

Grażyna Szwat-Gyłybowa

Bogomilism:
The Afterlife
of the “Bulgarian Heresy”



MONOGRAPHS



Institute of Slavic Studies,
Polish Academy of Sciences

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Translated by
Piotr Szymczak

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*To my Children, Husband, and Friends
with thanks*

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INTRODUCTION

In a well-known essay entitled *Looking for the Barbarians: The Illusions of Cultural Universalism*, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski looked at the root causes of Europe's cultural specificity, involving the ability to question itself and to move beyond the constraints of its own civilisation. Among other things, Kołakowski attributed this spiritual vigour to the Christian tradition's unending struggles with the temptation of Manichaeism on the one hand, and the opposed temptation of pantheism on the other. Taken to an extreme, each might lead to stagnation: the former as a result of its contempt for the world of matter and its indifference to history and time, the latter through its unquestioning affirmation of this world. As Christian thought moved between those two poles, Kołakowski argued, it came up with no ultimate solutions, but provided us with a measure that steers clear of the false dilemma of "optimism" vs. "pessimism," or the choice between belief in ultimate solutions and despair.

[I]t is the tradition of Christian teaching to shield us from both these perils: from the wild certainty of our infinite capacity for perfection on the one hand and from suicide on the other. [...] Christianity said, "The philosopher's stone, the elixir of immortality, these are superstitions of alchemists; nor is there a recipe for a society without evil, without sin or conflict; such ideals are the aberrations of a mind convinced of its omnipotence, they are the fruits of pride." But to admit all this is not to give way to despair. The choice between total perfection and total self-destruction is not ours; cares without end, incompleteness without end, these are our lot [Kołakowski 1997: 30–31].

There is no telling what course European history might have taken had Christianity succumbed to the Manichaean temptation and upset this fragile balance, but gnostic dualism is one of those ideological currents that have accompanied Christianity since its very beginning,

continuing to shape European culture over the centuries [Myszor 1988; see Stoyanov 1994].¹

The long and complex history of gnostic systems that developed within the Judaeo-Christian tradition has led to many misconceptions.² For centuries, the associative, pictorial language of gnosis and its esoteric character have stirred interest, but also produced misrepresentations which, as it were, perpetuated the failures of reason, often standing helpless before the quasi-rational logic of things hidden from the uninitiated. Serious research into the history of gnostic influence began in the twentieth century.

It can be traced in various ways and has varying forms: on the one hand, the acceptance of its problems and even the retention of gnostic positions in Christian theology, on the other hand, a kind of transformation (metamorphosis) of gnostic ideas and traditions, including their reformulation in view of the changed historical and social situation, and finally the more or less conscious, sometimes even amateurish, reception of gnostic ideas and fragments of systems in modern syncretistic-theosophic sects. It is difficult to prove continuity in any detail, as the connecting links often are "subterranean" channels, or else the relationships are based on reconstructions of the history of ideas which have been undertaken especially in the realm of the history of philosophy [Rudolph 1983: 368].

As a result, our scholarly understanding of the impact of gnostic formations on the history of European culture is fragmentary, focusing on individual writers, artistic movements or historical periods, but

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, quotations cited from Polish sources are translated into English by Piotr Szymczak and those from Bulgarian sources are translated into English by Marina Ognyanova Simeonova.

² In this book, I use the terms "gnosis" and "gnosticism" in the sense adopted at the Congress on the Origins of Gnosticism in Messina in 1966. In the interest of terminological consistency, the participants in that congress agreed to use the term *gnosticism* in the historical and typological sense to denote the group of gnostic systems of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, and *gnosis* to denote "a knowledge of divine secrets which is reserved to an elite." Gnosticism is characterised by an anti-cosmic dualism and the idea (expressed here in the broadest terms possible) that humans carry a divine spark trapped in the material world, which (when excited by a divine messenger) can return to God. The gnosis sought in gnosticism is conditioned ontologically, theologically and anthropologically: "Not every form of gnosis is a gnosticism; this term only applies to those that contain the notion that the spark to be revived and restored to its original condition has a divine nature equal to the nature of God; in gnosticism, this gnosis also presupposes a relationship of identity and divinity shared by the knower (the gnostic), that which is known (the divine substance of the knower's transcendent self) and the knowing itself (gnosis) [...]" [*Propozycje* 1996: 6–8], see also Stoyanov 1994: 87–103.

still no synthesis has been produced other than the various exercises in myth-making made in the interest of various ideologies. The debate is taking place at a number of levels, and the wide range of views and appraisals represented in that debate indicates that the esoteric tradition has been harnessed for a number of purposes. It can be approvingly portrayed as the original source of the European Enlightenment, [Cegielski 1994] or it can be dismissed as the mother of all conspiracy theories. Speaking at the Frankfurt book fair in 1987, Umberto Eco unambiguously argued in favour of debunking and de-mythologising this kind of secret knowledge in all its forms. Maria Janion, a Polish literary historian, notes:

Eco was deploring the general move away from the Graeco-Roman model of rationality. To him, nothing was more harmful in this respect than the hermetic and gnostic traditions. Both promoted the belief that the world had been created by an evil demiurge, and both held the promise that initiation was attainable through higher knowledge. The hermetic-gnostic model exists to this day, generating two harmful syndromes: the syndrome of mystery, and the syndrome of cosmic conspiracy. This modern irrationalism can be contained by identifying its ancient roots [...]. Eco is opposed to the aura of mystery attaching to esoteric conspiracies and secret societies (the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, etc.), which he does not believe ever existed. He finds this troubling because he believes it to be a dangerous falsehood, a strange community connecting the Knights Templar and the Elders of Zion (which, we might add, is itself a fabrication that Eco creates freely out of whole cloth) [Janion 1996: 35].

Those two strategies of reflection on the gnostic tradition's place in European culture appeared to be model examples in that the former focuses its field of research on the history of spirituality (with such basic questions as the nature of the world and the human condition or the origins of good and evil), and the latter invokes history mythologised – a distorted remembrance of the past. The former tempts us to explore the meaning of neo-Manichaeism as an alternative to Christian spirituality,³ but also as

³ Gnostics are not “aiming at any ideal philosophical knowledge, nor any knowledge of an intellectual or theoretical kind, but a knowledge which had at the same time a liberating and redeeming effect. The content of this knowledge or understanding is primarily religious, in so far as it circles around the background of man, the world and God, but also because it rests not upon one's own investigation but on heavenly mediation. It is a knowledge given by a revelation, which has been made available only to the elect who are capable of receiving it, and therefore has an esoteric character. [...] But not only ignorance stands in contrast to the knowledge of the gnostic, so also does faith, since it knows nothing concerning itself” [Rudolph 1983: 55–56].

the source of modern spirituality;⁴ the latter suggests focusing instead on the grand forgeries of the gnostic tradition in European culture. The two options are obviously and inescapably interconnected.

In an article entitled “Representing the Past: Reflections on Myth and History,” Kirsten Hastrup makes an attempt to come up with a functional analysis of myth (representation of history in oral culture) and history (myth expressed in a literary culture) to illustrate the dynamic nature of their relationship, and to question whether the two should be divided by a sharp boundary [Hastrup 1987], seeing as they are both equally legitimate forms of presenting the past, despite the differences in the mode of expressing the relationship between the past and the present. Myth, which is based on metaphorical remembrance, embeds the past within the present, whereas history, with its use of metonymy, embeds the present within the past [Hastrup 1987: 263]. Although Hastrup is alive to the structural differences between myth and history, she regards the two as equals in the art of memory and as carriers of collective identity. All new readings of the past should be regarded with a degree of suspicion as artificial constructs that follow the rules of mythological thinking, or what Kołakowski calls (in reference to history) “these little holy histories of ours” [Kołakowski 1997: 247]:

Robbed of all continuity and direction, history would be useless; but our culture, in order to exist, must render it useful, must carve out its own identity from its past and assimilate that past, appropriated as a past endowed with meaning and continuous identity, so that it resembles the subjective past of a human being. Thus, we have reasons for constructing our own *fabulae mundi* [...]. From this we may draw a single, modest moral: we must always retain and remember the distinction between a fact and the *fabula* that engulfs it; we must not permit that the thought might be abolished and swept away in some pointless supreme synthesis; we must, in short, call facts and *fabulae* by their true names [Kołakowski 1997: 247–248].

Studies on the place of gnosis in the history of culture run into two problems. The threat of ideological simplification that Rudolph mentions is particularly acute in view of the virtually inexhaustible over-interpretations that have been accruing for centuries both to the historical facts and to the multi-layered narratives that followed them. In this case, Kołakowski’s “modest moral” that we should distinguish between fact and fiction

⁴ In her study *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości* (*Another Modernity. Questions About a Contemporary Formula for Spirituality*), Agata Bielik-Robson [2000] dissects modern spirituality to reveal the forgotten realms of philosophical, religious and gnostic reflection that shaped it.

produces an image of culture as a domain of chaos, bringing into doubt the very possibility of reliable knowledge on the matter. Such fears may appear old-fashioned in the context of the postmodernist fascination with cultural relativism, which undermines the idea of “hard and fast truths” relating to cultural facts; however, they speak to the deeply human need of imposing order or structure on the world to score an intellectual victory over chaos, no matter how illusory. In this book I am always aware that the fluid boundaries of my subject make this treatment particularly prone to unreliability; however, I want to attempt to describe a phenomenon taking place in Bulgarian culture – on the peripheries of Europe – which nonetheless appears to speak volumes not just about Bulgarian culture, but also about European cultural discourse as a whole. Although this discourse may have a more sophisticated form in the cultural centre, it still remains the same prototypical intra-cultural conflict that gets reproduced in its various local variants.

Bulgarian culture – a culture that is close at hand and distant at the same time – is a special case of identity discourse that is torn between faith and gnosis. A local form of neo-Manichaean gnosis developing in the Balkans for more than four centuries (tenth to fifteenth century) known as Bogomilism was a significant ideological alternative to Byzantine Christianity, attracting masses of followers. At the height of its popularity, the various forms of this particular neo-Manichaeism spread to enormous territories from Asia Minor to Provence. In fact, even those geographical boundaries must be treated as merely symbolic. Bogomilism ultimately dissolved in the ocean of Orthodox Christianity and Islam under Ottoman rule in Bulgaria. However, the idea of the movement became revived in the late nineteenth century in the context of the modernisation processes of the new Bulgarian state, functioning as an important element in the reflection of the country’s intellectual elite on Bulgarian religious and cultural identity.

The question arises concerning Bulgaria’s modernisation in that period: why did a significant proportion of Bulgarian intelligentsia conclude that the existing vision of Bulgarian national identity (constructed in the nineteenth century based on the myth of SS. Cyril and Methodius) was not deemed a sufficient mainstay of that identity? Instead, a series of reinterpretations of Bulgarian history were developed (in various ideological stripes) to portray Bogomilism, a movement hostile to Orthodox Christianity, in a positive light. Regardless of their ideological differences, those reappraisals clashed with the constitutive vision of the nation’s past, producing significant revisions to the self-portrait of Bulgarian identity. In this reinvented version, the Bulgarian as a simple, God-fear-

ing man of evangelical virtue faced a new challenge from the figure of the Bulgarian as a heretic; those two models have since been locked in a rivalry for Bulgarian hearts and minds with changing results. In its continuing renegotiations of identity, Bulgarian culture has not resolved to jettison any part of its own heritage. Perhaps out of fear of rupturing its continuity, it has instead favoured a strategy of creating meaning through an ongoing discourse between – to simplify – its “neo-gnostic” and “Christian” options. Was that a case of a modern and ideologically pluralistic Bulgarian culture using an expediently contrived heretical past as a homeopathic antidote in order to alleviate the fears of modernisation, or perhaps a case of historically conditioned Bulgarian religious uncertainty seeking validation in an increasingly secular world? One way or another, ambiguous facts from the past were transformed into unambiguous values of modern times,⁵ combining to form the various projects of Bulgarian modernity.

This book is also an attempt to answer the question of the conversation between modern Bulgarian culture and Bogomilism, a movement which is being continually reclaimed, in changing configurations, for the Bulgarian collective memory. Except in the most obvious cases, I refrain from calling Bogomilism a “national myth” to avoid a casual pigeonholing of a phenomenon related to mentality. Within the Bulgarian cultural discourse, Bogomilism can be treated as a historical phenomenon (variously cherished, deplored or misrepresented for ideological purposes), or as an ahistorical, quasi-religious formation, freely and unceremoniously revitalised and reinvented starting in the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Either way, Bogomilism remains present in Bulgarian thinking about the nation’s history and future: in some cases as a subject for reflection about past events, in others as an active paradigm providing insights into future developments. In my mind, to place Bogomilism on the list of mythologems would be an act of symbolic violence, a deliberately demythologising or debunking approach that interferes with the space of the culture under discussion.

It appears that one convenient term, if a controversial one, applicable in this context would be the concept of a *lieu de memoire* or “site of memory,” introduced in the 1970s by the French scholar Pierre Nora [see Nora 1978, 1984; English translation of the latter: Nora 1989]. Given the term’s ambiguity, some disambiguation is in order. Because Nora offered no systematic interpretation of the term (which he based on Frances A. Yates’s *locus memoriae*), I use it in the sense defined by Andrzej

⁵ On transformations of tradition see Szacki 1971: 275.

Szpociński, an interpreter of Nora's ideas in Poland, who proposed treating *lieux de memoire* as

proper names of objectivised cultural products, names of historical events, and names of heroes representing ideas regarded as relevant by members of a given group. It does not matter whether or not such events actually happened, or whether or not the venerated heroes are historical persons or figures of legend. The decisive thing is that members of the group consider them to be carriers of important views or values [Szpociński 1987: 18].

Thus, it is immaterial whether a given *lieu de memoire* denotes anything in the real world, or belongs to the world of the imagination. What matters is that it is a component of collective mentality, and as such it remains a "depository of culture" (a term used by Szpociński in a different article) [Szpociński 2003: 22]. Some light on this understanding of the term *lieu de memoire* is thrown by Francis A. Yates's *The Art of Memory* [see Yates 1966], a book which held a great fascination for Nora. It is a reconstruction of the mnemonic techniques known since classical antiquity, with a special focus on the Renaissance. In Yates' terminology, a *locus memoriae* is a literal, specific place appearing as a segment in any system of artificial memory constructed by a person (such as The Field in Giordano Bruno's graphic models or a cornice in the Theatre of Memory of Claudio Camillo). The role of a *locus* is to store information that can be activated when inspected by the user of the mnemonic system. This remarkable characteristic of mnemonic techniques, known already in classical antiquity, involves the ability to connect information to arbitrary spatial ideations, a process of effective retrieval from memory of items which would otherwise be forgotten. In other words, it was a form of mental activity designed to play an auxiliary role by remedying the shortcomings and abuses of natural memory [see Ricoeur 2004]. Nora uses the concept of *lieux de memoire* in a different historical and social context, focusing on egalitarian communities rather than on magi steeped in esoteric knowledge, but in doing so he brings to light an important aspect of collective memory educated in the process of socialisation,⁶ namely its artificiality. In this context, it seems particularly relevant to note Szpociński's comment that

Nora proposes a method of studying the past by describing the process through which *lieux de memoire* become constituted, and in doing so he tries, more than [Panofsky in art – G.S.G.] to, as it were, catch history red-

⁶ The importance of modern educational systems as a nation-making factor was noted by Ernest Gellner in *Nations and Nationalism* [Gellner 1983: 18–75]; see also Anderson 1991.

-handed, and capture the emergence of meanings and mental categories. Compared to Panofsky, this is a dynamic version of the history of mentality [Szpociński 1987: 22–23].

The aim of this study is to capture the process through which Bogomilism was constituted as a particular kind of *lieu de memoire* that keeps changing its location in the mnemonic system of modern Bulgarian culture. Given its amorphousness, this particular repository of culture becomes flexible raw material shaped by missionaries and reformers of various stripes. On their own initiative, Bogomilism can get consigned to oblivion, or emerge on the peripheries of the mnemonic system, or indeed move towards the centre. In each case this is made possible by the shortcomings of human natural memory [Ricoeur 2004] and the mechanisms of common sense thinking [see Hołówka 1986].

Bogomilism – the Basic Narrative

Bogomilism as a historical phenomenon studied by mediaevalists remains outside the scope of this book.⁷ Although I refrain from asking questions about “the real facts of the matter,” relying instead on the expertise of specialists on the subject, I nevertheless try to reconstruct, for the purposes of this book, a kind of basic narrative of Bogomilism, intended to function as an accepted body of historical facts serving as a reference point for subsequent ideologically informed fictionalisations. I do this in full awareness of the fact that the basic narrative of Bogomilism which follows is itself a “little holy history” of my own: a prejudice (in Gadamer’s sense) that shapes my point of departure as an interpreter of the events.

Two books in Bulgarian, recognised as the fundamental sources of knowledge about Bogomilism, inform my basic narrative: Yordan Ivanov’s anthology *Богомилски книги и легенди* (*Bogomil Books and Legends* [Иванов 1925]), and the seminal work by the Marxist writer Dimitar Angelov, *Богомилството в България* (*Bogomilism in Bulgaria* [Ангелов 1969]), a book whose first edition was marred by vulgar sociology, amended in the 1993 edition [Ангелов 1993]. Those two books form the basic canon of knowledge about Bogomilism, available to any educated Bulgarian.⁸

⁷ Compared to its first edition [Гечева 1997], the number of entries in the scholarly bibliography of Bogomilism grew by a third in the second revised edition [Гечева 2007] to reach a total of 3,500.

⁸ Now this set of texts has been joined by Dmitri Obolensky’s *The Bogomils. A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism*, a 1948 book [Obolensky 1948, latest edition Obolensky 2004] which remained unpublished in Bulgarian until 1998 [Оболенски 1998].

They will serve as a reference point for my examination of the phantasms of the Bulgarian myth-makers who defined the place of Bogomilism in Bulgarian history using the conceptual framework of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas.

* * *

The emergence of the Bogomils in the tenth century was a profound shock to the Bulgarian state, recently Christianised in 866 and still contending with its pagan tradition. Pride in the evident achievements of Bulgarian culture's waning "golden age"⁹ must have been clouded by serious doubt among the educated classes concerning the spiritual evolution of the growing masses of followers of the new doctrine, preached by itinerant preachers who were prepared to die for what they claimed was their vision of Christianity. From the beginning, the emergence of the Bogomil movement was associated with the name of Priest Bogomil, the founder of that folk form of neo-gnosis. Presbyter Cosmas, author of *Sermon Against the Heretics* (our richest source of information to date about the Bulgarian Bogomils in the first Bulgarian state) portrays Bogomil as the first Bulgarian heresiarch:

It happened that during the reign of the orthodox Tsar Peter, there appeared in the Bulgarian lands a priest named Pop Bogomil [Dear to God], although it would be better to call him Bogunemil [Detested by God], who first began to preach heresy there [Презвитер Козма 1982: 30–31].

We have no biographical details concerning Priest Bogomil. We only know that he was a member of the lower clergy (the most numerous group of clergy in the Church), a group which maintained a close relationship with the common people. His teaching focused on the southwestern borderlands of the Bulgarian state in what is today Macedonia, with its main centre near the Babuna mountain (where the Bogomils were locally referred to as *babunas*). According to legend, Bogomil was buried in the area in Bogomila, a village named after him.¹⁰

Although the emergence of Bogomilism is associated with that particular folk preacher, who was clearly a charismatic individual,

⁹ The Bulgarian golden age in Bulgarian historiography coincides with the rule of Tsar Simeon (893–927), when the Bulgarian state was at the height of its economic, political and cultural power in the mediaeval period.

¹⁰ According to another version of the legend, Bogomil's grave is located in the village of Kamenitsa in northern Bulgaria; see Ангелов 1969: 151.

the ground for this Balkan form of neo-Manichaeism had been prepared much earlier. In the eighth century, members of an extreme dualist sect known as the Paulicians were resettled to the northern borderlands of Byzantium (mainly to Thrace) [see Mango 1980: 100–103; Haussig 1969: 302–303; Obolensky 2004: 28–59]. Although the Paulicians lived in closed communities away from the general population, and did not engage in significant proselytising efforts, historians point to earlier Paulician missionary activity in the Balkans. Perhaps the Paulician doctrine became assimilated and modified by Bogomil to reconcile it with the Christian concept of a benevolent God, but also to explain the pervasive presence of evil in the material world, but given the scarcity of our evidence this hypothesis must remain conjectural.

