bulgarian interwar literature, follows the main sights from the modern and ancient architecture of Athens. The tour starts from the central square of the city and passes through the National Library of Greece, The Academy of Athens, and the National Archaeological Museum of Athens – buildings which imitate the ancient Greek style. Then the tourist reaches the true “attractive force of Athens” – according to Andrey Markovich’s work – not the modern appearance of the city but “the remainings of ancient Athens” that are gathered around the hill of the Acropolis (Markovich 1930: 51). The majestic Acropolis of Athens when illuminated by the setting sun “shines like some brilliants of a tiara, placed over the beautiful head of Athens” (Markovich 1930: 66). The course of this reflection is continued in Boyan Bolgar’s work where he concludes that “the fate” of modern Greece is that the country’s present would be diminished and everyone will be staring at the country’s past (Bolgar 1937: 117).

In the book “Dreams near Acropolis” by Dimitar Shishmanov the outlined division through the tourist’s gaze between modern and ancient Athens, that is clearly stated in Andrey Markovich and Boyan Bolgar’s works, loses its relevance. In “Dreams near Acropolis” there is no conflict between the old/ancient and the new/modern and they both merge in the overall/general picture

of the city: “There were a few people in the garden near the tavern. They were sat near the wobbly tables [...] all of them were silently watching the silver silhouette of the Parthenon, which seemed to be sculpted not from marble, but from some other – unknown and breezy – precious material” (Shishmanov 2009: 87). When presenting the modern life of Athens in “Dreams near Acropolis”, Yordan Badev notes in a review about the book that “the antiquity is not just some dead décor, it is constantly projected in the souls of the people described in one way or another” (Badev 1938: 8). The book “Dreams near Acropolis” concentrates on the ancient which embeds perfectly in the architecture of the present urban area of the city as an expression of the continuity between the past, present and future.

The image of the Acropolis, positioned in the title “Dreams near Acropolis” by Dimitar Shishmanov, is a central topos of the Greek culture. The book represents in details the corpus of the buildings and monuments, in which is sealed with two-thousand-year history. Through the eyes of the Bulgarian travellers, the Acropolis is the guardian of history, an artifact that retains memories of the past. The focus on the ancient poses the questions of the beauty, the nature and the divinity. In the “Living and dead Athens” the Acropolis is the place where “pure contemplation and logical construction should harmonise with each other” (Bolgar 1937: 140). On Boyan Bolgar’s “Alive or dead Athens” book, viewing the Parthenon – main monument of the Acropolis, evokes a sense of completeness, spiritual ease and wholeness. The Parthenon and its “singing geometry” come in line with the city’s perspective, giving it a general perception of stability and “extra-terrestrial balance”. In front of the Parthenon’s nobleness, the traveller feels both humble and winged, while recognising in the view the distinguishing characteristics of the Greek genius – “combined with measure, true to nature, in harmony with its essence” (Bolgar 1937: 133). The Acropolis and the Parthenon in Athens, as an artistic realization, are an expression of the high achievements of ancient Greek architectural, sculptural and creative thought. Their contemplation engages the Bulgarian traveller not only with the understanding of beauty of mathematical accuracy and architectural symmetry; but also towards the conception of human moderation and calmness.

Conclusion

In conclusion it should be noted that the poetics of the road to Athens is connected to the laws of modernity and the technical changes and improvements through the interwar decades. The Bulgarian literature from the 1920s and the 1930s, dedicated to the Balkan route Sofia – Athens, allows us to get a detailed picture of the tourist’s journey to the Greek capital. Travelling on a

steamship to Greece is seen as a well-established and safe travel method. On the other hand, travelling by air is presented as a relatively new and enjoyable experience that captures the imagination of the travelers and inspires their writings. Regardless of how these travelers reached their destination, once they are in Athens their attention is grasped by the same topoi. The literary image of the Greek capital preserves its main connection to the Hellenic past and the tourist's itineraries follow the ancient roads that correspond with the Bulgarian interest in the antiquity – its monuments and specific atmosphere. The presented books contain both factual details about the city's architecture and its streets and buildings as well as the spontaneous stories and impressions of the Bulgarians, in which prevails the charm of the ancient culture of the city.

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**Balkanske rute: Sofija–Atina.
Književne interpretacije 20-ih i 30-ih godina 20. veka**

Rezime

Fokus rada usmeren je ka različitim književnim interpretacijama 20-ih i 30-ih godina 20. veka čija su tema rute putovanja od Sofije, glavnog grada Bugarske, do Atine, glavnog grada Grčke. Cilj istraživanja je ispitati kako jedna balkanska kultura (bugarska) tumači drugu (grčku) kroz perspektivu putnika u međuratnom periodu. Bugari Atinu poznaju kao kulturni topos, pa samim tim i putopisna književnost potvrđuje njen značaj za Balkan. U književnim delima postoje dve vrste putovanja: tokom 20-ih godina 20. veka bilo je popularno putovanje parobrodom, dok je 30-ih godina 20. veka putovanje avionom postalo intrigantnije. Bugari percipiraju Atinu kao moderan evropski grad u razvoju sa skoro milion stanovnika i višestrukim međunarodnim grupama posetilaca. Glavni grad Grčke, sa svojim karakterističnim kulturnim identitetom, predstavlja atraktivan centar za strance – turiste i istraživače koji su fascinirani njenom raznovrsnošću i diverzitetom drevnih arhitektonskih spomenika. Atina je prikazana kao mesto procvata međunarodnog dijaloga i kao sinteza drevnog i modernog.

Ključne reči: balkanske rute, putovanje, međuratna književnost, Atina, 20-e godine 20. veka, 30-e godine 20. veka, parobrod, avion