The chronology of those events highlights the fact that Paulician dualism and Christianity had been taking root in the Balkans long before Christianity became the official religion of the Bulgarian state in 866. Christianisation was frowned upon both by the Slavic population, which was attached to its pagan tradition, and by the proto-Bulgarian boyars, who regarded Christianity as an instrument of Byzantine influence and were unwilling to reject the cult of their tribal god Tangra. Another conjecture gaining ground in recent years [see Barber 2000: 14] is Bernard Hamilton’s hypothesis that it was the proto-Bulgarians who imported to the Balkans a moderate form of Eastern dualism known as Zurvanism, which they had encountered in their migrations on the outskirts of Persia, and which later influenced the emerging Bogomilism [Hamilton 1988]. Though unconfirmed, this hypothesis is one more piece of the complex ethnic and religious jigsaw puzzle of the first Bulgarian state, which remained ethnically divided into the proto-Bulgarians and the Slavs until Tsar Boris embraced Christianity and eliminated the proto-Bulgarian tribal elite that opposed the new religion. Introduced by force, Christianity helped achieve a double purpose: its egalitarian doctrine helped to remove the ethnic divisions within the state, and lent extra weight to the sacralisation of secular authority, already recognised as such by the proto-Bulgarians [see, among others, Бешевлиев 1981: 67–83]. However, the spiritual edge of Christianity dulled quickly. Even before the East-West schism of 1054, the standing of Christianity was undermined by Tsar Boris’s hesitation between accepting baptism from the Western or the Eastern Church, and the fierce rivalry between Latin and Byzantine missionaries, an internecine conflict deftly exploited by Paulician missionaries [Obolensky 2004: 59–110 (Chapter III)]. The Bulgarian state also had to contend with the non-Christian monotheistic religions present in the Bulgarian territories, notably including Judaism

and Islam [Obolensky 2004: 68].¹¹ Although we have no reliable data about the effects of the proselytising efforts of those two religions, one thing seems certain – Bulgaria was a territory of conflicting worldviews, with no straightforward relationships of causality linking different phenomena, especially as regards spiritual traditions, which change at a very slow pace.

According to Bulgarian mediaevalists, Boris's baptism was at first primarily a political act. In declaring a war on paganism, the church found itself in a difficult situation. The Greek clergy (only Greek clerics were originally available to Bulgaria's nascent Christian church) faced problems of communication and popular resistance. Christianisation was taking place under difficult and complicated conditions, which contributed to the development of a local form of religious syncretism in Bulgaria (not unlike those found in many other parts of Europe). The efforts of those members of clergy who spoke Slavic languages had a limited impact in those circumstances. Slavic-speaking clergy appeared in Bulgaria with the disciples of SS. Cyril and Methodius, leading to the creation of two powerful literary schools in Preslav and Ohrid. The influence of the Preslav Literary School, found mainly in court circles, did not extend to the general population. The situation was somewhat different in Ohrid, but following the death of St. Kliment the local missionary activity was likewise significantly reduced. Ironically, the gap between the Orthodox Church and the people widened during the rule of Tsar Simeon, who had autocephalous ambitions for the Bulgarian church and broke from the Patriarchate of Byzantium by making the Archbishop of Bulgaria a patriarch in his own right (probably in 918). Boris's anti-Byzantine policies were aimed at consolidating Bulgarian hegemony in the Balkans, but they imitated the Byzantine cultural model, which the general population regarded with hostility, a situation which contributed to the widening gap between the Church (as the carrier of that culture) and the people. The introduction of the Slavic liturgy, which the Greek clergy in Bulgaria opposed, was another aspect contributing to the atmosphere of spiralling mistrust and downright hatred, strengthening isolationist attitudes [Obolensky 2004: 70] and possibly preparing the ground for the development of the heresy.

In addition to the Paulicians, another powerful sect present in Bulgaria was the Massalians,¹² who probably arrived in the Balkans

¹¹ However, we know from Tsar Boris's correspondence with the pope that the pope recommended a non-violent policy in converting believers of other religions; see Иванов 1925: 368.

¹² The Massalians ("those who pray") did not recognise the authority of the embraced individualistic interpretations of the New Testament and believed the Eucharist to be

together with the Paulicians. Although both sects abhorred the Christian Church, they remained distinct from each other. The Massalians found a safe haven in the flourishing monastic movement, gaining access to people who were getting away from worldly turmoil to seek God. Given the weak levels of assistance from the Church, monasteries became a seedbed of heresy.

Another catalyst of religious ferment came from the continuing migrations of people displaced by warfare and the shifting balance of power and political influence in the Balkan Peninsula. Following Bulgaria's defeat in a war with Byzantium, all of eastern Bulgaria came under Byzantine rule in 971. The Cometopuli dynasty established a Western Bulgarian Kingdom in Macedonia, which was ultimately defeated by Basil II, whose wartime atrocities in 1018 earned him the nickname of “Bulgar Slayer.” In 969–989, Byzantine emperors decreed two resettlements of new groups of Paulicians from Armenia. Those were sent to Thrace, in the area of today's Plovdiv (during the reign of John Tzimiskes) and to Macedonia (during the reign of Basil II), to defend the northern borders of Byzantium from attacks by Slavs, to whom they unexpectedly defected.

In this context Obolensky's thesis – that Bogomilism, understood as a social movement, can be viewed as a typical mediaeval form of multidirectional reaction to current political events – remains valid; as a world-view, it may have been attractive to many people as a kind of compromise between two seemingly irreconcilable religious systems.

We are touching here on a certain paradox of Bogomilism, which combined the characteristics of an esoteric doctrine (as a form of gnosis) with an egalitarian character stemming from its proselytizing outlook (since most major missionary religions tend to be egalitarian). Perhaps it was this internal dichotomy of Bogomilism as an esoteric doctrine reserved for an elite (comprising the so-called “perfect ones”) and as a quasi-religion open to the masses (referred to as “the faithful”) that facilitated the movement's expansion into Byzantium and Western Europe, where followers of dualistic systems were known under a variety

symbolic (though they took the communion). Their basic doctrine consisted in the belief that “in every man from his birth there dwells a demon who cannot be expelled by Baptism, but only through prayer,” which they regarded as “the most essential occupation of man and the necessary and sufficient condition of salvation,” leading to the bestowing of the gift of the Spirit, including prophecy. This state of glory was manifested externally through ecstasy. Those unable to attain it had to live an ascetic lifestyle; people who had expelled their demons lived a life free of sin. Massalians who became “freed from sin” often lived dissolutely; see Obolensky 2004: 49–50.

of appellations including the *patareni* in Bosnia,¹³ and the Cathars and Albigensians in southern France and northern Italy [Duvernoy 1976; Obolensky 2004: 286–289 (Appendix V); Niel 1967; Runciman 1947]. The idea's migration was probably facilitated by the Crusades, and the collapse of the Bulgarian state became the direct trigger of the spread of Bogomilism to the Byzantine territories. During the period of Byzantine rule in Bulgaria, opposition to the occupation came mostly from the Paulicians and the Bogomils, also boosting their popular status as defenders of the people. This popularity extended to Byzantium itself, as attested in two basic sources for the period, Anna Komnena's *The Alexiad* and *Panoplia Dogmatica* by Euthymius Zigabenus [see, among others, Ангелов 1969: 37–62].

In the second Bulgarian state, Bogomilism initially experienced a second flourishing (thirteenth century), followed by its degeneration and gradual disappearance (fourteenth century), in tandem with the general condition of the state and the historical developments of the period. The successful anti-Byzantine uprising of 1186 created a favourable environment for the movement to consolidate its influence. Political turmoil and general hostility to the Byzantines caused by charges of extortionate taxation, deep-seated hatred harboured towards the Greeks after the defeat of Bulgaria by Basil II (the “Bulgar Slayer”), and hatred of the oppressive Byzantine Church cumulatively favoured the growth of the heresy as an alternative worldview. During the reign of Kaloyan, the Bogomils and the Paulicians sided with the tsar in his struggle against the Latins who, spurred on by Pope Innocent III, launched a crusade against the Bulgarian ruler in 1205 for having “allied himself with [...] enemies of the Cross of Christ” [cited in Obolensky 2004: 231].

In constructing a state-wide anti-Latin coalition Kaloyan pursued a policy of religious tolerance as part of a strategy involving supporting all the folk religions that could be relied upon to consolidate the population in the struggle. Unsurprisingly, the actions of his successor, the usurper Boril, met with hostility from the Bogomils. Before he was deposed by the followers of the legitimate successor, Ivan Asen II, Boril managed to convene an anti-Bogomil council in Tarnovo (1211), which anathematised the Bogomils and related sects.

¹³ The conjecture, formulated in the nineteenth century by Franjo Rački in *Bogomili a patareni*, that the Bosnian *patareni* had Bogomil roots, though always regarded as questionable, has not been disproved. Today, Noel Malcolm is one of the opponents to this idea, favouring instead an interpretation of the Bosnian Church as an endemic form of Eastern Christianity; see Malcolm 2002: 27–42 (“The Bosnian Church”).

The Greek records of the council survive in a fourteenth century Bulgarian copy,¹⁴ forming our sole source of information about thirteenth century Bogomilism. The views attributed to the disciples of Priest Bogomil in *The Tsar Boril Synodic* are similar to those contained in the *Sermon Against the Heretics* by Presbyter Cosmas: they rejected the Old Testament and its prophets, the institutional Church, traditional prayers (with the exception of the Lord’s Prayer), the liturgy, the Eucharist, and the cult of the Cross and religious icons. Some of the Bogomil views known from older sources reappear in the *Synodic* in a strongly radicalised form. Obolensky emphasised this repeatedly, perhaps in a somewhat partisan fashion, tracing this fact to the influence of Byzantine Bogomilism and the Docetism of the Massalians,¹⁵ who according to Obolensky were identified with Bogomilism already in the fourteenth century [Obolensky 2004: 213]. At the same time, the *Tsar Boril Synodic* offers evidence of a strong connection between Bogomilism and pagan practices, and anathematises all those who engage in magical practices. This is an important aspect for our understanding of the Bogomil tradition, but we cannot be sure whether Bogomilism adapted pagan customs to its doctrine, or merely formed a tactical alliance with paganism in the struggle against the Orthodox Church. Obolensky favoured the latter interpretation, however the two do not seem to be mutually exclusive. In the case of religious sects, tactical adaptations were key to their survival, even if they came at a price of losing their distinctive qualities. The same process appears to have been at play in the contact zone between Bogomilism and the Massalians. Elements of Massalian doctrine exerted an increasing influence on the Bogomils, leading to significant fusion between the two heresies in the twelfth century, followed by a complete absorption of Massalianism into Bogomilism in the fourteenth century. Before the fourteenth century, one distinctive difference between the two sects (which disappeared completely in later centuries) was that the Massalians were accused of moral corruption, whereas the Bogomils were known for their asceticism. The Bogomil reputation for moral purity was undoubtedly regarded as a validation of the doctrine, contributing to their charisma. The loss of this puritanical reputation in later centuries hurt the standing of Bogomilism, which later became indistinguishable from the rest of society, affected as it was by the general moral decay of the fourteenth century. Destitute and deprived of pastoral care from the Church in a period when

¹⁴ The so-called *Палаузов препис*; see Динеков, Грашева, С. Николова (eds.) 1985: 213.

¹⁵ Docetism is the belief, prevalent among Christian Gnostics, that Christ did not actually become man, and therefore did not suffer and was not crucified; see Rudolph 1983: 162; Obolensky 2004: 210–211, 238, 242–243.

scepticism and rationalism were accompanied by an openness towards all kinds of extravagant doctrines, extreme asceticism went hand-in-hand with extreme immorality [see Obolensky 2004: 264]. Bogomilism, in its turn, became too open to external influence and turned into a syncretic religious community, losing its internal coherence in the process.

Another source of information about Bogomilism, coming from the period when the second Bulgarian state was at the height of its power, is the *Life of St. Theodosius of Tarnovo*, documenting the saint's struggle against heresies including Bogomilism (Massalianism) and Judaism. Around the year 1350, Theodosius convened and led a church council in Tarnovo. Those facing charges included a number of heresiarchs (such as a healer and magus named Theodoret and Theodosius, a monk preaching profligacy) as well as followers of Bogomilism named Lazar, Kiril and Stefan. As portrayed in the *Life*, the doctrine contained elements of Bogomil dualism combined with Massalian features.

The first document ever to level charges of immorality against members of the movement, *The Life of St. Theodosius of Tarnovo* is an illustration of Bogomilism's final stage after more than four centuries of existence. Its later history is lost to the mists of time. Presumably, some of the Bogomils, like the Bosnian *patareni*, converted to Islam; others were absorbed into the Paulician sect after the fall of Tarnovo, and eventually converted to Catholicism. Others still were probably absorbed into the Orthodox Christian majority, perhaps harbouring secret allegiance to the Bogomil doctrine. This strategy seems very likely since Bogomils had relied on mimicry from the very beginning. Adaptation in the interest of effective proselytising or avoiding persecution went hand in hand with Bogomil syncretic tendencies. The sect's openness and its involvement with developments in the world (contrary to its doctrine) resulted in an increasing doctrinal eclecticism and growing connections with the pagan tradition and the teachings of other sects. This syncretism probably contributed to the gradual internal disintegration of the sect [Obolensky 2004: 264], whose memory and influence considerably outlived the movement itself. As Kurt Rudolph noted,

the influence [of Bogomilism] was not confined to the Balkans but made itself felt East and West words. The Bogomilian writings in Old Church Slavonic¹⁶ still enjoyed great popularity throughout the Middle Ages and strongly influenced Old Slavonic popular literature. The songs of the beggars at the door of Russian churches still preserved Bogomilian thought patterns. Even stronger was the effect in Italy and France where apparently Bogomilian ideas pene-

¹⁶ This information must be treated as conjectural since no Bogomil writings have survived to the present day.

trated at the beginning of the eleventh century, which combined with the local resistance movements against the official Church and against society. [...] This “gnostic-spiritual heresy” in the eleventh century covered the whole of northern Italy and France and became the expression of a changed understanding of Christianity and Church. It found its most strongly marked expression in the Catharists, i.e. the “pure” or Albigensians [...]. This “neo-Manichaeen church” could be subdued only by the harsh action of the Inquisition (which was brought into existence in this connection) and by proper crusades. Its after-effects were still felt for a long time in other later “heresies.” The Catholic Church itself could only overcome this crisis internally by recognising the “orders of mendicant friars” which arose in the same period, and which formed part of the protest against the hierarchy and against the wealth of the Church. Thus, this revival of gnostic religion was of importance for the self-understanding of the Christian Church [Rudolph 1983: 375–376].

Reflection on the place of Bogomilism in European culture takes place within the broader context of a debate taking place outside of Bulgaria regarding the related movement of the Cathars. In his book *La Religion des Cathares*, Jean Duvernoy argues that the Cathars, though regarded as heretics from the viewpoint of Church orthodoxy, should in fact be rehabilitated as “true Christianity”:

Called “Christians,” “true Christians,” or “good Christians,” the Cathars based their religion on the Revelation and on the Bible in which it is recorded, to the exclusion of all foreign Revelation. In this respect, it is particularly improper to speak of them as Manichaeen or neo-Manichaeen. Christianity, Manicheism and Islam have grafted on the stem of Judaism one Envoy and one Book. In this respect, the Cathars are nothing but Christians: their Envoy, saviour and the author of their Revelation is Christ, their Book – the New Testament [Duvernoy 1976: 27].

Duvernoy’s argument, which treats the Christian and gnostic paradigms as identical, appears to sit comfortably within the postmodern current of reflection which relies on paraphrase as a substitute for actual dialogue between different worldviews. This kind of typological abuse is also often found in Bulgarian texts, particularly texts by writers who have a limited interest in the subtleties of the history of spirituality, and treat Bogomilism as a tool for their own purposes.

Bogomil Cosmogony

In the *Sermon Against Heretics*, Presbyter Cosmas mentions the name of Priest Bogomil only once, in a passage referring to his disciples as heretics. The historically accepted name of “Bogomils” first appears in

a letter by a Byzantine monk named Euthymius in the middle of the eleventh century. The name reappears early in the twelfth century in a work by the Byzantine theologian Euthymius Zigabenus, who used the name “Bogomils” in the title of a book in his *Panoplia Dogmatica* [Obolensky 2004: 122]. This may suggest that the appellation had become current by the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Our main sources of knowledge about the Bulgarian Bogomils include the *Sermon Against the Heretics* by Presbyter Cosmas (ca. 969) and the *Tsar Boril Synodic* (1211). The two sources indicate that Priest Bogomil was active during the reign of Tsar Peter (927–969). Cosmas uses first-hand experience of direct dealings with Bogomils to illustrate their methods:

On the surface, those heretics are like sheep: meek, humble and silent. They have pale faces from their hypocritical fasting. They say nothing, they do not laugh out loud, they show no excessive curiosity and they avoid other people’s gaze. Ostensibly, they behave so as not to stand out from the orthodox Christians, but inwardly they are actually wolves and predators, as God said.

Seeing this great and special humility, and thinking they are orthodox and able to advise about salvation, people approach them and inquire how to save their souls. And they, in the likeness of a wolf who wants to kidnap a lamb, first pretend to sigh and humbly answer, and when they preach, they present themselves as if they are in heaven. Whenever they see a simple and unschooled man, there they sow the weeds of their teaching, blaspheming the ordinances given to the holy churches [Презвитер Козма 1982: 31].

Aside from the criticism, Cosmas also includes a detailed description of Bogomil cosmology, containing as a key piece of dogma the argument that the material world was created by the devil, who was God’s younger son:¹⁷

Having heard what our Lord says in the Gospel in the parable of the two sons, they claim that Christ is the elder and think that the younger, who deceived his father, is the Devil; they call the latter Mammon and assert that he is the creator and author of earthly things (and think) that he ordered people to marry, eat meat and drink wine [Презвитер Козма 1982: 45].

According to mediaevalists, the key difference between the Bogomil and Paulician cosmologies consists in the subordination of the builder of the visible world to the one God. The Paulicians argued that good and evil were equal in origin and potency, which makes their system a *de facto* polytheism. By contrast, Bogomil dualism involved rejecting the idea

¹⁷ In other apocrypha, he is God’s elder son; see Naumow 1976: 60.

that God and his creation were one by introducing an intermediary endowed with creative power between the two as the actual creator of the material world. In this sense, Bogomil dualism can be described as moderate; in the tenth century, there were still internal differences of opinion on the subject, a point that Presbyter Cosmas notes with scorn. Instead, Cosmas mainly highlights those elements of the Bogomil doctrine that relate to moral purity and evangelical lifestyle. Bogomil doctrine was based on the New Testament, primarily the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The Bogomils rejected the Old Testament as the work of Satan.

Bogomil ethics were predicated on cosmological dualism [Obolensky 2004: 109; Ангелов 1969: 166–206; Иванов 1925: 24–33]. Since the material world is the work of an evil demiurge, a soul wishing to become united with God must avoid all contact with matter, particularly the human body, which is Satan’s most potent instrument of power over men. For this reason, the Bogomils rejected the institution of marriage and refrained from consuming meat and wine. It appears that the requirement of sexual abstinence did not apply equally to all the faithful. Bogomil communities consisted of members referred to as “the perfect ones” and ordinary believers who were free from, though encouraged to engage in, such strict ascetic practices. As a result of their dualistic cosmology, Bogomils rejected the Christian understanding of matter as a vessel of spiritual grace, worthy of sanctification. Instead, they embraced anti-sacramentalian views and rejected baptism (John the Baptist was regarded by the Bogomils as a prophet of Antichrist), the Eucharist, the holy Mass, and all symbols and material items of religious cult, such as churches, crucifixes or icons.

As moderate dualists, the Bogomils admitted the possibility of an ultimate victory of good over evil, however they took from Manichaeism an attitude of contempt for the material world (viewed as the work of an evil demiurge), and sought redemption through knowledge of man’s cosmic and spiritual history. Gained through initiation, such knowledge offered release from matter so that the soul (man’s inner divine light) could become reunited with the true God. The divine element could be freed from the shackles of matter not through sacraments or divine grace, but by resisting the laws of the material world, i.e. by thwarting the designs of the evil demiurge. This revolt against the bondage of matter impelled the Bogomils to embrace extreme asceticism, the aim of which, in common with other Gnosticisms, was not sanctification of life but a “metaphysical strategy” of standing up to the nature of things created by Satanael [Obolensky 2004: 128–129].

In his essay *Przeciw gnostykom* (*Against the Gnostics*), Krzysztof Dorosz notes some of the ethical corollaries of dualist thinking:

Those things are good which destroy the world and bring closer the moment of release of the divine spark in the human soul. [...] The true God's influence does not in any way extend into this world, therefore the world is completely devoid of moral substance, and any contracts or dealings with it [...] are null and void, a matter of pure indifference. [...] This means that the more we negate and condemn the world – the more we regard it as a domain of absolute evil – the more likely we are to invert the poles of good and evil in our thoughts and actions [...] Perfection gained through struggle against an oppressive cosmic system makes gnostics morally immaculate [Dorosz 1989b: 203].

In the case of the Bulgarian Bogomils, this sense of moral immaculateness, though a constitutive element of their self-portrayal, could not have been the only reason for the great moral authority they enjoyed among the people:

In contrast to the intellectual and moral decadence of the clergy, who only too often left the flock without adequate support or instruction, the Bogomils, owing to their saintly appearance, intimate knowledge of the Gospel, strict asceticism, ardent proselytism and courage in persecution, must have appeared to many Bulgarians as the bearers of true Christianity. Their clever simulation of Orthodoxy, which considerably facilitated their task of avoiding detection, was both a powerful weapon of proselytism and a protection against systematic persecution [Obolensky 2004: 141].

The halo of martyrdom and sainthood surrounding the persecuted Bogomils as early as the tenth century proved to be a long-lasting attribute and emblem of the movement, contributing to the emergence of a typologically spurious portrayal of the Bogomils as the true Christians. As Obolensky notes, the clergy played a part in this process: some members of clergy overlooked the significant differences between dualistic gnosis and religion, and became attracted to Bogomilism with its easy answers about the mystery of evil in this world, which were perfectly attuned to the period's spiritual anxieties [Obolensky 2004: 103].

The Bogomil tactic of using nothing but the Gospel in support of their interpretations made their arguments convincing, coming across as a rationalised version of Christianity. In fact, however, the Bogomils had other books as well, which were presumably kept secret from Christians, and therefore remained hidden (*occulte*). Such writings were only available to an elite worthy of initiation. We do not know the nature of those books, or how many of them there were. The only surviving example is

The Secret Book, preserved in two Latin copies: one, made in the fourteenth century, was discovered in the archives of the Inquisition in Carcassonne, the other – known as the “Vienna” manuscript – was found in the twelfth century Vienna Codex [Ангелов 1985: 209; Петканова (ed.) 1981: 399]. Both manuscripts were published relatively quickly. The untitled Carcassonne text was published by the Dominican friar F. Benoist as *Faux Evangile* (1691), and was renamed by a later publisher as *Liber Sancti Johannis* (1832), a title which became accepted in scholarship.

The Secret Book, also known variously as the Gospel of John, the Apocryphon of John or the Gospel of Pseudo-John, was removed to Lombardy, presumably from Bulgaria, in the second half of the twelfth century by a Bogomil bishop named Nazarius. Its time of composition is unknown, but its Bogomil provenance is accepted by most scholars. Written as a conversation between St. John and Christ, the book is essentially a presentation of Bogomil cosmology. It portrays the material world as a kind of compromise between the ultimately optimistic eschatology of Christianity and the pessimism of the extreme Manichaeists.

Bogomilism accepted the existence of one eternal God, whose eldest son Satanael rebelled against his father. This rebellion resulted in a cosmic catastrophe that destroyed the original unity of the one God and ruler of the universe. Although as a system Bogomilism remained closely tied to the folk imagination, and steered clear of sophisticated gnostic speculations about the Pleromia and its divine emanations,¹⁸ this fateful family feud can be interpreted as the process through which evil became separated from the eternal power or the invisible Father. In a world of perfect unity portrayed in *The Secret Book*, the highest Trinity originally comprises three persons: God the Father, Christ and Satanael, ruler of all heavenly virtues. Already at this point Satanael has the attributes of a creator, playing the role of the demiurge, a kind of intermediary between the world of chaos (the abyss) and the cosmos, which he models on a certain order – in the Father’s likeness.

I [Christ – G.S.G.] sat at the side of my Father, and satan was the builder of all things, and made everything in His likeness. He descended from the heavens to the abyss, and rose from the abyss to the throne of the invisible Father [Тайна книга 1981: 289].

¹⁸ In the teachings of gnostics coming from the tradition of Egyptian hermeticism, *pleroma* meant fullness, the original being. The collapse of the lowest eon of *sophia*, caused by its uncontrolled striving for the unknown father of the *pleroma*, gave rise to the world as the resulting “ignorance” or “error” led to the emergence of the world’s material substance, which trapped the sparks of spiritual light. See, among others, Rudolph 1983: 321.

A creative being, God's firstborn son is thus seduced by his own creative power. His desire to match his Father's glory expresses itself through a plan to build his seat above the clouds. The beginning of a new act of creation is portrayed in the form of Satanael's descent to the fires of Gehinnom prepared for him:

After descending into the heavens he commanded the angel who ruled over it: Open the airy gates for me! And the angel opened the air for him. On his way down he saw the angel of the waters, and said to him: Open the watery gates to me, and the angel opened them. Down he went, until he came to the water-covered earth, and when he descended beneath the ground he saw two fish yoked together like a team of ploughing oxen; by the invisible Father's command they were supporting the earth on the east and on the west. Lower down he saw pregnant clouds supporting the sea, and below those a hell prepared for him, which was the fiery Gehinnom. He could go no further because of the heat of the flames, and he turned back angrily [*Тайна книга* 1981: 289].

This portrayal of Satan's wanderings indicates that the creation of the world could not be an act of creation *ex nihilo*, but rather a reordering of the world according to a new set of rules. In order for a new act of creation to take place, the Father's new consent had to be given. Having beguiled one third of the angels (including some from the fifth heaven), and having lost his divine attributes, Satan lost his potency because he and his companions could find no peace, a necessary requirement for creation. Separated from God the Father, evil personified turns out to be impotent without the Father's support – which He grants out of pity:

[...] his light was taken away from him, and his face took on the colour of burning iron, and became like the face of a man. His tail had swept a third of the heavenly hosts behind him, and then he was expelled from the divine house, and his power in heaven was taken away from him. But when he descended here to the heavens, finding no peace for himself or for those who were with him, he implored the Father, saying: Have patience with me, o Lord, and I will return all those things to you. And God the Father took pity on him, and gave peace to him and those who were with him, and allowed him to do what he liked for a space of seven days [*Тайна книга* 1981: 290].

The Secret Book initially portrayed the creation of the world by Satan as a modification of the order imposed by the Father:

Satan sat on the welkin, and told the angel of the air and the angel of the waters to lift up the earth, which was submerged in water, and the earth dried up. Then he took the wreath of the angel of the waters, and used one

half to make the light of the moon, and the other half to make the light of the stars, and he used the gems from the angel's crown to make the heavenly lights and constellations. And when he divided his heavenly hosts according to the order imposed by the Highest Lord, he created thunder, and rain, and hail and snow, and gave authority over it to his servants. And he commanded the earth to produce all the flying creatures, amphibians, trees and grasses, and he commanded the sea to produce fishes and birds of the heavens [*Тайна книга* 1981: 290].

The creation of living people was a crowning act in this demonic work, a devious plan to trap angelic souls in matter. In Bogomil anthropology, man is a dualistic creature. The human body is created out of clay in Satan's likeness, but the soul, which contains the glory of the fallen angels, belongs to God:

Then he devised to create man in his likeness, to be his servant. So he told an angel of the third heaven to enter a body made out of clay, and he took a part of that body, and made another, with a female form, and he told an angel of the second heaven to enter the woman's body. When they saw that they had taken on a mortal coil and were of different kinds, the angels cried. Satan told them to unite their clay bodies, and they had intercourse, not knowing that they were committing a sin. And the maker of all evil devised to make a paradise and placed the people in it. Finally, he planted reeds in the middle of paradise, and out of his own spit he created a serpent, and told the serpent to hide among the reeds [...], to hide his deceitful wiles from them. And he approached them, saying: Of every fruit-bearing tree of paradise you may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat. And he entered the serpent, and beguiled the angel who had the female form, and the brother of that angel satisfied his sinful lust, and coupled with Eve to the sound of the serpent's hissing. This is why those who follow the lustful desires of their father the devil are called the devil's seed and the devil's offspring, and so it will remain for ever and ever. For the devil put his own venom and lust into the angel who was in Adam, and the devil's seed and the devil's offspring will continue to propagate for ever and ever [*Тайна книга* 1981: 290-291].

In a world created by the demonic demiurge, the satanic pride and desire that led to the cosmic catastrophe now serves to consolidate the demiurge's earthly rule. God the Father has foreseen its end: the rule would last no more than seven days, equivalent to seven centuries. In the Bogomil doctrine, the coming of the Final Judgement is connected with the coming of Christ. Jesus, who is a divine spirit, an angel and God's younger son, is an emissary who will teach mankind and liberate it from the shackles of matter. He descends from the seventh heaven and takes on a human form, passing through the ear of an angel named Maria.

Then he teaches people how to become united with God, baptises them in the Holy Spirit, his disciples live an ascetic lifestyle and say the Lord's Prayer, thus swelling the members of the perfect elite. The Final Judgement will come when the total number of the perfect ones has equalled the number of the fallen angels. Jesus will sit in judgement, judging people "according to the faith he preached." The sinners will be condemned to eternal damnation along with Satan:

After imprisoning the devil, shackled in unbreakable chains, the son of God and his elect will walk on the firmament of the heavens, and the sinners will cry and moan, saying: Swallow us up, oh earth, for we wish to die! [*Тайна книга* 1981: 294].

When that happens, Jesus will lead the elect out of the crowd of sinners and take them to the seventh heaven, where they will have a share in the glory of the angels:

And then the Son of God will sit at the right hand of the Father, and the Highest Father will rule over the angels and the just, who will join the heavenly choirs, and he will clothe them in everlasting robes, and crown them with ever-fresh wreaths, and give them thrones that do not die but last for ever, and he will be with them. And they will not suffer from hunger or thirst, or from the heat of the sun. God will wipe away all tears from their eyes, and the Son of God and his Father will reign for ever and ever [*Тайна книга* 1981: 294].

In the light of research to date, Bogomilism appears to have been a form of gnosis offering self-redemption through adherence to certain ascetic rules. One of those was prayer, a tool for making contact with God trapped within man. The Lord's Prayer was the only prayer recognised by the Bogomils. Based on an analysis of the text of that prayer surviving in Cathar copies, Ivanov pointed out two notable facts. He demonstrated that the text follows the Orthodox Christian wording of St. Matthew's Gospel, a finding which corroborates the thesis that the Albigenian and Cathar doctrines had an Eastern provenance, and confirms that the Bogomils regarded bread as a form of spiritual, supernatural food [Иванов 1925: 112]. They said the Lord's Prayer several times per day and at night, and they used it in their rituals – spiritual baptism, in times of illness, and at the hour of death. A thirteenth century *Cathar Prayerbook* in the Provençal language found in Provence arguably offers additional insight into Bogomil prayer practices (it is assumed that the *Cathar Prayerbook* was modelled on an earlier Bogomil prayerbook, now lost). It comprises five parts: Confession of Sins, Confession of Faith, Spiritual Baptism of a Perfect Bogomil, Occasional Prayers, and Spiritual Baptism

in illness. The first part of the prayerbook is particularly notable because it throws considerable light on Bogomil values. In the formula used for the confession of sins, all sins seem to be regarded as coming from the soul's acquiescence in bodily desires:

For our sins are many with which we offend God day and night, with word and deed, consciously and unconsciously, primarily with our will, which evil spirits close in the body in which we are clothed. Bless us and have mercy on us!

And in addition, despite the fact that the Word of God and the holy apostles teach us, and our spiritual brothers give us guidance to reject all desires of the body and all uncleanness, fulfilling the will of God by making a perfect good, in spite of all this, we, as negligent servants, not just do not obey, duly, God's will, but often we indulge in carnal whims and earthly concerns to such an extent that we harm our souls. Please, show kindness and mercy to us! [Иванов 1925: 119].

The list only contains cardinal sins, which are violations of the rules of ascetic practice (including fasting and prayer, avoidance of contacts with the world, and avoidance of vain worldly conversation). The Bogomil examination of conscience recognises only one sin against another human being, namely the reviling of others, which should be avoided by every “good Christian,” as they called themselves.

The Bogomil *homo ethicus* must always frustrate the urges of the body – regarded as a potential source of sin and a prison to be escaped. In the light of the apocryphal texts, however, ultimate liberation can only happen when Christ joins forces with the perfect ones in the struggle against Satan.

There are no reliable data about the form of Bulgarian spirituality produced by the four centuries of rivalry between Christianity and Bogomilism. The fate of the Bogomils and the effects of their proselytising mission in the period of Ottoman rule are lost to time. Scholars assume that the Bogomils ceased to exist as a cohesive community in the fifteenth century. Without engaging in undue speculation, it is probably quite likely that the Bogomils, guided as they were by the principle of mimicry, mostly blended with the Christian community, perhaps retaining a memory of their own doctrines. Evidence for this claim comes in the form of elements of Bogomil dualism found in Bulgarian folklore and the written tradition, primarily the *Damaskini* (collections of sermons, didactic texts and religious stories named after the Greek bishop Damaskinos Stoudites) and miscellanea in circulation until the middle of the nineteenth century, also featuring apocryphal texts known in these territories since the Byzantine times. The most popular texts included moralising apocrypha containing vivid descriptions of the tortures suffered by sinners after death: *Ходене*

на Богородица по мъките (*The Wanderings of the Mother of God Amid the Torments*), the аprocryphon *Видение на светия апостол Павел, който бе възнесен от ангела на третото небе* (*The Vision of St. Paul the Apostle Taken by an Angel to the Third Heaven*) and *Епистолия за неделя* (*The Epistle of Sunday*), a so-called “letter from heaven” imported to Bulgaria in the tenth–eleventh centuries [Петканова-Тотева 1965: 120–128].¹⁹ Other texts that retained their impact include Old Testament аprocrypha (*sic*) believed to be of Bogomil provenance entitled *Откровение Барухово*, and *Слово за Адам и Ева*, and the аprocryphon *Разумник* touching on both the Testaments. Dualistic elements in folklore include a number of legends recorded in the nineteenth century and published by Ivanov in *Богомилски книги и легенди*, including: *Бог и дяволът създават другарски света, после враждуват помежду си* (*God and the Devil Create the World Together, and Then Become Enemies*), *Бог и дяволът сътрудничат при направата на земята* (*God and the Devil Work Together to Create the World*), *Сътрудничество и вражда между бога и дявола при създаването на света* (*Cooperation and Enmity Between God and the Devil as They Create the World*), *Адамов запис* (*Adam’s Testament*) [Иванов 1925: 327–382].

The controversial problem of the provenance of the dualistic motifs in Bulgarian folklore has not been convincingly resolved. Yordan Ivanov argued that gnostic dualistic ideas were not found in Slavic and proto-Bulgarian myths, and therefore could not have influenced Christian аprocryphal writings, a surmise that has not been disproved [Иванов 1925: 361–382]. Hamilton’s idea of the Iranian (Zurvanist) roots of Bulgarian dualism, possibly imported to the area by the proto-Bulgarians, still needs more research. Given the scarcity of the source material, a conclusive and plausible explanation of the provenance of Balkan dualism may be long in coming. Another challenge to modern anthropology of culture is the underresearched problem of the influence of the dualist motifs on Bulgarian mentality, given that folklore (and Church writings) were the only areas of culture available to the population until the middle of the nineteenth century.

The disproportionate imbalance between the scarce attested facts and the ample fictions they engendered inspired me to examine those aspects that lend themselves to scholarly investigation because they are documented in nineteenth and twentieth century texts of high and popular culture. Bulgarian attitudes towards their own heretical tradition (forgotten over the centuries, and revived in the nineteenth century)

¹⁹ For more information on the subject, see Wrocławski 1991.

are one such aspect. I only rely on texts containing direct and primary references to Bogomilism. My selection of source material is not guided by considerations of genre, since my primary interest was the persuasive function that consolidates all those texts: a function that was variously understood, achieved with various tools, and related to various levels of social reception. In the case of reflection on historiographic texts this produced a certain technical difficulty: to me, historiographic writings were sometimes an important reference work offering current knowledge on the subject of Bogomilism (which is often difficult to verify); at other times they were the object of my study, treated as evidence of the cultural outlook of their authors. To some degree, I was helped in this methodological difficulty by modern historiography, which highlights the importance of subjectivity on historical texts, dominated as they are by the narrative element, where even constataions of fact are acts of interpretation [White 1993: 143–160; see also White 1980]. The paucity of Bulgarian medieval sources on Bogomilism, and the wealth of the literature on the subject – the dearth of archaeological fact combined with an abundance of fictions – validate my approach, which focuses primarily on those texts that, given their general nature, were able to reach a wider readership to become part of the cultural mentality.

My examination of the meanders and internal contradictions found in contemporary Bulgarian thinking on Bogomilism also revealed the strategies through which portrayals of heresy get tailored to the ideological preferences of their authors. On many occasions the project involved not so much identifying the traces of dualism present in their worldviews, as revealing the mechanisms through which the historical memory and religious outlook of the readers get manipulated in the interest of manufacturing ideologically expedient sources of national cultural identity.

1

BOGOMILISM AS A SUBJECT OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES (1762–1944)

By introducing contemplation, rationalism and indifference, it [Bogomilism – G.S.G.] tempered the heat of religious and patriotic feeling, robbing those people of the warmth necessary for armed struggle, the kind of warmth that engenders fanaticism in religion and enthusiasm in patriotism [Grzegorzewski 1883: 77].

This dark doctrine dampened people's love for their homeland, caused divisions in every class of the people, and ultimately led to demoralization. When the Turks appeared on the peninsula, the oppressed Bogomils viewed them as liberators rather than oppressors [Иречек 1929: 289].

Problems of Identity

Those two passages emphasising Bogomilism's negative impact on Bulgarian mentality appeared in writings of two foreign authors who had close ties to nineteenth century Bulgaria. The first is a passage from an essay published in 1883 by a Polish Orientalist, Jan Grzegorzewski; the second comes from a scholarly book by the Czech historian Konstantin Jireček.¹ Despite the considerable differences of scholarly weight and

¹ The book was published in 1876 almost at the same time in Czech and German, followed by a Russian edition in 1877. It was not translated into Bulgarian until 1886.

temperament, both passages offer remarkably similar explanations of the problem of the Manichaean tradition in relation to Bulgarian religious life and social values. Both writers draw attention to the enduring influence of the gnostic worldview on Bulgarian mentality. Their interpretations effectively undermine the cultural image of “the Bulgarian” as a figure moulded by Orthodox Christianity, as portrayed by Paisius of Hilendar, the father of Bulgaria’s national revival writing in the second half of the eighteenth century. This difference was probably connected to general developments in late nineteenth century historiography; however, it is also important to bear in mind that reflection on the past tends to bear the mark of current problems. What was it that prompted the two writers, who were otherwise so loyal to their assumed country and its patriotic narratives,² to draw such far-reaching conclusions from meagre evidence? Could the contemporary Bulgarian identity discourse have been a factor? By the second half of the nineteenth century, how far had that discourse drifted away from its ideological source, Paisius’s *Slavonic-Bulgarian History* (*Славянобългарска история*, 1762)? Paisius’s work, which was inspired by patriotic motives (though it was still rooted in medieval mentality), is generally recognised as the earliest and most important symptom of the burgeoning cultural needs of the collective which in the nineteenth century would solidify into a modern nation. Although at the time of its composition it was not the only text of this type [Апетов 1995: 5–30], Paisius’s history achieved broad resonance in society, and consequently played a crucially influential role in the shaping of Bulgarian culture.

Paisius – a monk from the holy Mount Athos – combined the rhetorical strategies of a *narodен будител* (an awakener of national identity) with the strategies of an Orthodox Christian preacher. As a result, the image of “the Bulgarian” that he was instrumental in shaping, and which would provide the basis for Bulgarian identity discourse in later decades [see Еленков, Даскалов (eds.) 1994], was based on the Christian system of

² Both also spent many years in Bulgaria. Following the country’s liberation from Ottoman rule, Jireček was an important opinion leader in Bulgaria and was involved in creating the structures of the young Bulgarian state, notably as Minister of Education (1881–1882) and director of the National Library (1884). Grzegorzewski had been connected with the Balkans since the Russian-Turkish war (1877–1878). As a correspondent of *Le Figaro* and of the Lwów-based *Gazeta Narodowa*, he was already at that time involved in a number of public and secret missions in Bulgaria, some of which were related to Poland’s independence goals. In 1903–1914 he headed the “Hyacinthaeum” Scholarly Station in the East, an institution based in Sofia (and Constantinople), and he enjoyed a socialite lifestyle in the salons of Sofia; see Reychman 1971; Kaczmarek 2002: 157–176.

values. The figure Paisius held up as an example was a simple rustic: uneducated, but noble in spirit and filled with evangelical virtues, far superior not only to non-Christians but also to members of his own confessional group.³ In Paisius's identity project, this figure was imbued with patriarchal values which served as a solid foundation to buttress the religious and cultural identity of Bulgarians. For Paisius, the roots of Bulgarian identity were embedded in the traditions of the mediaeval Bulgarian state, fatefully ruptured by the Ottoman invasion: a vision where a humble ploughman stood by the side of a brave and kindly tsar who protected the Christian faith and the common people, and propagated culture [see Dąbek-Wirgowa 1989, 1993]. In constructing this image of the past, Paisius relied on a strategy of endorsement for selected events, manifesting itself in a reverential attitude for origins – such as Christianisation, patriarchy, or the origins of the state. An emphasis on historical sources went hand in hand with an emphatic appeal to preserve the Bulgarian language and the ancestral traditions.

You unreasonable and foolish men! Why are you ashamed to call yourselves Bulgarians, why do you not read and speak your own language? Did the Bulgarians not have their own kingdom and state? So many long years did they reign and they were glorious and famed the world over [...]. Throughout the whole Slavic world, the Bulgarians were the most glorious, they were the first to call themselves tsars, the first to have a patriarch, the first to be christianized, they conquered the largest domain [Paisy Hilendarski 2012: 192].

This myth of the Bulgarians as an “elder nation” was a compensatory device; Paisius is divided between sustaining and encouraging the Bulgarians on the one hand, and rebuking them on the other. This internal conflict is presumably a reaction to the discrepancy between how Paisius imagined the collective consciousness (or lack thereof) of his Bulgarian contemporaries, and the model he was proposing. This problem deserves to be examined at some length.

Paisius's *History* first appeared in print (in an abridged form under a changed title) in 1844; the first full edition came out as late as 1885 in the Polish (sic!) city of Lublin, after Bulgaria regained independence [see Korwin-Szymanowski 1981]. In the national revival period, the book circulated in numerous copies.⁴ The first manuscript copy was made as

³ Paisius's own sense of resentment from his ill-treatment at the hands of Greeks probably played a role as well, prompting him to write his work; see Dąbek-Wirgowa 1998.

⁴ More than sixty have been identified to date; see Грашева (ed.) 2003: 33–35.

early as 1765 thanks to the private generosity of Stoyko Vladislavov, a future writer and Bishop of Vratsa, who included a resounding curse in the manuscript on any malefactors who might interfere with its circulation:

Whoever adopts or steals it, let him be accursed and damned by God our Father Almighty and the 12 apostles and the 318 fathers, and the 4 evangelists [cited in Диневков 1959: 17].

The effort and expense involved in distributing the work and ensuring its survival indicate the importance of *History* to its contemporaries. With their support, Paisius did not slip into oblivion like many other monastic writers, and found readers who perused his book looking for answers to their fundamental problems of identity.

Many serious studies have been devoted to the complex phenomenon of the emerging Bulgarian modern national identity. Particularly notable in this context are the achievements of those Bulgarian historians (including historians of literature and culture) who undertook the thorny project of debunking the endless myths surrounding the Bulgarian tradition following the democratic transition of 1989. Still, as Teresa Dąbek-Wirgowa notes, the enormous pressure of the heritage from the national revival period is so pervasive that even modern scholars are not always capable of moving beyond the concepts, values and paradigms which had become consolidated in that period [Dąbek-Wirgowa 1997: 95–97]. One such particularly enduring element is the ambivalence attached to tradition, which tends to shift between the extremes of idolatrous veneration on the one hand, and total rejection on the other. Wrapped up in increasingly elaborate trappings, endorsements of Bulgarian cultural heritage clash with its dramatic disavowals.

In a study entitled “Notes on Self-Colonizing Cultures,” Alexander Kiosev argues that by simultaneously rebuking Bulgarians and reviving the memory of their roots Paisius consolidated the resentment caused by the painful experience of Bulgarian otherness, and in doing so he inadvertently perpetuated the very trauma he was trying to remove [English version: Kiossev n.d.; this is a shortened version of: Къосев 1998]. Despite his success in removing the stigma of the Bulgarians as a nation without history, and replacing it with the pride of having one, the accompanying rebukes and castigations (reflecting the humiliations Paisius experienced at Greek hands) became a lasting element in Bulgarian identity discourse.

Maybe the constitutive traumas can not be overcome and they will occur over and over again in the form of various historical symptoms – as [...] a recurrence of the suppressed? [Kiossev n.d.].

It appears that one particularly valuable contribution to the debate on memory and the traumas of collective identity comes from current reflection on memory inspired by the discoveries of psychoanalysis. In his celebrated article “The Sublime Dissociation of the Past or How to Be(come) What One Is No Longer,” Franklin R. Ankersmit [2001] offered a new perspective on the familiar European experience of a civilisation rejecting an old cultural identity in favour of a new one. As he points out, this process usually occurs in the context of trauma because the repression of an existing identity is a painful process accompanied by forgetting (as dictated by the laws of individual and collective psychology), resulting in a *de facto* loss of the former self. The resulting feeling of profound loss or cultural despair comes from the realisation that no return to the former identity is possible: “a former identity is irrevocably lost forever and superseded by a new historical or cultural identity. Hence, in cases like this any reconciliation of a former and a new identity is categorically out of the question” [Ankersmit 2001: 302]. At the same time, Ankersmit notes,

The new identity is mainly constituted by the trauma of the loss of the former identity – precisely this is its main content [...] This sort of trauma is just as permanent as the loss of the former identity. In this case, our collective identity is the sum of all the scars on our collective soul [...], scars that will never wholly cure, and that will cause in us a continuous and enduring pain [Ankersmit 2001: 302].

Treating Ankersmit’s term of “collective soul” as metaphorical, and therefore ambiguous and in need of clarification, I assume that collective identity is conditioned, but not determined, by the experience of past traumas, whether hidden and repressed, or consciously cultivated through socialisation.

We do not know the nature of the identity of the inhabitants of the Eastern Balkans who were repressed and jettisoned in the process of modernisation. We can only try to read and interpret that identity, hoping to come closer to a relatively plausible model. In fact, a similar project was indirectly tackled in the 1980s by the Bulgarian historian Nikolai Genchev in *Българската култура XV–XIX век (Bulgarian Culture, Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)*. Based on an analysis of the cultural changes in Bulgaria following the Ottoman invasion, Genchev concluded that the changes were conditioned by three factors with long-term consequences: the removal of the pressure of Byzantinism, the loosening of ties with the community of Orthodox Christian Slavic nations (*Slavia Orthodoxa*), and the rupture of contacts with European culture [Генчев 1988: 260]. The resulting void was filled by the Islamic influence

in its Ottoman variant. Although the religious and linguistic differences proved to be an effective barrier to a full orientalization of the Balkan Slavs over a period of five centuries, they nonetheless adopted Ottoman models of social life and daily existence where mandated by law and enforced by state institutions.⁵ As a consequence, the collective identity of modern Bulgarians is defined by a sense of belonging to Orthodox Christianity,⁶ but it is also shaped by Ottoman influence in everyday life (cuisine, interior decoration, legal system, etc.), where it is regarded as no less natural and familiar than Orthodox Christianity.⁷

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the stability of the *Pax Osmana* was already facing serious challenges. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the inhabitants of the Empire were keenly aware of its slow decay leading to a decline in living conditions and a loss of security. Combined with the Herder-influenced nationalisms burgeoning in the neighbouring countries (along with the associated feelings of resentment), those factors probably contributed to a sense of trauma and solitude experienced by the *homo bulgaricus historicus* reanimated by Paisius, now inhabiting a world that was at best indifferent, and at worst actively hostile to the fate of Bulgarians. Isolated from the Ottoman community, until recently consolidated by faith, the *rayas*⁸ were now facing the challenge of having to define an identity of their own in opposition to the various “significant others.”⁹ This process was not taking place in a void. The neighbouring nations regarded as aliens (the Greeks and the Turks) as well as the more distant Europeans were already pre-figured by stereotyped images going back to the fossilised mediaeval tradition: the “false Byzantines,” the “cruel and unclean sons of Hagar,” or the “ruthless crusaders.”

⁵ For more information on the subject, see Georgieva 1995.

⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century, this took the form of a struggle for an autocephalous Bulgarian Orthodox Church (independent of the Greek patriarchy in Constantinople). This project was crowned by success in 1870; see Жечев 1980.

⁷ One interesting voice in this debate is Aleko Konstantinov's *До Чикаго и назад* (*To Chicago and Back* [Константинов 1894]), a series of sketches from the author's trip to America in the late nineteenth century. Regarded in Bulgaria as a cultural and spiritual sophisticate contemptuous of common tastes and customs, Konstantinov reveals his own cultural preferences in *To Chicago and Back*, where he extols the traditional Balkan lifestyle (with its palpable Eastern character) by way of contrast to the American way of life; see Стефанов 2000.

⁸ The primary meaning of *raya* is ‘a subject’; the term was used in the Ottoman Empire to refer to non-Muslim subjects.

⁹ The term was proposed by G. H. Mead [1934]. I am using this word in its broader sense defined by Charles Taylor [1991: 33–41].

The emergence of the modern Bulgarian nation and culture (referred to as “the national revival”)¹⁰ combined with modernisation in a process amounting to a wholesale overhaul of the civilisational paradigm. The experience was not unprecedented in Bulgarian history; a similarly profound transformation followed the introduction of Christianity as a state religion, when the pagan cultures of the proto-Bulgarian Slavic state were subjected to acculturation in the Byzantine mould. Another point of transition was Bulgaria’s incorporation into the civilisation of Islam, attended by a relegation of Christians in terms of legal status. Finally, Bulgaria’s national revival was not only an act of constituting a modern nation but also, as discussed above, a new major process of conversion in which the Ottoman model was discarded in favour of a new social and political order deemed attractive by the Bulgarian elites. On the one hand, this meant that it was difficult to rely on a sense of shared European identity in the inhabitants of the continent’s Balkan peripheries [see Dąbek-Wirgowa 1992], who often felt alienated, especially given that they were regarded as representing an “inferior” (meaning insufficiently exotic) version of the Orient [see Todorova 1997]. On the other hand, Bulgarian culture at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though still part of the essentially mediaeval sphere of *Slavia Orthodoxa Orientalis*¹¹ with its paradigmatic prejudices against the “Latins,” evinced none of the qualities that might interfere with the adoption of the European model. On the contrary, the process of Bulgarian transformation went ahead in a number of areas simultaneously, often taking on forms considered by many nineteenth century writers as overly enthusiastic and threatening to the local tradition. Some members of the intelligentsia reacted to that sense of cultural resentment by seeking refuge in cultural products viewed (not always accurately) as familiar and authentically.¹² For others, this hasty adoption and frenzied exploration of the cultures of the West and modernising Russia was a strategy aimed at eliminating cultural differences (often regarded as an embarrassment to the Bulgarians) in order to securely establish the Bulgarians as rightful members of the modern world [Страшимирова 2000: 61–86].

¹⁰ Rumén Daskalov offers some interesting reflection on the misleading semantics of this term, etymologically meaning “rebirth,” (erroneously) implying that something had existed before; see Даскалов 2002: 13–38.

¹¹ Józef Magnuszewski [1995] appealed for this cultural area to be treated as a separate entity.

¹² For more information on the subject, see Даскалов 1998b.

Inherent in this strategy, however, was a certain pitfall. Europe, which had been dangling a utopian vision of progress in front of its nations since the Enlightenment, was itself undergoing a process of transformation in the wake of the French Revolution, accompanied by fears of a collapse of the values of Western civilisation. This kind of fear was not unprecedented in European history and culture. As the Polish historian of ideas Jerzy Jedlicki notes,

[A] sense of apprehension that world events might be taking a bad turn is as old as the idea of progress itself. In Western culture, the idea of degeneration is an inseparable obverse side of the idea of progress. Both are children of the eighteenth century. The philosophy of the period was less homogenous than it is commonly believed. The Enlightenment had a number of faces, not all of them serene and optimistic. [...] In its earliest stage, the French Revolution appeared to substantiate the beliefs of the enthusiasts, but its abuses caused a rapid change in the philosophical mood in Europe. The poison taken in prison by Condorcet shortly after writing *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* takes on a symbolic dimension [Jedlicki 2000: 25–29].

Unsurprisingly, those Bulgarians who were disappointed with the European axiological uncertainties quickly became disillusioned and profoundly frustrated after coming into contact with the European values that were supposed to be an antidote to Bulgarian cultural retardation. As they adapted the European cultural paradigm for their own purposes, the Bulgarian elites tasted bitter disappointment with what the Enlightenment had to offer even before the process of secularisation in society had run its course. At the same time, nineteenth century Bulgarian culture (in spite of its peripheral position within the broader picture of European culture) did not manage to steer clear of many of its problems, such as xenophobia or oikophobia, frequently affecting intellectuals since the Enlightenment and leading them to "a repudiation of inheritance and home," i.e. of all values associated with locality and familiarity [see Scruton 2004: 36]. The latter attitude, present to a greater or lesser extent since the earliest stages of the formation of a Bulgarian national culture, manifested itself in two ways: either through an abhorrence of the local tradition, perceived as negative baggage and a potential threat to modernisation, or through a dislike for European culture marked by an uneasy mix of universalist pretensions and abrasive nihilism that negated the idea of progress. This self-imposed exile from the "comfortable" home of patriarchal tradition (which previously served as a safeguard of meaning in that it defined an individual's place in a world permeated by the sacred) failed to produce a sense of belonging either in the new,

national home [Dąbek-Wirgowa 1988: 64], or in the alienated world of European culture afflicted by a prevalent crisis of values.

To meet the growing and changing needs of an internally heterogeneous community, this variety of overlapping influences produced an increasingly complex discourse of identity. Identity debates were often triggered by external influence, and repeatedly invoked those areas of culture which had become erased from collective memory [Halbwachs 1992]. The processes of managed remembrance and forgetting, which had been set in motion by Paisius, went on to produce competing projects of national identity, working in opposition to the orthodox model. Despite the experience of oppression and confusion in a world of contradictory values, however, the West (occasionally represented by Russia) was never ultimately devalued as a *significant other*, and continued to be regarded as a stable point of reference in the discourse of Bulgarian identity. Although the exact status and position of Western culture would shift repeatedly over the course of the twentieth century (often as a result of institutional pressures), the figure of the *significant other* in Bulgarian culture retained its Western character.

As interpreted by Kiosev, Bulgaria's nineteenth century opening to Western values amounted to a sacralisation (or even deification) of the West in a desperate attempt to replace Bulgarian values with alien ones, which Kiosev argued produced the binary opposition of Ours/Foreign as categories based on a complex of inferiority [Kiosev n.d.]. In order to debunk the deceptive rationalisations meant to alleviate the trauma involved in the birth of a new nation, Kiosev rejects the metaphor of "revival," rooted in more than two centuries of the Bulgarian discourse of identity. Kiosev dismisses the idea of a Bulgarian revival as misleading, and embraces instead Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community [see Anderson 1991: 6] to argue the primary constitutive factor for the Bulgarian nation was the persistent complex of insufficiency and absence inculcated by Paisius, leading to culture-making compensatory action:

The Birth of the Nation manifests itself always as a Re-Birth, as a Revival of the Nation. The new modern type of culture and collective constructs by necessity a historical Narrative of its own – it invents for itself a far going historical Past that allows it to identify itself with phenomena which are absolutely different in structure – medieval Empires and ancient philosophers, rural magic and rituals, kings, dynasties and saints, patriarchal sexual ethics, sometimes even mythological ancestors or transcendental origins of the nation. All this is meant to self-convince such a culture that its own historical time has not started at the traumatic point but has been contin-

uous from some honorable Past towards the glorious Future of the Nation. In this perspective, the humiliating birth-trauma of such cultures seems to be merely a transitory unpleasant incident, which will be overcome and entirely forgotten during the stream of History – the provisional and accidental Absence of civilization will be replaced through its happy Presence [Kiossev n.d.].

Undoubtedly, the Bulgarian elites (which were by no means an exception in the broader European context of the time) regarded the modernising offer of the West as an opportunity to consolidate its ethnic and cultural community around the borrowed concept of the nation to counter the threat of assimilation from the Greeks. And although the modern Bulgarian nation was taking shape thanks to the efforts of its burgeoning intelligentsia, happening as it were before its very eyes, that process was not taking place in a cultural vacuum. Moreover, local inheritance must have been regarded as of value worthy of protection, significant enough to be perceived as a positive quality distinguishing the Bulgarians from other human communities. In the context of Kiossev’s research it is perhaps more valid to frame the modernisation process not so much in terms of an absence of civilisation preceding its arrival, but rather as a painful but voluntary process of producing a uniquely Bulgarian interpretation of an adapted model of civilisation, a process that incorporated the community’s communicative and cultural memory [Assmann, Czaplicka 1995].

Jan Kieniewicz, a Polish historian who in the 1980s studied the connections between European civilisation and the emergence of nations, noted that the emergence of ties of national identity was tantamount to “developing the original elements in one’s own culture, in the local communities, in keeping with the borrowed model of civilization” [Kieniewicz 1986: 171]. Kieniewicz accepts that memory is a necessary precondition for the emergence of a sense of national identity, however his emphasis is different from Kiossev’s as his model leaves more room for the effort of transforming the inheritance, whatever it might be. The point of departure is not an absence but rather a process of self-adaptation to a model regarded as attractive – a process of pragmatic acculturation rather than symbolic violence. At the same time, Kieniewicz (whose reflection focused on the Iberian Peninsula and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) posed questions about the effects of such acculturation, which he believed was capable of producing self-contained quasi-civilisations in the peripheries of Europe [Kieniewicz 1986: 179]. This hypothesis of the Polish researcher seems promising in the Balkan context, and it brings the point forcefully home that extraversion and introversion are mutually conditioned within modern identity discourse, and the ulti-

mate consensus achieved by any culture should not be viewed through the lens of evolutionist fallacies.¹³

Coming back to the problem of memory, Maria Bobrownicka in her book *Narkotyki mitu* (*The Narcotic of Myth* [Bobrownicka 1995]) repeatedly refers to the problem of the civilisational retardation of the Balkan Slavs before the national revival, describing their ahistoricism (predicated on the structures of mythological thinking) in depreciative terms. However, such assertions are questionable in view of the nature of human thinking, especially common sense thinking. In “Presenting the Past: Reflections on Myth and History,” Kirsten Hastrup [1987] recommends that distinctions between history and myth should not be made carelessly. Repeated attempts to read the past should always be treated with some suspicion, as artificial constructs subordinated to the principles of mythological thinking. Myth as well as history serves as the material used by collective cultural memory which, as Jan Assmann notes,

always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation. Cultural memory exists in two modes: first in the mode of the potentiality of the archive whose accumulated texts, images, and rules of conduct act as a total horizon, and second in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectified meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance [Assmann, Czaplicka 1995: 130].

This means that the traumatic experience of change to cultural identity, imposed on the Bulgarians by the elites calling for modernisation, can be described in terms of the reconstruction of collective memory, a remodelling of the figures of remembrance which preserves only “that which society in each era can reconstruct within its frame of reference.”¹⁴ Moreover, in periods of modernisation, experts have a particular role to play in the process. The place of an anonymous mediaeval polyhistor or the collective subject of creative folklore is now taken by a new figure, namely the writer, who claims the mantle of authority on things past

¹³ In the 1970s, some Bulgarian literary historians developed the notion (inspired by the Soviet researcher Georgi Gachev, and based on marxist theory of stages in cultural development) of the accelerated development of Bulgarian literature. This local adaptation of the evolutionist paradigm served to formulate the thesis that Bulgarian literature of the nineteenth century had completed all of the phases necessary for its appropriate development rapidly making up the lost distance to European literature (regarded as the default model).

¹⁴ This idea of Maurice Halbwachs is cited in Assmann and Czaplicka’s *Collective Memory* [Assman, Czaplicka 1995: 130].

and future, and wants to shape collective memory according to his own notions of history. According to findings of memory studies, this kind of operation would be doomed to fail if the creative vision of the past bore no relationship to the group’s normative ideas about itself.

Paisius’s proposal must have taken into account the preferences of the community it targeted. This ensured the success of the project of educating society, undertaken in the century that followed; the inventory of deficits was gradually replaced in collective thinking by a list of assets, based on revitalising the memory of glorious deeds from the past, also described by scholars as an invented tradition [Hobsbawm 1983].

This involved a selective approach to past events, where patterns and compositions were selected or manufactured to suit current needs, and repressing those events which were considered shameful, or even accidental but embarrassing to the community [see Jedlicki 1987: 113–129].¹⁵ This immaculate portrayal of the Bulgarians as a Slavic and Orthodox Christian community was airbrushed and retouched on an ongoing basis in tandem with the growing scale and availability of historical knowledge.

The meanderings of Bulgarian history provided ample fodder for speculation to people seeking to devise a vision of national ethnogenesis that would ensure a maximum amount of glory and political gain. Suffice it to say that the two centuries in which a modern national Bulgarian identity emerged and took shape have ultimately produced as many as three different mythologised visions of the nation’s ethnic and cultural origins. The modern researcher Rumen Daskalov offers the following ironic comment:

[W]hen we want to be belligerent, we are proto-Bulgarians first and foremost; when we need to be peace-loving, we play up our Slavic blood; and when we want to come across as cultured – we talk about our Thracian heritage [Даскалов 1994: 30].

¹⁵ Jedlicki points out the consequences of such abuses of history, noting the Judaeo-Christian roots (among others) of the sense of collective responsibility for the deeds of ancestors, which is our civilisation are a quintessence of the notion of original sin. This responsibility is as it were the obverse side of the need for a glorious pedigree (real or imagined) offering a sense of identity and belonging. The modern metaphorical understanding of inheritance, which transcends the natural ties of blood, makes it a very capacious concept; it has come to comprise a very broad set of elements that form the tradition of a given community, providing “even the least of its members a sense of ideas, collective power, and permanence.” The sense that a community is legitimised by the achievements of its ancestors is implicitly connected with a sense of shared responsibility for their misdeeds. As Jedlicki notes, this understanding of the connections with the past is a form of moral duty, which goes against the widely accepted liberal right to “choose one’s tradition”; see Jedlicki 1987.

Plainly, each of those ideas of the nation could easily work as a stand-alone national identity, complete with its own set of mythologems.

The Slavic model (in a separatist version proposed by Paisius and an integralist version proposed by the Russophiles associated with Lyuben Karavelov and Vasil Aprilov) was exploited by nineteenth century Slavophilia, the *narodniks*, the Socialists and, in the twentieth century, by the political left. Under Todor Zhivkov's regime it took on the freakish form of Communist nationalist policies.

The proto-Bulgarian model – subordinated in the interwar period and during World War II to the interests of national ideology with a pro-German orientation – was used under Zhivkov to serve as the founding myth during the celebrations of the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state (1981). Following the collapse of Communism, this model has staged a comeback with a new generation of myth-makers looking for arguments to consolidate Bulgaria's position within the new political situation. In many cases, such arguments emphasised the non-Slavic and non-Orthodox Christian dimension of Bulgarian origins [Обретенков 1997: 78–79].

The Thracian myth – positing the ancient, Orphic origins of Bulgarian spirituality, with Bulgarians coexisting with various ethnoses and cultures, and enduringly adopting the most valuable elements of that inheritance, was nurtured with particular care in the times of Zhivkov. In parallel to its research activities, the Institute of Thracian Studies established within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences propagated a portrayal of the Bulgarians as rightful heirs to the spirituality of the Orphic Rhodopes.

A scholarly analysis of those models by Bulgarian researchers [see Krusteva et al. 1996; Еленков 1994; Богомилова 1995] has defined the values attributed to each:

proto-Bulgarians	Slavs	Thracians*
warlike	peaceful	peaceful
pagans/Bogomils**	pagans/Christians/ Bogomils	followers of Orphic cults/proto- -Christians/proto-Bogomils
just	gentle	gentle
pragmatic	spiritual	spiritual
state-makers	passive	passive

* Nowadays, nobody in Bulgaria takes seriously the supposed Thracian ethnogenesis of the nation, but the Thracian substrate is believed to be one of the constitutive elements of the Bulgarian nation.

** This is a reference to the mythical figure of Boyan the Magus, son of Tsar Simeon, grandson of Khan Boris. Boyan the Magus is sometimes identified with Bogomil himself, see pp. 85-97.

Recurring in all those projects is the figure of the pagan Bulgarian as a one-time bringer of “real” civilisational values to the Balkans, far superior to the cultural tradition of Byzantium (primarily in ethical terms).¹⁶ This anti-Byzantine stance, conditioned by historical experience and validated by national mythology, is seen by many scholars as the underlying cause of the disparaging treatment of the Orthodox Church by modern Bulgarians. Despite the fact that Orthodox Christianity remains a token of national identification (even though, scholars argue [Николчев 1999: 382], it fails to satisfy the religious needs of Bulgarians), this makes Bulgarians receptive to available ideological alternatives. This is why the apparently anachronistic Thracian model – interpreted in terms of Bulgarian openness to spirituality and vague mysticism, deeply rooted in the cultural tradition of Bulgarian lands – may be currently undergoing a renaissance of sorts.¹⁷

This collective portrait of the Bulgarians turns out to be a Janus-like construct, fundamentally different from the project once put forward by Paisius, which now turns out to be merely one piece in a complex mosaic, and not always a central one at that [Апетов 1995: 5–73].

An Obstacle to Progress

By the time the memory of Bogomilism became reinvoked in the second half of the nineteenth century,¹⁸ the concept of the Bulgarian ethnic and cultural origins had not experienced the rifts discussed above. The problem of Bogomilism became subsumed into a general reflection on the religious attitudes of Bulgarians and their influence on the nation’s history. In a way, this approach went against the grain of Paisius’s project, whose ideological strategies did not involve religious apostasy, and ruled out any

¹⁶ The proto-Bulgarian inscriptions carved into stone are a good example of the proto-Bulgarian sense of superiority towards Byzantium. One such inscription, known as *Надпис от Филипи* (ninth century), probably commemorating the military assistance provided by Khan Omurtag to Emperor Michael II during the uprising of Thomas the Slav (822–823), says, among other things: “Whoever seeks the truth, the god sees that, and whoever lies, the god sees that. The Bulgarians have done a lot of good to the Christians which the Christians have forgotten, but the god sees that” [Bulgarian translation cited in Божилов (ed.) 1983: 45]; for more information, see Бешевлиев 1979.

¹⁷ Possibly contributing to this phenomenon are the publications of Alexander Fol and Ivan Marazov, Thracian scholars particularly active in the 1970s.

¹⁸ In 1878 Bulgaria regained political autonomy, a fact which cannot be regarded as a demarcation line in culture; some scholars, including Wojciech Gałazka, argue that “the process of revival does not seem to be fully complete to this day” [Gałazka 1992a: 17].

duality in reflections on tradition. Although his integrity as a historical autodidact forced Paisius to acknowledge the fact that heresies were once rampant in Bulgarian lands, he treated those as symptomatic of a kind of overabundance, which he viewed as no less shameful than a lack of historical memory. Unsurprisingly, Paisius claimed that Bogomilism was eradicated in the times of the second Bulgarian state:

Thus, the Bulgarian Kingdom fell ultimately under Greek power because of Samoil's, the Bulgarian king's sin, and because of the Novatian and Armenian heresies that had been multiplying in Ohrid's land among the Bulgarians. But later Saint Ilarion, Bishop Meglinski and Saint Theophilact eradicated and annihilated completely these accursed heresies from Bulgaria [Paisy Hilendarski 2012: 233].

In his attempt to identify the causal links connecting past historical events, Paisius diagnosed Bogomilism (which he described as an Armenian heresy) as the root cause that led to the collapse of the first Bulgarian state, resulting in the Byzantine occupation. The conclusion that apostasy was a factor leading to a national catastrophe and misfortune corresponded with Paisius's idea of providential interventions in history, "rewarding good deeds and punishing evil ones." In this logic, the collapse of the state was a divine punishment for the sin of apostasy committed by the Bulgarians.¹⁹

There is no evidence to suggest that Paisius engaged in any more considered reflection on Bogomilism. Given the modest scale of the achievements of Bulgarian theology, the development of historical research in the following century led to a rush of Bulgarian writers referencing the Bogomil tradition in ways that often played fast and loose with historical facts. Notably, "in nineteenth and twentieth century national states, historiography was taking over many of the awareness-building functions once reserved for religion and philosophy" [Werner 2004: 15].

Before 1850, research on the history of heretical movements was mainly conducted in Western scholarship [Wolf 1712; Oeder 1734; Schmidt 1849], but in the second half of the nineteenth century the focus shifted to the Slavic east of Europe, producing an increased general awareness of newly discovered historical sources. In 1857, Ivan Kukuljević-Sakcinski published the *Sermon Against the Heretics* by Presbyter Cosmas (tenth century) in a journal (*Arkiv za povjestnicu jugoslavensku*), the earliest source of evidence about the Bogomil presence in the period of the first

¹⁹ True to his interpretive categories, Paisius similarly attributed the Turkish occupation to divine punishment for the sin of conflicts within Christianity.

Bulgarian state, known to Kukuljević-Sakcinski in a sixteenth century copy. The following year, the Bulgarian historian Spiridon P. Palauzov discovered fragments of *The Tsar Boril Synodic*, an anti-Bogomil work by Tsar Boril (1211). In 1860, the Russian Slavist Osip Bodianski saw into print the *Life of St. Theodosius of Tarnovo*, another important source of information about the efforts to suppress the Bogomil heresy in the late period of the second Bulgarian state. A veritable explosion of research on Bogomilism followed in later decades, initiated by Croatian and Russian scholars and continuing to this day; notable contributions in this context were made by Bozhidar Petranović, Aleksander Gildferding, Nikolaj A. Osokin, W. Lewicki, Franjo Rački, Konstantin F. Radchenko, Michail Popruzhenko, and others, too many to mention here – suffice it to say that a bibliography of research on Bogomilism published in 1997 comprised a total of 2,514 items [Гечева 1997]. Bulgarian scholars writing on Bogomilism in the nineteenth century included Marin Drinov [Дринов 1911a; 1911b], Raicho Karolev [Каролев 1871], Nikola Filipov [Филипов 1899] and others, spurring a general interest in this forgotten aspect of Bulgarian history and opening public debate on the importance of Bogomilism to the Bulgarian historical experience. This debate took place in the context of heated ideological conflicts, with historiographical integrity often falling victim to religious or ideological reductionism.

The influence of Russian Orthodox thought was likewise not without influence on the Bulgarian interpretations of Bogomilism, often providing the inspiration to take a broad perspective going beyond the strictly dogmatic approaches. In *За богомилството (On Bogomilism)*, a study published in Braila in 1871, Karolev cites the authority of Russian authors to appraise Bogomilism as a “complete and deep deformation of the very essence of Christianity.” Similar to Presbyter Cosmas, Karolev attributed the emergence of the Bogomils to the prevalence of paganism among the people and the lax moral standards of the Bulgarian clergy. Drawing on the monilinear Enlightenment idea of history,²⁰ he emphasised the destructive aspects of the Bogomil doctrine, including its profound pessimism, which posed an obstacle to development and progress [Каролев 1871, 7–8: 106]. Karolev’s views were taken up by two historians of Orthodox Christianity, Dimitar Tsukhlev and Ivana Snegarov. Tsukhlev’s 1911 book *История на българската църква (History of the Bulgarian Church* [Цухлев 1911]) and Snegarov’s 1928 study *Поява, същност и значение на богомилството (The Emergence, Nature and Importance of Bogomilism* [Снегаров 1928]) followed Karolev in diagnosing the historical factors that conditioned Bogomilism and appraising its destructive influence

²⁰ I borrow this term from Andrzej Wierzbicki [1999].

on social mentality and a traditional social order. This said, Snegarov noted instances of Bogomil social activity and collaboration with some Bulgarian rulers, undertaken to revive “the early Christian brotherhood of the apostles,” a comment that probably reveals certain shortcomings in Snegarov’s theological competence.

Those scholarly attitudes were strongly coloured by a negative opinion of the Bogomil neo-Manichaeism, which they believed entailed a principled rejection of the state. The only positive aspects of Bogomilism were considered to include the movement’s political dimension, since Bogomils sided with their rulers at critical junctures of Bulgarian history as allies in conflicts with the Byzantines or the Latins. Similar anti-Catholic and anti-Byzantine complexes are also palpable in the writings of the eminent Bulgarian historian M. Drinov. In a 1869 study *Исторически преглед на българската църква от самото и начало до днес* (*A Historical Survey of the Bulgarian Church from Its Earliest Beginnings to the Present Day*) [Дринов 1911a], Drinov highlighted the state-building aspects of Bogomil activity, emphasising their influence on Western Europe, where they supposedly stimulated a struggle against the “powerful and dangerous Catholic Church.” In another study, *Южние славяне и Византия в X веке* (*Southern Slavs and Byzantium in the Tenth Century*) Drinov went a step further, offering a positive interpretation of the Bogomils, whom he portrayed as a predominantly popular movement, emerging in reaction to growing Byzantine cultural pressures coinciding with a conflict between the Orthodox Church and the boyars who sought to restore the old pagan religion [Дринов 1911b]. In this interpretation, the anti-Byzantine potential was consistently viewed as an unquestioned value of Bogomilism. In both cases, Drinov was defining the importance of the heresy through the lens of the attitudes of its adherents towards outside powers, namely the institutions of the Latin and Byzantine Churches,²¹ united in their hostility to the idea of an autocephalous Bulgarian Church, so dear to Bulgarian patriots in the period of national revival.

A similar appraisal of Bogomilism, largely aligned with the ideas promoted by nineteenth century Bulgarian historians, appeared in Bulgarian literature in the works of its doyen, Ivan Vazov, who at the height of his powers was already affectionately referred to by his compatriots as “the grandfather.” In Vazov’s understanding, national identity was a finished

²¹ The sources of the anti-Catholic phobia in Bulgarian culture has been attributed to the trauma of the crusades, in crusaders were known to treat Orthodox Christians as pagans, with all the drastic consequences this entailed. This is documented in a well-known thirteenth century source, *Narrative of the Martyrs of Zograf*.

and immutable construct, precluding any internal dynamics of negotiation. His outlook on national history was essentially the same.

In his two historical novels, *Светослав Тертер* (*Svetoslav Terter*, 1902) and *Иван Александър* (*Ivan Alexander*, 1906), Vazov showed a particular interest in the complex problems of the second Bulgarian state; in trying to diagnose the causes of its collapse [Mozejko 1967: 131] he was touching on the most sensitive site of collective memory. Vazov, who regarded statehood as a supreme value, took an accordingly simplistic, clear-cut approach to appraisals of historical events, his characters slotting neatly into the categories of patriot or traitor. Edward Mozejko has noted how this general strategy shaped Vazov’s opinion of Bogomilism [Mozejko 1967: 132], and argued that Vazov’s appraisal of the heresy is marked by a degree of gradation, from moderately negative in *Светослав Тертер*, to unambiguously hostile in *Иван Александър* [Mozejko 1967: 133]. Although Mozejko’s observation appears to be by and large correct, and his “state-making” line of interpretation helps unlock Vazov’s meanings, the facts of the case appear to be rather more complex.

In *Светослав Тертер*, a thirteenth century Bogomil community gathered around a good feudal lord who cares for his people and for the country, spontaneously decides to join in the struggle for Bulgaria’s independence, currently facing a threat from the venal tsar and the invading Tartar hordes. Guided by a sense of justice and acting in the interest of self-preservation, the Bogomils choose to stand by their master, whom they regard as an unquestioned moral authority. Described by their feudal master as “good Christians” and “brethren,” the Bogomils repay him with loyalty and moral consideration. The two estates represented by the characters live in complete harmony. Perhaps for ideological reasons, the portrayal of the Bogomils in *Светослав Тертер* is by no means negative. In fact, the novel appears to evince signs of Vazov’s fascination with the movement, or at least shows no signs that he had come to a negative opinion on the subject. As much is suggested by the narrator’s commentary which praises the value of Bogomil writings as the fruit of “mystical fantasy.” Vazov emphasises the indigence and suffering of the people, an attitude which likewise appears to be sending a compassionate message of understanding of the Bogomils, who retain moral purity and pursue spiritual aspirations despite facing grinding poverty and economic oppression. By describing the Bogomil apocrypha as the spiritual food of the people – unsophisticated perhaps, but also filled with mysterious poetry [Mozejko 1967: 94] – Vazov was actually elevating the status of those writings. Spirituality, which is

always regarded as positive in Bulgarian culture, is an indicator of the movement's high, non-materialist values. As an illustration, Vazov incorporated into his narrative a piece of pseudo-Bogomil apocrypha which he entitled *Въпросите на св. Ивана* (*The Questions of St. John*):

And before the Coming of the Lord, out of the abyss of heaven will come the Antichrist. On his head he will have hairs like arrows, his eyes will be as luminous as the morning star, and his fingers will be as sharp as sickles. And then God will hurl thunder and lightning on the Antichrist, and he will turn into dust, and the wind will disperse it to the ends of the earth. And when the Antichrist is wiped off the face of the earth, there will be resurrection of the dead, those who lie in graves and in the entrails of animals, and at the bottom of the sea. Then the whole earth will be set on fire together with the forests, mountains and cities; winds will blow from the four ends of the world, blowing all the dust away. The earth will be as white and clean as paper, without mountains and ravines, flat as a board. Then the Son of God will appear and the Last Judgement will begin. An angelic trumpet will sound, which will be heard from the seventh heaven all the way down to hell [Вазов 1980b: 93–94].

The text is a compilation of passages from pieces of a fifth century Greek apocryphon widely distributed in the Slavic lands of the tenth and eleventh centuries, known in scholarship as the *Apocryphal Revelation of John the Evangelist*. Vazov may have known that source, which he mistook for a Bogomil text, from an 1873 edition by Vatroslav Jagić or a later publication by Ivan Franko (published in Lviv) [Франко 1896, 1898, 1902].²² The version appearing in the novel is redacted, a fact that did not escape the attention of those writers who followed the literature on Bogomilism. The chronology of the publication process suggests that Vazov's text was then used by Dr. Mladen Panchov [Панчов 1907: 23], who cited Vazov's text almost verbatim with no extra commentary as an example of Bogomil writings. As a result of Vazov's standing as a cultural authority, this erroneous identification was perpetuated in later publications, though in fairness it needs to be borne in mind that we are dealing with a period before the publication of Ivanov's *Богомилски книги и легенди*, when no systematic knowledge of local apocryphal literature was yet available in Bulgaria.

The Bogomil episode in *Светослав Тертер* essentially reconciled two different aspects: the people's democratic right to rationalise the origins

²² For more information about the most important editions of the text, see Петканова (ed.) 1981: 396.

of evil in an intellectually accessible way, and the political aspects of national interest and national security.

In his later novel, *Иван Александър*, which is set in the waning years of the second Bulgarian state [see Mozejko 1967: 129–135], Vazov no longer evinces the same kind of fascination with the “mysticism of the people.”²³ The book portrays a country in a state of disintegration caused by the moral depravity of the tsar, who is sinfully enamoured with a beautiful Jewish woman. Vazov succumbs to anti-Semitic prejudice²⁴ in portraying the anti-Bulgarian attitudes of Sarah’s fellow Jews, who disregard the good of the state and act solely in collective self-interest. Focused on his personal problems and ensnared by Sarah, Ivan Alexander was guilty of the sin of omission, argues the narrator, because his efforts to root out the state’s internal enemies were too lethargic. Those internal enemies were not only Jews but also various heretics, including the Bogomils:

Indeed, in the middle of the fourteenth century, the time in which those events were taking place, Bulgaria had become a stage for daring and mendacious teachers of false heretical doctrines. Planted centuries earlier, Bogomilism was gaining ground at the speed of an elemental force, flooding Orthodoxy with its turbulent waves, and undermining the foundations of the church and state with its destructive influence [Вазов 1980a: 235].

Vazov updates the interpretative categories of Paisius of Hilendar to lay the blame for that spiritual and political disaster at the feet of Byzantium – an inexhaustible source of corruption and intrigue leading to moral lassitude and loss of spiritual purity in Orthodox Christianity [Вазов 1980a: 235]. Misleadingly (though perhaps acting out of ignorance rather than malice), Vazov illustrated his anti-Byzantine stereotypes with material drawn from hesychasm [see Leloup 1998; Palmer, Sherrard, Ware

²³ We do now know what happened between 1902 and 1906. Perhaps Vazov dallied briefly with Freemasonry, which had certain hermetic sympathies. This is suggested by circumstantial evidence: Vazov’s brother was a member of a masonic lodge, as was Vazov’s closest friend and fellow writer Konstantin Velichkov. Although too tenuous to draw firm conclusions, those facts may be relevant in the context of reflection on ideological migration and influence; see Богданов 1994: 73–75; В. Георгиев 1986: 20, 159.

²⁴ Anti-Semitism is rare in Bulgarian culture, only manifesting itself more strongly only in writers educated in Russia – Vazov and Lyuben Karavelov. In the notes from his travels in Bulgaria [*Записки за България и за българите (Notes About Bulgaria and Bulgarians)*], first published in Russian in 1867, followed by a Bulgarian edition in 1874] Karavelov included an anti-Semitic description of the Jews of Sofia and the city’s Jewish quarter.

(eds.) 1979], a great mystical movement within Orthodox Christianity, which he mistakenly attributed to Bogomilism:

Teodoritus, a monk who had fled from Constantinople, arrived in Tarnovo. He preached the ludicrous doctrine of the Hesychasts, the most extreme and savage expression of the Bogomil heresy. It was a mixture of the most vulgar pagan beliefs [...] with the most outlandish doctrines. He won over for Hesychasm great numbers of the common people, as well as high-born townfolk and boyars. His success encouraged other Byzantine monks who were Bogomils. Having learned a little medicine, he treated patients for free, and he insisted that he could see God. And his authority grew in the eyes of the superstitious people [Вазов 1980a: 235].²⁵

By failing to distinguish between the fourteenth century heresiarchs and the disciples of St. Gregory Palamas, Vazov (a self-proclaimed devoted adherent of Orthodox Christianity) was either inadvertently exposing his ignorance about his own religious tradition, or perhaps manifesting his disapproval for its mystical variety.²⁶ It appears that although Vazov was not familiar with the exact nature of the ideologies he was criticising, he saw their common denominator as ecstatic experience ultimately culminating in a negation of reality, a reaction characteristic of a chiliastic mentality.²⁷ Vazov's resistance to the destruction of non-spiritual values appears to be motivated by the idea of salvaging some kind of inner core or centre. Taking place on the margins of his narrative about the tsar's liaisons is a hidden struggle against the eruptive chiliastic mindset (which he never identifies by name but appears to treat as part and parcel of the mystical movements he disparages). Vazov, who was not much of a conservative quietist, apparently used his journalistic zeal to justify and validate his own nation. He devotes considerable attention to descriptions of the harsh living conditions among the population, seeking to explain their obscurantism and superstitions with economic deprivation. His perspective is predicated on Enlightenment values, grouping any and all manifestations of mysticism under the single umbrella term of "superstition":

²⁵ This passage is a paraphrase of the *Life of St. Theodosius of Tarnava* by Patriarch Kalistes; see *Пространно житие* 1986.

²⁶ This may be the product of possible mutual influence between Vazov and Pančov. There are many apparent parallels between Vazov and Pančov, who likewise regarded hesychasm as a religious sect; see Панčov 1907: 39–40.

²⁷ "Chiliastic mentality severs all relationship with those phases of historical existence which are in daily process of becoming in our midst. It tends at every moment to turn into hostility towards the world, its culture, and all its works and earthly achievements, and to regard them as only premature gratifications of a more fundamental striving which can only be adequately satisfied in Kairos" [Mannheim 1954: 198].

And the uneducated, ignorant people, sunk in deep superstition, impoverished by the rapacity of the boyars [...], listened carefully to those fanatical apostles. [...] A raw, dark mysticism had gripped spirits, lies and delusion found fertile ground in the darkened consciousness of those unenlightened crowds, who had already been prepared by the centuries-old Bogomil heresy, which had become a religion on a par with the Orthodox Church, ready to accept the most damaging seeds of spiritual and physical decay [Вазов 1980a: 237].

According to Vazov, vulgar materialism and primitive mysticism had always operated in the Bulgarian soul as mutually conditioning influences, breeding unchecked in the absence of spiritual assistance from the Bulgarian clergy [Вазов 1980a: 237].²⁸ In this sense, Vazov’s opinion about fourteenth century clergy mirrored the negative opinion of its moral condition as expressed by Presbyter Cosmas in the tenth century – despite the fact that Vazov’s novel is set in a period of great flourishing in Bulgarian culture, notably including the writings of the Tarnovo school, which over the following century continued to pollinate intellectual life in those areas of *Slavia Orthodoxa* that remained outside of the borders of the Ottoman Empire. In moulding the facts of his novel to fit his agenda, Vazov cherry picks historical facts, leaving out those aspects of history that go against his own vision of the world. As a moralist, this leads him into a cul-de-sac of factual distortion. He reveals his motivations in an afterword appended to the novel, containing some reflections on the role of chance in history. According to Vazov, Ivan Alexander’s transgressions triggered an avalanche of significant events, linked by patterns of causality which are discernible with hindsight, revealing an expansion of evil originating from sin. In this sense, Vazov argues, it is not coincidental that Bulgaria was ultimately conquered by Sultan Bayezid, grandson of Sarah and Ivan Alexander.²⁹ Vazov’s speculations, in which he earnestly seeks to uncover the “mystical” (meaning: demonic) links

²⁸ “[...] the clergy, ignorant and dull in the dead atmosphere of its purely ceremonial religion, deeply fallen, with no energy or authority, had become a passive spectator of the element of moral decay” [Вазов 1980a: 237].

²⁹ “Alexander’s marriage to a Jewish woman, a great political and religious temptation at that time, was an event fraught with fatal consequences. It was because of this that [...] the disintegration of the anyhow weakened empire. [...] Sarah’s son [Ivan Shishman – G.S.G.] was also the last Bulgarian tsar, weak and unable to defend the state against the Turks, and he saw its defeat. Sarah also gave birth to [...] Mara – renowned in folk songs – later wife of Murad II, who bore him a son Bayezid I, the conqueror of Bulgaria, who in 1393 turned Tarnovo into ruins. One cannot but wonder about this concurrence of historical circumstances. [...] whether in this case we cannot say about Bulgaria what historians say about Troy – that it fell over because of a woman?” [Вазов 1980a: 294].

between events, indicate a desire to find unifying meaning in historical trauma, corroborating Mannheim's old thesis that historical conservatism is mainly instinctive, focused on the "impulsive, irrational factors which furnish the real basis for the further development of the state and society" [Mannheim 1954: 106].

The ambiguity in Vazov's appraisal of the place of Bogomilism in history was therefore a product of his heterogeneous political and religious interpretive criteria.

One important thinker in the interwar period who not only developed further but also modified the interpretive strategies used by Vazov was the Bulgarian historian Peter Mutafchiyev. When he was working on his essay in the 1930s, there was already a strong pro-Bogomil current in Bulgarian culture, which Mutafchiyev opposed, objecting to any positive appraisals of Bogomilism in Bulgarian cultural memory. Based on his careful study of Bogomil cosmogony in the celebrated 1934 essay *Поп Богомил и свети Иван Рилски* (*Priest Bogomil and St. Ivan of Rila*) [Муџаџчиев 1934]) he made Bogomilism responsible for exerting a destructive influence on Bulgarian mentality, resulting in centuries of apathy in the face of evil:

Nothing was more alien to Bogomils than the desire for social transformation. Had their teachings contained any socio-reformist tendencies, those would have been in complete contradiction with their own dogma. For, relying on the basic idea that the world and all that supports it is the work of Satan, Bogomilism had only one logical outcome: a conclusion pointing to the absolute meaninglessness of any attempt to change that which exists. At best, all efforts would lead to nothing but a modification of something that is fundamentally unchangeable, because its existence was determined by a will whose power weighed over all earthly things, hence was stronger than people. Therefore, any transformation here would represent a new, more perfect realisation of that will, an even more complete triumph [Муџаџчиев 1994: 362].

From the perspective of the nation, Mutafchiyev believed that the Bogomil attitude of detachment from the world – which they regarded as the work of Satan – took on the least productive form possible, namely an attitude of nihilism and humble, passive endurance. Faced with the threats to Bulgarian statehood looming on the horizon in the fourteenth century, he argued, this attitude facilitated the Turkish conquest of the country. Like Vazov, Mutafchiyev attributed the religious indifference of the Bulgarians to the specific qualities of Eastern mysticism. He was similarly negative about the local variety of Orthodox Christianity (which he regarded as an instrument of Byzantine influence) and Ivan of Rila,

Bulgaria’s patron and greatest saint. According to Mutafchiyev, the great anchorite and miracle-worker shared responsibility for the pathology-breeding deformations of the Bulgarian national psyche:

In the judgments on our history the crucial role of Bogomilism has been emphasised very often. It has also been blamed for the fact that our medieval state lost popular support among the masses and for this reason never managed to become consolidated. This view is one-sided, and contains only part of the truth. For we were not only a Bogomil nation, but also a nation of hermits. The principles laid down by Ivan of Rila grew into a movement no less decisive for our fate than that inspired by Priest Bogomil’s doctrine. That distancing from the world robbed our nation of any remaining energy it could use in its struggle for existence. In the era preceding the final defeat of mediaeval Bulgaria, our country was full not only of Bogomils and adherents of all other possible sects, each more degenerate and extreme than the next; wild mountains, forests and caves were swarming with feral hermits. [...] In the end, our land seemed as it were too cramped to accommodate its sons, refugees from life and from life’s duties [...] [Мутафчиев 1994: 367].

Mutafchiyev’s abhorrence of all forms of mysticism and escapism is reminiscent of Vazov’s. However, his essay must be interpreted in the context of the political events of the 1930s, taking place in an ideological discourse that revered force. Thus, the dismissal of the two forms of mysticism that had a fundamental importance in mediaeval Bulgarian culture (Eastern Christianity and neo-Manichaean gnosis), held to be accountable for the nation’s spiritual weakness, was very much of its time. The Nietzschean overtones apparent in Mutafchiyev’s attitude towards Christianity were paving the way for an expansion of the Dionysian element, which would provoke an intense fascination in the late nineteenth century, colouring the perceptions of Bogomilism.

Precursors of Progress

Above all else, one characteristic element of Bulgarian thinking about Bogomilism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was its association with the Enlightenment idea of progress, succinctly defined by J. B. Bury as an interpretation of history predicated on “the idea that civilisation has moved, is moving, and will move in a desirable direction,” *ad infinitum* [Bury 1920]. It appears that the combination of a carefully groomed and managed interpretation of the Bogomil heresy with the belief in progress was seen as the answer to the need for aligning the idea of Bul-

garian history with a superficially assimilated Western European model of cultural development (perceived as having universal relevance).

In this context, the incorporation of Bogomilism into the canon of the Bulgarian national tradition, more than a hundred years after the composition of Paisius's *Slavic-Bulgarian History*, was symptomatic of the fact that in the modernist period the model of Bulgarian culture constructed during the period of national revival had lost its hegemonic position and unquestioned power to lend cohesion to the community.³⁰ On the other hand, in the same period, the process of inventing (or, to use a more conventional metaphor, reviving) a Bulgarian tradition was by no means complete. The process was going ahead in a context where modern ideas were being assimilated, and the political utopia of a nation state was being undermined by its inability to fulfil the high hopes associated with the state-making project in that it failed to remedy the ills of the Ottoman period known as the Turkish “bondage” or “oppression.” Although Bulgarian culture in independent Bulgaria never exactly showed signs of buyer’s remorse, the living conditions in the newly independent state were a quick and disillusioning reality check compared to the political phantasms from the period of national revival, tied as those were to fossilised elements of collective mentality. Interpretations of Turkish occupation were one of them. As Wojciech Gałązka noted,

absent from the many possible attestable interpretations of the occupation present in the mentality of the patriarchal Bulgarian society in the second half

³⁰ Also part of the revivalist tradition are the views of the most eminent Bulgarian poet of the national revival period, who symbolically brings that period to an end, namely Hristo Botev. In an article entitled “Народът вчера, днес и утре,” published in 1871 in *Дума на българските емигранти*, Botev’s creation of a heroic Bulgarian past invokes the times of Priest Bogomil and Tsar Samuil as a glorious chapter in the history of the otherwise unassuming Bulgarians: “Indeed, our people have repeatedly shown their strong will, rising against their tsars, against the clergy, as in the days of Bogomil and Samuil. But all this happened only under a threat of violence to their homes where they had always felt morally free – to their families and their understanding of honour – in a word, to their profoundly social life, which distinguishes the Slavic nations, including our own” [cited in Ботев 1976: 17]. Botev was the problem child of Bulgarian national revival; operating within the constraints of utopian socialism and anarchism, he associated the idea of freedom from Turkish oppression with the idea of social justice. The image of the Bulgarians as a nation of slaves, which obsessively recurs in his writings, gets replaced by an alternative journalistic portrayal of the Bulgarians as nonconformists (heretics, hayduks) capable of defending their own interests. Although this isolated comment can hardly be deemed as culturally influential, it seems notable as an example of a positive reappraisal of Bogomilism predating Bulgaria’s independence [see also Poźniak 1996]. In modern times, there have been attempts to attribute a gnostic worldview to Botev; see В. Николова 1999.

of the nineteenth century is the sense of political oppression. This suggests that the Turkish occupation was not regarded in terms of political oppression. The idea of *liberté* did not have the kind of communicative potential expected by the political leaders and members of the intelligentsia who were organising political life at the time. [...] [T]he yoke of oppression was not viewed as a historical phenomenon; instead, it operated on the private timescale of private existence, and “tursko igo” was regarded as part of that fate [Gałązka 1992b: 26].

Unsurprisingly, full liberation from Ottoman rule was associated with hopes for dramatic economic progress and increased personal prosperity. After a short period of euphoria, those expectations became thoroughly defeated. As a result, writers redoubled their efforts to reflect on the moral degeneracy of the political elites, usually accompanied by a tendency to mythologise the period of national revival as a past preserve of high values. Speculations on the meaning of history and projections about the future of the nation augmented the role of ideology in the nation's life,³¹ and boosted the standing of professional ideologues, who aspired to claim all of the symbolic order as their rightful remit.³² They engaged in efforts to modify the canon of national culture (in the form of *lieux de memoire*) to align it with the interests of the political elite, taking care to incorporate the community's changing collective ideas about itself as they did so. After all, *lieux de memoire* can only be adapted to serve current exigencies provided that the ideological offerings of the intellectuals bear some relationship to the general aspirations within a society. As noted by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality*,

power in society includes the power to determine decisive socialisation processes and, therefore, the power to produce reality. In any case, highly

³¹ Herzen countered the Hegelian theories of progress (which attributed an absolute dimension to the laws, meanings and purposes of history) with his view that “[i]n history everything is unpremeditated, everything is free, *ex tempore*. There are no limits ahead, no itineraries” [Herzen 1956: 365].

³² “Looking at the past developments in European history and historiography one might think that [...] historiography took priority in constructing its great rules, as was the case with Ibn Khaldun, Vico, Condorcet, Herder, Hegel, Marx and others, and only then came the historians, who used those ready-made schemes of development to scour the sources for confirmation of the philosophical models that brought order to history, fashioning historical processes into something meaningful. [...] Historians influenced by various philosophies of history looked for meaning in the past as fulfilment of God's will, with history following God's commands that imposed some kind of sense on the events, or as the spontaneous realization of an objective *Zeitgeist*, as was the case with Hegel, or as the realization of the idea of progress and improvement of humanity, etc.” [Szczeptański 1990: 16–17, 19].

abstract symbolizations (that is, theories greatly removed from the concrete experience of everyday life) are validated by social rather than empirical support. It is possible to say that in this manner a pseudo-pragmatism is reintroduced. The theories may again be said to be convincing because they work – work, that is, in the sense of having become standard, taken-for-granted knowledge in the society in question [Berger, Luckmann 1991: 137].

It is probably a historical paradox that the memory of Bogomilism, a movement hostile to all earthly institutions, could be revitalised so soon after the creation of a Bulgarian nation state and a Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Although the impulse to examine the “autochthonous” neo-Manichaean tradition was provided by developments in historical scholarship, the very fact of social acceptance for practices commemorating Bogomilism seems remarkable. This is even more surprising given that the endorsement was extended to a heresy with no surviving adherents, and one that had been roundly anathematised by the Orthodox Church, an institution which continues to be an important element of Bulgarian identity.

Popular interest in Bogomilism can be attributed to several factors. One is the increasingly deferential Bulgarian attitude to the mediaeval tradition, treated as a resource that can fill the gaping cultural void left by the period of Ottoman rule. In this approach, the medieval tradition acts to replace the sense of absence and deficiency with the satisfaction of “possessing” actual cultural assets. Having said that, Bulgarian interest in Bogomilism has never been a purely antiquarian exercise. Far from being treated as an inert museum exhibit, Bogomilism became a dynamic element of the Bulgarian identity discourse. Gałązka attributed this primarily to the efforts of the Bulgarian political elites:

When they [the elites – G.S.G.] deem it necessary to be rebellious, the myth of oppression becomes expedient, and when it is necessary to retain political stability – it becomes useful to portray the Bulgarians in terms of the heretical and contrarian Bogomils [Gałązka 1992b: 27].

This apparent paradox reveals the strategies of social manipulation. Political messaging experts in charge of propaganda projects had to rely on concepts that could gain traction with the public. In a way, therefore, such propagandist efforts contributed to the process of “creating reality,” adroitly selecting at any given time those signifiers that were potentially useful, notwithstanding the fact that such signifiers frequently belonged to rival definitions of reality, and “there will always be a social-structural base for competitions between rival definitions of reality and that the outcome of the rivalry will be affected, is not

always determined outright, by the developments of the space” [Berger, Luckmann 1991: 137]. No technique for commemorating Bogomilism could hope to be effective unless it filled a specific need in society, and fulfilled the basic requirement of “ringing true,” which in the case of ideological propositions boils down to a certain “compatibility between a statement [...] and society’s idea of what is plausible” [Topolski 1978: 14]. The social creation of reality means that those things are true that can be acceptably incorporated into the society’s accepted model of the world. By its nature, such a reality can never be fully stable: on the contrary, it is dynamic and amenable to correction. R. Redfield once introduced a distinction between the “great” and “little” traditions [Redfield 1961: 40–45]. The former are developed through a deliberate process in shrines and schools; the latter emerge as part of the everyday life of illiterate villagers. The two traditions always remain related to each other, the nature of that relationship being conditioned by social class. In the egalitarian Bulgarian society, whose social structure was flattened in the Ottoman period, it is not coincidental that the Bulgarian intelligentsia had a plebeian background, producing a kind of ideological correspondence between the intellectuals and the common people [Генчев 1987, 1991; Даскалова 1997: 21–77].

Does that mean that the intellectual project of reinterpreting Bogomilism as a positive component of the “great” tradition could find any kind of support in the Bulgarian “little” tradition? It seems almost impossible to offer a conclusive answer. What we have are merely traces, pieces of indirect information on the subject, scattered in popular literature that catered to general readers – books of advice, educational digests, and calendars from the period of national revival [Хаджийски 1974: 481, 494–495]. To use one example, the metonymic portrayal of one fragment of this “small” tradition presented by Ivan Hadzhiyski, an eminent Bulgarian sociologist from the interwar period, importantly demonstrates that multiple sources of information were available to a typical representative of the nineteenth century Bulgarian bourgeoisie:

Grandpa Natcho was rather superstitious. Besides those mentioned above he also read other books [...] Among them I remember the following: *Balgarski knizhitsi* [*The Bulgarian Books*], published in Constantinople, a calendar with the picture of a rooster on the cover, an edition of the Constantinople newspaper, Venelin’s “Kriticheski izdirvaniya” [“Critical Studies”], translated by Teacher Botyo, *Hristoitiya* by Rayno Popovich, various books and calendars published by Hadji Nayden Yoanovich from Tatar Pazardzhik, *A Stone Fell From the Sky*, many life stories of St. Theodora, St. George, St. Demetrius, St. Eustatius, St. Anthony, St. Simeon [...]. There was another thing as well,

his own manuscript – of Bogomil origin, *St. Paul the Apostle's Visit to Hell* [...] Finally, grandpa Natcho had a book on various healing treatments... [Хаджийски 1974: 481, 494–495].

In combination, books by the Slavophile Yuri Venelin, the lives of saints, calendars and Bogomil apocrypha (or at least supposed Bogomil apocrypha) added up to a heterogeneous world of values in the life of an individual. This was the fertile soil waiting to accept the ideas generated by the “Gnostic aristocracy of those who received the calling”³³ – nineteenth century nationalist ideologues who turned to the past seeking to legitimise their own worldviews. In a period of modernisation, with its attendant mechanisms of state supervision over the educational system, it is remarkable that the Bogomils continued to have an ambiguous status all the way until the late 1940s. But despite the differences of opinion and emphasis, the movement was predominantly regarded as important and relevant to the history of the nation, accompanied by an effort to emphasise those of its ideas that were seen as progressive (in most cases meaning ideologically fashionable).

The oldest textbook reference to Bogomilism I have been able to find is *Кратък извод от българската история. Книжка за учение в основно училище* (*A Short Survey of Bulgarian History. A Booklet for Use in Elementary Instruction*, 1881). This reference includes only some basic information about the emergence of the heresy and its spread to what the author argues was all of the Stara Planina peninsula [Манчов 1881: 43]. Ganchev's 1888 textbook, *Учебник по българската история за долните класове на гимназиите и за трикласните общински училища* (*Textbook of Bulgarian History for the Early Grades of Junior High School and Three-Year Common Schools*) is far more informative, and includes some details of Bogomil cosmogony. Dobri Ganchev interprets Bogomilism as Paulicianism reformed in the spirit of a Slavic religion, which, though it contributed to the weakening of the Bulgarian state, also contained progressive ideas, such as the equality of men and women [Ганчев 1888: 35–37]. The 1917 textbook *Учебник по българската история за 3 прогимназиален клас* (*Textbook of Bulgarian History for Grade 3 of Progymnasium* [three-year junior high school]) also tackles Bogomilism's ambivalent role in Bulgarian history. Its author describes the Bogomils as morally superior to “other Christians,” highlighting their kindness, modesty, simplicity and self-restraint [Попов 1917: 47–49]. Ivan Georgiev takes a similar approach in his history textbook for Grade 3 (1914). On the one hand, he portrays

³³ A phrase used by the Polish Romantic poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid, cited in Walicki 1990: 35.

the Bogomils as martyrs and saints in their time, on the other, he notes the disintegration of Bulgarian society that contributed to the collapse of Bulgarian statehood [Й. Георгиев 1914: 64–69]. Similar appraisals of Bogomilism can be found in the textbook by Ivan Pastukhov and Ivan Stoianov, notable for containing an approachable modern interpretation of “gnosis” [Пастухов, Стоянов 1918: 57–60, see also Пастухов 1926: 56–60]. Finally, a 1925 textbook by Violino Primo (Tsonko Popov) and Nikolai Todorov, *За родината и нашето далечно минало. Отечествознание за 3 отделение (On the Fatherland and Our Distant Past: Knowledge About the Fatherland for Third Grade Students)* presents Bogomilism as a movement of poor but kindly people, who embraced the ideals of brotherhood and equality to protest against economic exploitation and moral corruption of the clergy and the higher orders of society [Виолино Примо, Тодоров 1925: 67].

Against the general background of textbooks from that period known to me, one is particularly notable in its relentlessly negative appraisal of the heresy. Ivan Ormandzhiev and Mara Velkova argued that Bogomilism was responsible for creating a schism within Orthodox Christianity, leading to the weakening of the Bulgarian state [Орманджиев, Велкова 1937: 54–55]. Similar interpretations of the heresy appear in the 1942 textbook by Ivan Кепов and Vana I. Кепова, emphasising the ignorance and paganism of the Bulgarian masses as the root cause in the spread of the heresy [Кепов, Кепова 1942: 50–51].

Unsurprisingly, the textbooks are in some ways similar to the historical ideas targeted at adult readers at the same time, but the analogies are primarily linguistic rather than substantive: they use similar language to discuss historical events, but tend to be asymmetrically selective about the content they communicate. A particularly illuminating case in point (perhaps even somewhat exaggerated) is the 1943 textbook by Naiden Sheytanov and Bozhidar Bozhilov for grade three of lower gymnasium (*progymnasium*), containing an appraisal of Bogomilism which is completely differed from Sheytanov’s earlier publications, which evince a fascination with neopaganism.³⁴ In the textbook, Presbyter Cosmas (rather than Bogomil) is portrayed as the main positive hero, and Bogomilism itself is dismissed by the authors as a “false doctrine” (*лъжеучение*) that exerted a negative influence on the Bulgarian nation by undermining its unity [Шейтанов, Божилов 1943: 115–116]. In order to unlock the meanings encoded into those textbooks it is necessary to views the interpretations they offer in the contexts of broader units of

³⁴ For more information on the subject, see pp. 74, 77–78.

meaning, which were often shaped by reference to specific historical circumstances. In the context of World War II, when national unity was a much emphasised value, the textbook by Sheytanov and Bozhilov was adroitly using the concept of “false doctrine” to make a negative example of Bogomilism as a case of betrayal of national interest. Playing a similar role was a relevant passage in a bilingual textbook for Grade 3, used in Bulgarian Muslim elementary schools in 1936:

At that time secret instigators appeared among the discontented peasants. They taught them not to work for their masters, and not to pay taxes. Revolts followed. The instigators were called the Bogomils. They dressed modestly, abstained from meat, and were thin and pale [Недев, Салиев 1936: 32–33].

The passage seeks to discredit the Bogomils by using aesthetic criteria, emphasising the failure to conform to the folk ideals of ruddy health and physical attractiveness. This conflation of physical ugliness and “secret instigation” does not seem accidental and (its unintended comical effect notwithstanding) can be interpreted as an instrument of state persuasion in the context of increased activity of Turkish emissaries in lands inhabited by Bulgarian Turks [see Мутафчиева 1995: 22–29; see also Mutafchieva 1995].

One common denominator in most textbooks is the idea of the moral superiority of the Bogomils compared to the representatives of the Orthodox Church, and the portrayal of the Bogomils as a community that cultivates Slavic democratic traditions. Even though this appraisal was balanced by commentary on the negative consequences of Bogomilism to state stability and Church unity, the sense of affirmation for the high ethical standards of the poor Bogomils prevailed over accusations of ignorance and paganism. Values such as poverty, purity, kindness, simplicity, restraint, brotherhood, equality, unity and the readiness to die for one’s ideals, which combine to create a positive image of the Bogomils in those texts, are concepts belonging to the repertoire of many ideologies leading a parasitical existence feeding on the Christian tradition. By using those clichéd stereotypes it was possible to incorporate the history of the Bulgarian neo-Manichaeans into a system of ethical values used to construct a gratifying portrayal of Bulgarian ancestors who played an important role in the history of progressive and humanitarian social movements, representing Bulgaria in the linear Enlightenment vision of world history as a march of progress [Wierzbicki 1999: 129].

On occasion, this strategy had the effect of removing or obscuring the differences between Bogomilism and Christianity. This is illustrated, among other things, by *Богомили* (*The Bogomils*, 1936), an educational book

for children by Peter Karapetrov published in the series “Художествена Библиотека ‘Древна България.’” Published within the constraints of an apparatus of political censorship, it was duly approved by officials from the ministry of education, the ministry of defence, the ministry of trade, the ministry of internal affairs, and the Holy Synod. Karapetrov’s portrayal of the Bogomils tried to reconcile the interests of the various state authorities with the belief that the Bulgarian nation should take pride in its progressive Bogomil tradition. Accordingly, Karapetrov bent historical facts considerably to reinterpret Bogomilism as a religious movement that combined anti-Byzantine attitudes with Orthodox Christianity (in doing so, Karapetrov used the standard analogy of the struggle for an independent Bulgarian Church during the period of national revival). He highlighted the close similarities between the doctrines taught by Priest Bogomil and Orthodox Christianity and Christian values in general [Карапетров 1936: 26–28]. In a similar conciliatory nod to the state, he emphasised the role of the state in consolidating the nation. In this interpretation, the Bogomils were portrayed as true patriots: prepared to resist the foreign elements, but also open to their potential conversion.³⁵ Writing in an emotional tone, he offered an idealised vision of the Bogomil community:

[...] the small Bulgaria gave to the world and to new cultural history one of the most moral and humane doctrines – the doctrine of the Bogomils [Карапетров 1936: 32].

Writers with an anti-clerical stance communicated their anti-clerical messages more openly in the general body of commentary on Bogomilism that included scholarly and pseudo-scholarly studies, public talks, essays, and articles in the popular press.³⁶ For all the personal differences in selecting the salient points, an anti-clerical orientation appears to be a common denominator of the texts discussed here. The Bogomil contestation of the Orthodox Church was the primary motive that boosted the movement’s credibility and led to its glorification. This way of thinking was obviously influenced by the treatise of Presbyter Cosmas and the general tradition of Bulgarian anti-Byzantine attitudes, projected onto the past as a supposed context for Bogomil writings and activities. However, those factors by themselves fail to adequately explain the ten-

³⁵ In the story this is apparent in the characterisation techniques, where all the negative characters are foreigners, mostly from Byzantium.

³⁶ This found its continuation in Communist propaganda after World War II, see pp. 117 ff.

dency of those writers to disparage the Orthodox Church and treat it with hostility.

One book that throws an interesting light on the complexity of social attitudes towards the Orthodox Church in the nineteenth century is Toncho Zhechev's *Български Виликден или страстите български* (*Bulgarian Easter, or Bulgarian Passions*, 1980), which presents the meanderings of the struggle for an autonomous Bulgarian Church. Calling for a revitalisation of the patriarchal tradition, Zhechev included in his preface an insightful appraisal of that movement, which he accused of manipulating the religious sentiment of believers and subordinating the struggle for an autonomous Church to the interests of national struggle:

They, who hail from the kingdom of unbelievers, have made religion and church institutions a tool for their ardent political fanaticism, and subsumed into nationalist ideology and nationalist goals all the various elements of the nation's life, including traditional Christian ideas concerning the supreme and universal ideas about human life. [...] Bulgarian activists from the national church movement took liberties with church organisation, religion and its doctrines that merely cemented our disbelief, and the victory of that movement was the beginning of an open, comprehensive political struggle for national liberation, accompanied by obvious belittling of the relative influence of Church and religion in the life of the nation [Жечев 1980: 17].

Those words of a twentieth century scholar, who was the first to stand up for Christian values in communist Bulgaria, form a telling parallel with the reflection of the revivalist poet Petko Rachev Slaveykov:

Bulgarians will not become Catholics or Protestants, but they will not remain Orthodox either! To put it another way. Bulgarians will remain Orthodox only in name, but in actual fact – they will be without faith [Славейков 1860, cited in Жечев 1980: 14–16].

This observation is reminiscent of a similar comment made by Hadzhiyski in the interwar period, who wrote about Bulgarian religious life in *Бит и душевност на нашия народ* (*The Material and Spiritual Life of Our Nation*):

Christianity with its ideas and dogmas has had very little impact on the mind-set of the peasantry. The country priest, in order not to break ties with his parishioners, was forced to serve popular pagan superstitions more than he implemented the provisions of the church councils. The situation was different in the cities. Thanks to the easy availability of religious literature and higher intellectual standards, combined into a remarkable mixture with ancient superstition, Christian dogma held a more prominent place in the minds of the townspeople [Хаджийски 1974: 481].

This attitude towards the Orthodox Church, as seen by Bulgarians themselves, appears to have been conditioned by two types of pragmatism. One drew on the patriotic “great tradition,” invented to serve the idea of the nation; the other drew on the “little tradition,” in the sense of syncretic folk religiosity confined within the framework of magical thinking, whose most important characteristic was the belief that ritual practices could effectively influence the world.³⁷ This means that the spiritual climate described here should not be mistaken for the effects of the nineteenth century processes of secularisation affecting Bulgarian society, notably its elites, whose representatives were often dubbed the “Voltaireans” (*волтерианец*). Although Voltaire’s writings were not typically well known in the nineteenth century, his ideas were nonetheless immensely popular, and were propagated mainly by educators (in the early phase of the national revival mostly in Greek schools) [Аретов 1995: 189–235]. In this case, the Bulgarian “Voltaireans” represented a popular version of anti-clericalism drawing on the rationalistic tradition within the Enlightenment. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Voltaire’s authority in matters of religion had become replaced by later freethinkers, a fact noted at the time by Todor Shishkov, who became involved in a debate on Voltaire’s reception in Bulgaria:

[...] in religious matters, which he examined in his article, Voltaire is now surpassed by Strauss, Fauerbach, Renan and other talented writers who deal with these problems more systematically and competently, as a result of which he has been left behind – and is no longer fashionable [cited in Аретов 1995: 194].

This late nineteenth century “assault” on collective Bulgarian mentality by presenting a reinvented vision of the Bogomils was taking place within this fashionable ideology, associated with modernity, rationalism, and rejection of prejudice. The character of that manipulation of historical fact is a good object lesson confirming Tzvetan Todorov’s observation that

The work of the historian, like every work on the past, never consists solely in establishing the facts but also in choosing certain among them as being more salient and more significant than others, then placing them in relation to one another; now this work of selecting and combining is necessarily guided by the search, not for truth, but for the good [Todorov 1995, cited in Ricoeur 2004: 86].

³⁷ I make no claim to offer opinions of my own about the actual religious life of the Bulgarians. Instead, I rely exclusively on ideas on the subject in socially recognised texts.

Selective cherry-picking of historical facts based on their ideological expediency for the secular cause was invariably accompanied by an anamnesis of the sources of morality.

The earliest text attempting to rehabilitate Bogomilism with a positive reappraisal of the movement was *За богомилите и протестантите в България* (*On Bogomils and Protestants in Bulgaria*, 1884) by Georgi Petkov [Г. Петков 1884; cf. Геновски 1934: 33–34], probably the first Bulgarian writer to argue that it was precisely their pure and simple way of life that attracted followers to the Bogomil and Paulician movements, mainly recruited from monks who were devoted to Christ but lacked adequate spiritual care. Petkov portrayed Bogomilism as a heresy with important consequences for Bulgaria and all of Christendom, emphasising its superiority over Protestantism, which was making forays into Bulgaria at the time (Petkov accused the Protestant missionaries of promoting irreligiosity among the Bulgarians) [Геновски 1934: 30]. Petkov was one of the few voices that resisted the temptation of simplistic analogies. However, Petkov's ideas on Bogomilism gave rise (possibly inadvertently) to similar interpretations from Protestant missionaries. As early as 1869, a Methodist missionary named Albert Long gave a talk to the Bulgarian community in Constantinople, whose pathos-filled ending was an affirmation of Priest Bogomil and of the inner freedom of the ancient Bulgarians, which helped them “oppose the spiritual tyranny of the паpacy” [Лилова 2003: 37]. Long's text was published in 1870 by the poet and national revival activist Petko Slaveikov as a supplement in “\Македония,” a magazine popular at the time [see Лонг 1870]. The same publication also included an article by Naiden Gerov, a Bulgarian Russo-ophile, poet and, in later years, Russian diplomat, who supported Long's idea that Bogomilism was indicative of Bulgarian freedom of thought [see Геров 1869]. It seems that the political message of both texts, which emphasise the “anti-papal” character of Bogomilism, can only be understood in the context of the ongoing debates on the future of the Church in Bulgaria at the time. The Protestant missionary and the spokesman for the pro-Russian faction were probably united in their dislike for the papacy and the growing influence of the Catholic Church in Bulgaria.³⁸ As it turned out, their ideas would fall on fertile soil.

Already in 1899, Nikolai Filipov published a study entitled “Върху произхода на богомилството” („On the Origins of Bogomilism” [Филипов

³⁸ The establishment of eastern rite Catholic Church institutions in Bulgaria in 1860 was presumably regarded as a threat. The history of that Church and Russia's related policies are described by Ivan Elenkov [Еленков 2000].

1899]), highlighting the typological analogies between the Bogomil postulate of a return to the New Testament as the source of ethics on the one hand, and the later ideas of the Reformation on the other. Filipov ignores the fundamental differences between those two outlooks to portray Bogomilism as a proto-Reformation movement, a conclusion that would later be repeated often enough to become commonplace.

On 17 December 1906, M. Panchov gave a talk in “Славянска беседа,” a prestigious salon in Sofia that served as the meeting place for Slavophile intelligentsia. Although his talk did not go down in history as a significant cultural event, it contained a series of significant statements about the Bogomil movement and deserves some closer attention since it points to the emergence of Bulgaria’s image as a melting pot, whose geographical location meant that Eastern doctrines on their way to the West would reach Bulgaria first [Панчов 1907: 17]. In this sense, Panchov argued, Bulgaria was an inescapably heterogeneous place, where Christianity could never attain a position of true hegemony. This was conditioned in no small way by the politicisation of religion and the policies of the Orthodox Church which, according to Panchov, equated the spreading of the Gospel with Byzantine influence, inhibiting the emergence of a Bulgarian national identity [Панчов 1907: 9]. He offers a strikingly harsh critique of the clergy, and gives a positive appraisal of Bogomilism as a reaction of the people/nation to the disintegration of Christian values, which they were trying to defend:

Such was the original teaching of the Bogomils. We see in it a genuine protest against the corruption and the negligence of the official Greek and half-Greek clergy; their dogma is naive, but their morality, their concern for the people – those far surpass the morality and the activity of the Orthodox clergy. One could legitimately regard this teaching as the first reformation in the Christian church. It has a direct link to the teachings of Hus, and probably also to those of Luther [Панчов 1907: 33].

Although he highlighted the positive aspects of Bogomilism as a forerunner of the European Reformation, Panchov was not unaware of the negative aspects of the doctrine, whose degeneration he regarded as a natural consequence of the failings of human nature. Such integral elements of the Bogomil worldview as its blind hatred of any kind of authority, lack of patriotism and passivity in the face of danger, he argued, not only led to terrible bloodshed during the Turkish conquest of Bulgaria, but also, paradoxically, induced the Bogomils to reject their own doctrine. Under the pressure of historical circumstances, the Bogomil dislike of Orthodox Christianity compelled them to leave their own communities

and convert to Islam or Catholicism instead, which Panchov believed weakened the nation and perpetuated an attitude of national indifference [Панчов 1907: 44].

Nikolai P. Blagoev offered yet another interpretation of Bogomilism in a slightly later text entitled *Правни и социални възгледи на богомилите. Из съчинението „Богомили“* (*The Legal and Social Views of the Bogomils: From the Study “The Bogomils,”* [Н. Благовоев 1912]). He portrayed the movement as an unintended outcome of the Christianisation of Southern Slavs (who were supposedly indifferent in matters of religion and philosophy). Blagoev agreed with Panchov as regard the vitality of pagan beliefs in the population, and conjectured that Bogomilism emerged as a social movement to restore the democratic social model of the Slavs when it became destabilised by the invasion of Byzantine cultural and legal norms following Bulgaria’s formal Christianisation. Influenced by the marxisant left-wing writer Dimitar Blagoev,³⁹ Nikolai Blagoev tied the Bogomil question to tenth-century agrarian arrangements and the situation of the peasantry at the time:

In Bulgaria Bogomilism emerged as a result of the important agrarian issue, which made itself felt at the beginning of the tenth century, and which has not been fully solved in some areas of Bulgaria to this day. The Bogomils defended the small landowners against the encroachments and violence of the large landowners, the boyars, and the elders. They strictly followed the common legal and social notions, and therefore stubbornly fought against the illegitimate Bulgarian rulers [Н. Благовоев 1912: 104].

By relegating the problems of Bogomil cosmogony to a position of lesser prominence, Blagoev was able to selectively pick facts from the movement’s history in such a way as to portray the Bogomils as movement for emancipation from all forms of political and spiritual authority [Н. Благовоев 1912: 28]. His arguments about legal developments in family law, property law and penal law were intended to glorify Bogomilism, which was portrayed as a utopia of eternal order⁴⁰ built on the foundations of the old Slavic democratic systems. On that basis, Blagoev dismissed any connections between the Bogomils and the Western European heresies, interpreting the movement as a local phenomenon related to the Bosnian *patarini*, who were similarly hostile to the institution of the Church. His argument, bolstered by a broadside volley of quotations, ultimately reduced the problem to the agrarian question, a topical political concern in

³⁹ See p. 76.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of the concept of utopias of eternal order see Szacki 2000: 111–130.

Bulgaria at the time.⁴¹ In a 1923 article “Беседата против богомилите” („A Speech Against the Bogomils” [Н. Благоев 1923]) Nikolai Blagoev took his exercise in crude ideological shoehorning even further to argue that Bogomilism was not actually a heresy, but rather a political movement of people dissatisfied with the authorities: false accusations of heresy, like those of Presbyter Cosmas or Tsar Boril in the *Synodic*, were apparently concocted to defuse a political threat. In a mix of Slavophilic tendencies and conspiracy theories, Blagoev’s interpretation essentially accused the Orthodox Church of historical forgery.

The temptation of missionism entailed in the paradigm of Bulgarian culture and literary tradition as an elder among the Slavic nations turned out to be too strong to be jettisoned in favour of a cult of locality. In his 1916 book *България в миналото* (*Bulgaria in the Past*), Dimitar Mishev reengaged with the thesis that Bogomilism was an anti-Byzantine movement predicated on the traditions of Slavic democratism (a thesis which by that point had become legitimised in the literature of the subject) [Мишев 1916: 63]. At the same time, he joined the camp of believers in the movement’s proto-Reformation and cosmopolitan elements. This made it possible to place Bogomilism within European history alongside Lutheranism, Calvinism or Hussitism.

In later interpretations, the concept of Bogomilism was becoming increasingly capacious. To Mishev, the movement was the original source of some of the ideas current at the time, such as pacifism, women’s rights or respect for human life. He also attributed to Bogomilism all of the achievements and contributions of the Orthodox tradition, including the enormous reach of Bulgarian writings, comparable to the rival *Slavia Orthodoxa Cyrillianitas*. As interpreted by Mishev, Bogomil writings had ultimately taken on the characteristics of a literature of moral protest, and as such they were a kind of antidote to the complexes caused by the absence of such writings in the period of Turkish occupation. Moreover, he argued, the influence of the Bogomil rebellion radiated out through all of Europe, preparing the intellectual ground for a spiritual transformation of mankind [Мишев 1916: 97–103]. With this argument, Mishev and his predecessors

⁴¹ Boris Pashev recycled the strategy of using Bogomilism for the purposes of political propaganda in 1947. His pamphlet *Богомилското учение и съвременен аграризъм* (*The Bogomil Teaching and Modern Agrarism*, published by the peasant party) connected the Bogomil tradition with the party’s political strategies at the time. In emphasising the progressive nature of that movement, Pashev portrayed Priest Bogomil as the father of modern reforms, essentially attributing to him a left-wing political programme complete with the idea of farmers’ collectives (*sic*), which he believed helped Bulgarians survive the period of Turkish occupation.

were essentially reversing the “self-colonisation” (Kiosev’s term) of Bulgarian culture; if anything, Bulgaria was now being portrayed as an animator of an ideological colonisation of the European continent.

One work that indirectly contributed to perpetuating this form of memory about Bogomilism was Yordan Ivanov’s above-mentioned *Богомилски книги и легенди* (1925), an anthology of Bogomil writings with serious scholarly commentary that was quite innovative in its day. Although Ivanov remained true to his sources, his authoritative appraisal of Bogomil values in the preface contributed to legitimising the notion that the movement was an avant-garde of progressive ideas in Europe:

Bogomilism stirred the minds of medieval men; it forced Catholicism to come to its senses and to cure its own decay; it caused [...] the Albigensian Crusade [...] it resulted in the founding of the powerful Dominican order; it prompted the establishment of the most horrible institution of the Church of Rome – the Inquisition; under its ashes, the Reformation movement was born, with its associated religious liberties and human rights [Иванов 1925: 48].

Ivanov described the Bulgarian translation of *The Secret Book* of the Cathars (arguably correctly) as the most important Bogomil text, identifying and documenting the connection between the Cathars and the Bogomils to Bulgarian readers. But even though Ivanov offered a credible reconstruction of the provenance of Bulgarian Bogomilism and its extensive connections with other gnostic systems, his preface upheld the intuitions of earlier writers concerning the Bogomil moral code. A more detailed analysis of the *Cathar Prayerbook* (which he published in a bilingual version) could have led Ivanov to different conclusions, but it proved not to be the case.⁴²

Nikola Filipov’s 1929 study *Произход и същност на богомилството* (*The Origins and Nature of Bogomilism*) would merely restate the thesis that Bogomilism was a movement of fundamental importance to Europe. Filipov framed his comments (in imitation of the Russian writer A. N. Vesolovski) in the spirit of Slavic missionism,⁴³ portraying Bogomilism as first intellectual “gift of the Slavic world for Europe,” predating Jan Hus [Филипов 1929: 33]. In his later book *Богомилството (произход и същност)* (*Bogomilism: Its Origins and Essence*, 1941) Filipov devoted more space to an analysis of Bogomilism as a syncretic gnostic system

⁴² See pp. 31–32.

⁴³ I use the term “missionism” in the sense of Iwona Massaka: “The nature of missionism is a nation’s conviction that its achievements, history, culture and religion (as an important part of that culture) are more valuable or original than the history, culture and religion of other nations” [Massaka 2001: 16].

[Филипов 1941: 30], however, he emphasised the social-political character of the movement, highlighting those elements that he found particularly germane in view of modern developments, such as the return to the Slavic traditions of familial and tribal democracy that eliminated social inequality. His outlook on Bogomilism was characterised by an optimistic attitude towards political utopia [Филипов 1941: 37]. Filipov’s reflections also included the problem of the interrupted tradition. He believed that the Turkish occupation put an end to the natural development of Bogomilism as a political and religious formation:

At that time, we experienced a massive transformation in terms of the historical development of our nation, which severed the ties to our past, arrested normal development, and had a considerable impact on the nation’s soul. New interest and concerns, new longings and passions emerged among the people; and the new experiences largely smoothed over the memory of the past [Филипов 1941: 38].

In a sense, Filipov was addressing the problem of a tradition undergoing change through forgetting. In his interpretation, the Ottoman rule resulted in the extinction of the Bogomil tradition, seen as the core of Bulgarian cultural identity. His argument was a *de facto* endorsement of the heretical identity that became at one point lost by the Bulgarians.

A similar line of interpretation was taken by Ivan Klincharov, who held the destruction of Bogomilism responsible for the sterility of Bulgarian culture before 1800:

Following the destruction of Bogomilism, Bulgarian culture lost its contents for centuries, as a result of which it remained a monotonous steppe until the early nineteenth century [Клинчаров 1927: 163].

Similarly influenced by Vesolovsky, Klincharov looked for evidence of intellectual potential in the Bogomil movement, primarily looking for signs of its influence on European literature. In a transparently aggrandising gesture, Klincharov’s primary example was Book XII of *Inferno* from *The Divine Comedy*, where he argued Dante was relying on the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, and Book XXXII of *Purgatorio*, which he claimed betrayed the influence of the apocryphal book *On the Tree of the Cross*.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ In the book *Великобългарски светоглед (The Great Bulgarian Worldview)*, Sheytanov recycled the idea of Bogomil influence on Dante. He believed that Dante used a piece of apocrypha entitled *The Wanderings of the Mother of God through Torments* [Шейтанов 1940: 186]. The continued strength of this interpretive idea is apparent in the book by G. Vasilev, *Български богомилски и апокрифни представи в английската средновековна култура (Образът на Христос Орач в поемата на Уйлям Лангланд “Видението на Петър Орача”)* (*Bulgarian Bogomil and Apocryphal Representations in Medieval English*

Klincharov did not marginalize the social and economic aspects of the Bogomil rebellion, and took pains to curate its image as a revolutionary democratic movement [Клинчаров 1927: 158]. Citing the Russian scholar Osokin, he endorsed the idea that Bogomilism was a phenomenon “of world-wide importance,” and argued that by introducing “the republican leanings of [their] internationalist communism,” the Bogomils revealed themselves as modern politicians with a remarkable positive intellectual potential [Клинчаров 1927: 161–162].

As this demonstrated, the apotheosis of the Bogomils relied on an exaggerated impression of their European impact and an affirmation of Bogomil ethics. Already in the early decades of the twentieth century the Bogomils were being portrayed as exemplars of morality in texts by Mikhail Genovski, Ivan Kepov and Nikola Filipov, among others:

The Bogomilian movement with its moral norms comes to restore the lost faith, to ensure the self-preservation of a disheartened nation [Геновски 1934: 33–34].

It is the Bogomils who are the nation’s bearers of not just the Christian principles of brotherhood and equality, but of social justice, truth and peace [Кепов 1938: 73].

[F]or us the Bogomil ideal of life is clear: a simple, modest and pure life, curbing the needs of the body, favouring the spiritual over the material, moral rigorousness [Филипов 1941: 35].

In the comments quoted above, the focus on an idealised picture of the Bogomil ethical code overshadows reflection on the actual nature of Bogomilism as a moderate form of neo-Manichaean gnosis or the implications of the answers it gave to the problem of the nature of evil. As a result, all those dramatic attempts to conceptualise an ideal model of the *homo bulgaricus ethicus* inevitably led into intellectual quicksands, forcing writers to embrace fable, as every question about the past led to the invention of a different vision of history. This was illustrated in a quintessential form by *Какво е дал българинът на другите народи* (*What the Bulgarians Gave to Other Nations*, 1938), a heartwarming book of patriotic reassurance by the Bulgarian Freemason Stilian Chilingirov [Чилингиров 1938], who picked his historical facts carefully to portray Bogomilism as a progressive social movement that gave rise to all of Europe’s reformist and anti-clerical movements, complete with the French Revolution (*sic*):

Culture (*the Image of Christ the Plowman in William Langland’s “Piers Plowman”*) [Г. Василев 2001]), in which Vasilev seeks to identify traces of Bogomil cosmogony in medieval English poetry. The book became the basis for Vasilev’s doctoral thesis.

It will be no exaggeration to say that the slogan “equality, brotherhood, freedom,” under which the French started and conducted their revolution, and with which they tried to transform the relationships between individuals, social classes and nations – is our slogan. It will remain an eternal dream of humanity, it will survive as a signpost pointing to the true Christian path on earth, thanks to the genius of the Bulgarians – its creators, disseminators and enlighteners. It threw light on Christ’s path with the blood of thousands and thousands Bulgarian martyrs who ventured out into the world to establish a new order among the people and new justice on earth [Чилингиров 1938: 39–40].

Chilingirov, who endorsed the notion of Slavic missionism in the movement, highlighted the positives of Bogomilism as a kind of reformed Christianity which had turned away from the Church (the source of moral corruption), and embraced a mission of bringing authentic humanist values to mankind. Thus, Bogomilism could be regarded as Bulgaria’s cultural alibi: a ticket of admission to join the club of Europe’s enlightened nations.⁴⁵

Marxist writers were projecting a similar function on the movement. The first to propose this line of interpretation was the socialist leader Dimitar Blagoev in *Принос към историята на социализма в България* (*A Note on the History of Socialism in Bulgaria*, 1906). His outlook is sociological, interpreting Bogomilism as a spontaneous, grassroots neo-Christian movement aiming to restore and propagate in Europe the early Christian structures of communal living based on social equity [Д. Благоев 1906], which found approval with Marxist historiographers despite their general detestation of the Church (whether Catholic or Protestant). The ideologues of the Bulgarian left regarded Bogomil communities as deliberate attempts to reconstitute the early Christian institution of the commune, meaning that this particular aspect of the Bulgarian past could be treated as part of the history of Europe’s progressive social movements.

Ironically, writers fascinated with Nietzsche’s philosophy were similarly attracted to this kind of Enlightenment progressivism. In *Нашият народ* (*Our Nation*, 1923), Anton Strashimirov, a writer with a good understanding of the specific nature of gnostic thinking, highlighted the spiritual aspirations of the Bogomils and their emphasis on transcendence, portraying them as Nietzschean heroes endowed with superhuman strength:

We, the Bulgarians, countered this with an equally bloody individualism: Bogomilism. It was not a helpless mysticism of an unviable tribe, but rather a remarkably daring zeal wishing to capture the full experience of antiquity, and through the wisdom thus attained to move beyond the imperfection of

⁴⁵ An interesting aspect of that “mission” has recently been revealed by Piotr Czarnecki [2013].

earthly existence. It was a heated flight – a surging of power and will – to follow that which is unattainable and unearthly [...] [Страшимиров 1923: 24].

As interpreted by Strashimirov, this soaring spiritual flight, which produced growth elsewhere in Europe, caused political catastrophe in Bulgaria. The clash of Bogomilism and Islam resulted in a disastrous collapse of values and the fall of the nation, which Strashimirov compared to the tragedy of Zarathustrianism in Persia:

Many a thinker today traces the beginnings of the European Reformation to Bulgarian Bogomilism, which indeed holds all of its elements to become the starting point for centuries' worth of philosophical developments. This Bulgarian contribution to pan-European life has cost us our political existence. [...] The clash of Islam with Bulgarian Bogomilism is a tragedy equal to that inflicted on Zoroastrianism in Persia [Страшимиров 1923: 25].

At this level of generalisation, Bogomil spirituality came to be treated not just as an alternative to the Christian tradition, but as the nation's only appropriate tradition, whose loss led to the loss of Bulgarian identity, and whose greatness can only be seen today in the European heritage it helped to produce.

The traumatic need to make the Bulgarians part of the universal system dictated the need of ideological compromise; in Strashimirov's case, the then-fashionable cult of individualism and hermeticism was coupled with an endorsement of the monolinear vision of history, all in the service of boosting the persuasive function of the message that glorified the nation as a carrier of values of fundamental importance to European culture. A similar ideological eclecticism marked the ideas of Naiden Sheytanov, a Bulgarian philosopher educated in Germany active in the interwar period, who identified the greatness of the Bogomil heresy with its open anti-clericalism, progressivism and global impact:

And in this heretical realm, we, Bulgarians are leaders on a European scale. Our Bogomilism lies at the foundations of the Reformation within the Catholic Church. In terms of its doctrine of equality between men and women, it anticipates – indeed inspires – the cult of the lady in medieval France, and the subsequent struggle for equal rights for women. According to the Vienna-based researcher Leo Seifert, Bogomilism played a much greater role, not only in the history of European culture and religion, but also in socio-political history. Initially, Seifert argues, Bogomilism came up with the slogan of struggle against papal authority. Later, however, its religious nature turned into ideology whose modifications and expansions transform the face of modern and current Europe. Thus a Bulgarian cultural achievement takes on the scale of a major motive force of history on our continent, and even in the puritanical North America [Шейтанов 1937: 983–984].

Inspired by Nietzsche’s philosophy, Sheytanov called for a revival of pagan and gnostic traditions to counterbalance Christian universalism, which he openly despised [Димитрова 1996: 83–86] and held responsible for a number of social ills, including the decline of the vital powers of the nation. In his search for a formula capable of overcoming the Bulgarian “spirit of negation” he turned to Bogomilism as a source of spiritual power whereby the passive evangelical simple folk could rediscover their inner rebellious heretic. In his plans, the new Bulgarian religion in its most perfect form would amount to a syncretic type of neo-Bogomilism combining old Bogomil ideas with neo-Dyonisianism, neo-Orphism and the folklore tradition. The role of this original national religion of the future would be to unite the Bulgarians and to make them rally around the idea of Great Bulgaria [Шейтанов 1937]. In his later book *Великобългарски светозлед* (*The Great Bulgarian Worldview*, 1940) [Шейтанов 1940: 134], Sheytanov’s views devolved into open chauvinism fashioned in reference to the pagan tradition.⁴⁶ Combined with his pseudo-scientific arguments based on a logic of *bricolage* and (often erroneous) etymologies of selected conceptual keywords, Sheytanov’s associative mode of thinking formed a creative strategy that made it possible to draw connections between distant ideological elements. The hyperbolic portrayal of Bulgaria as the meeting place of great pagan cultures served to glorify the nation’s folk tradition, portrayed as the Balkan breeding ground of European spirituality, including the Germanic ideology of national socialism.⁴⁷ Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Bulgarian representatives of neo-gnostic worldviews would increasingly invoke this particular insight, which I discuss in more detail in the following chapter.

Zagorchin’s “Utopia of the Order”?

One notable piece of reflection of the place of Bogomilism in Bulgarian history was *Ден последен, ден господен* (*The Last Day – God’s Day*, 1931–1934) a historical novel by Stoian Zagorchinov that encapsu-

⁴⁶ For more information on the neo-pagan sources of national socialism, see Haack 1999; Goodrick-Clarke 1985.

⁴⁷ Not unjustifiably, Sheytanov identifies common ground with Nazism in the shared rejection of the Judaic tradition: “Not only is the language of this heresy Bulgarian, but also the Bogomil theology rejects the Old Testament of Christianity as a book sacred to the Jews only. This idea is embraced, for instance, by the German National Socialism a mere one thousand years after us! Redundant proof of the ideological primacy of the legendary Balkan!” [Шейтанов 1940: 193].

lates the progressivist views on the matter. Like Vazov, Zagorchinov looks at the spiritual, social and political life of Bulgaria on the eve of the Turkish invasion. Although the novel focuses mostly on plebeian life, it presents a broad panorama of the period. It traces the roots of the disintegration of communal ties and of the collapse of the state to numerous complex conflicts. Along with this reflection on the roots of evil in the world he also offers thoughts on the chances of its repair [see Dąbek-Wirgowa 1980: 268].

This is reflected in the way Bogomilism functions in the novel as a social utopia. Although the movement does not feature prominently in the story, the ideas promoted by the Bogomils (the struggle against evil, the construction of a state to ensure general happiness) are of key importance to the story arc. Hidden inside the novel's adventure story, the narrative of the Bogomil survival projects was a voice in a debate on the heresy's place in Bulgarian history. Zagorchinov's position is not straightforward. Though clearly influenced by the myth of Bogomilism as the ultimate source of the idea of progress, the writer was far from creating a monolithic vision of the movement; in his interpretation, Bogomilism is a multi-faceted construct influenced in complex ways by other heresies, flourishing in great number in Bulgaria in the period immediately preceding the Turkish invasion.

To outline the ideological assumptions of the Bogomils, Zagorchinov uses *Подялба на света между Бога и дявола* (*The World Divided Between God and the Devil*), a Bogomil folk legend anthologised by Yordan Ivanov as Item 6 [Иванов 1925: 337–338]. In the legend, Satan (called Zerzevul based on another legend, *Зерзевул*),⁴⁸ was initially God's friend and companion created out of God's shadow. For this reason, God was at first untroubled when Zerzevul asked to divide the world into two parts. Then the devil violated the terms of the compact by usurping God's part, namely heaven and the living people [Иванов 1925: 316]. As interpreted by the perfect ones (Bogomil teachers) in the novel, this open conflict between God and his demonic shadow continues, though it no longer involves people. To bring this struggle to a positive conclusion it is necessary to defeat those who have given themselves to the devil: the tsar, the boyars, the Church hierarchs. All good people should get involved in the struggle and rally around God, who is trying to restore the world's original unity and to free the earth from Beelzebub's dominion: "Just as God at once time sent Zerzevul to eternal torment, so it is now time for

⁴⁸ According to Ivanov, this folk articulation of the name of Beelzebub is also found in the Greek vernacular [Иванов 1925: 380].

the tsars and the boyars, those minions and allies of Satan, to be thrown into the abyss of hell” [Иванов 1925: 317].

In Zagorčinov’s novel, Bogomil cosmogony appears in a somewhat modified form. Its moderate dualism, hopeful of the ultimate victory of God’s spirit over demonic matter, is replaced by a dichotomous vision of the world where order can only be restored by eradicating Satan’s servants. In this interpretation, matter was created by God, and although it has been given over to evil, it can still hope to be redeemed. The chaos surrounding moral values is revealed to be the product by a power-sharing arrangement which is disadvantageous to mankind and the world. Zagorčinov’s novel does not offer any straightforward answers about the likelihood of such success. The hayduk avenger Momchil (a highwayman and folk hero), whom the Bogomils elect as their leader, dies in combat before his credibility as a man of power can stand the ultimate test.

The Bogomils are facing a dire threat: a Church council has been convened against them. Zagorčinov portrays them as an internally fragmented group with vacillating members who are prone to conversion. The faction that calls for revenge on the rich and a struggle for a just state on earth is just one ideological option among many:

Let’s do what Bogdan said: set the boyars’ towers on fire and flee into the woods [...]. If we can smash the Tsar’s army, we can elect Momchil as tsar, so we put our man on the throne [Загорчинов 1979: 426].⁴⁹

Tomorrow, when Satanael and his minions are exiled to eternal torment and the Kingdom of Heaven comes on earth, when truth and peace will reign in the world and it will not be as it is now [...]. This is the kingdom that we, the Bogomils, are waiting for. We proclaim it to the Christians. Your God is our God, and you are a brother to the Bogomils [Загорчинов 1979: 332].

[...] the present kingdom belongs to Satanael; it will fall, and another one will come: the kingdom of God – without the boyars, without serfs [Загорчинов 1979: 333].

A second group is made up of conformists who favour a strategy of blending in. To them, the ultimate value consists in physical survival through mimicry:

Whatever we do, brothers, our fate is always the same. It is better to sit quietly. God willing, better times might come. If you are forced to go to church, do not resist. Just recite the Lord’s Prayer in your mind, and fast afterwards. [...] It does not behoove one to kiss Christ’s disgrace [the cross – G.S.G.] [...],

⁴⁹ I quote from an edition published after World War II, in which the title was changed by removing the subtitle.

but if they compel you, kiss it, and repeat in your mind: “Forgive me, Lord, that I kissed Satan!” [Загорчинов 1979: 426–427].

The third group comprises the hedonists, who are prepared to discard the gnostic abhorrence of the body to experience erotic ecstasy, masquerading as a mystical experience:

Little by little, men joined them as well, including a young Bogomil man whom the women undressed, tearing up the knots and button holes in his clothes with their teeth and nails [Загорчинов 1979: 430].

Ultimately, only the perfect ones are a small set of people who are equally opposed to all of those projects including the struggle, the idea of world restoration, survival at any cost or carnal substitutes for true spirituality. They are prepared to embrace martyrdom to free themselves from the oppressive prison of matter, and to return to the house of the Father:

Satan created the body, he also created strength, and the sword is a weapon of strength [...] We are strong with the strength of truth, strength of spirit which is locked within the body. Whoever strikes another with his right hand, he is calling Satan to help, he is defending his body [Загорчинов 1979: 428].

In *Литература и исторически мит* (*Literature and Historical Myth*, 2002), Ogniana Georgieva-Teneva points out how Zagorchinov was not so much trying to create psychological depth for his characters, as to demonstrate the social consequences of their moral outlooks [Георгиева-Тенева 2002: 150–151]. This applies in particular to Momchil, a character constructed in the mould of a mythological hero cum romantic lover. Zagorchinov portrays the Bogomil rationalisations of evil as products of errant reason, trying and failing to make sense of the tragic experience of the human condition. Among the elites, the effort to find a way out of the oppressive life in this world takes on the form of spiritual nonconformism that produces escapism and an aestheticised passivity towards evil. In the novel, this stance appears to be unacceptable at the egalitarian level. The gnostic vision becomes transformed in the minds of the actual leaders of the people, who are guided by practical reason and mindful of the material needs of the flock. Mystical dualism turns into a clear-cut distinction between “us” and “them,” “friend” and “foe,” as complex ascetic strategies for frustrating Satan’s designs are replaced by a pragmatic approach aimed at producing quick results in the here and now. Though dressed up in religious costume, the populist slogans ultimately rally the community around the banner of prosperous existence. In Zagorchinov’s novel, the utopia of the order with its promise of a new society seems to be doomed to fail.

2

OCCULTIST ATTEMPTS TO REVITALISE BOGOMILISM

Standing in strange contrast to this fierceness is the tolerance shown by the Bulgarians to other beliefs and religions [...]. Why [...] not turn for illustrations of this phenomenon to the same qualities of the Bulgarian spirit that centuries ago produced Bogomilism? [...] True, the Bulgarians today are not the same as they were in the times of Tsar Simeon and Tsar Samuel; but this only goes to show that certain mental characteristics, which favour theosophic production, remain unchanged even in the face of changes to national character [Grzegorzewski 1883: 25–28].

An updated variant of the concept of the Bulgarian cultural mission (engendered by a combination of the ideologised memory of Bogomilism, the Enlightenment idea of progress, and the myth that the Bulgarians were cultural elders among the Slavic nations) was also present in Theosophy. Its nineteenth century heyday, coinciding with general religious revival, was a challenge to the belief, inherited from the rationalist elements of the Enlightenment, that religion would ultimately atrophy and disappear. In the modernist period, the search for new ways to restore the element of the sacred to the cosmos without having to rely on the ideological offerings of institutional religion was taking place in the context of unprecedented levels of intellectual exchange and communication. The heightened activity of various missionary movements worldwide [Bell 1978: 29–55] (including Evangelicals and Methodists in the Bulgarian context),

coupled with the emergence of religious studies and systematic research into folklore, unavoidably produced a number of unpredictable popular misconceptions so characteristic of the nineteenth century. Researchers associate the period’s crude and mechanical ideological syncretism and its simplistic analogies with increased levels of personal mobility and superficial perceptions of the scientific advancements of the time. In the absence of a stable unifying centre, the search for ideological inspiration turned to areas outside of Christian spirituality, indicating a fascination with exoticism, a weariness with the dogmas enforced by institutional churches, and a yearning for hierophany that the churches were no longer capable of providing. The nineteenth century was also marked by a growing fascination with “underground” historical religions (such as ancient mysteries or esoteric schools) which, though never gone completely, were now definitively attracting renewed interest. In Europe, occultism left the narrow confines of secret societies to gain a wider recognition thanks to the efforts of Alphonse Louis Constant. Better known as Eliphas Lévi, he was a member of several secret societies in France and England (including the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons), whose short book *Histoire de la magie* (1859) gained an immense popularity in its day [see Prokopiuk 2000; Eliade 1976: 49]. In the United States, Spiritualism (a crude variant of mysticism) was made popular by the Fox sisters in the state of New York [see Klimowicz 1992: 7; Wasylewski 1958: 37]. Some people treated spiritualism as a form of entertainment to fill the spiritual vacuum, others, as noted by Eliade, used occultism as a powerful weapon against Christianity:

they reject the official contemporary religion, ethics, social mores, and aesthetics. Some of them are not only anticlerical, like most of the French intelligentsia, but anti-Christian; they refuse, in fact, all the Judeo-Christian values as well as the Greco-Roman and Renaissance ideals. They have become interested in the Gnostic and other secret groups, not only for their precious occult lore, but also because such groups have been persecuted by the Church. (...) From Baudelaire to André Breton, involvement with the occult represented for the French literary and artistic avant-garde one of the most efficient criticisms and rejections of the religious and cultural values of the West – efficient because it was considered to be based on historical facts [Eliade 1976: 52–53].

Bell was even more emphatic, pointing out that although the foundations of modernism were undeniably nihilistic, modernist aestheticism paradoxically sacralised art, whose role was to satisfy the deepest, often demonic needs of humanity triggered by hidden instincts that religion taught to hold in check. As in some ecstatic mysteries, the inten-

tion of aestheticism was to achieve the sublime through depravation [Bell 1978: 10].

In this sense, the proliferation of nineteenth-century occult and esoteric societies (which by that time were becoming increasingly exoteric) played a kind of educational role. The associative mode of Theosophist thinking focused mainly on the search for a common denominator shared by all the religions available to human knowledge. The worldview thus constructed was characterised by a superficial syncretism based on overinterpretations of cherry-picked elements of the various component systems. Those modern ideological configurations differed markedly from their gnostic predecessors in that they took an optimistic outlook on the human condition,¹ primarily because they replaced the old dualism with more conceptually diffuse axiological concepts (characteristic of modern religion [Bellah 1964]), and propagated the idea of individual and collective renewal (*renovatio*) within a re-sacralised natural world [Eliade 1976: 75–78].

The interest in occultism, spiritualism and esoteric teachings (which in 1900s and 1910s Bulgaria had been limited to small groups of initiates) turned into a mass fascination with mysticism and gnosis that swept the Bulgarian intelligentsia of the 1920s [Атанасова 1999: 373]. Three independent schools remained active until the 1950s: the spiritualists, organised since 1902 as the Sofia Lodge of the Theosophic Society [В. Георгиев 1986: 24–28] (who launched their own journal, the *Теософски преглед* in 1904), members of Lucy Gregory's Bahá'í community,² and the White Brotherhood of Peter Deunov (from 1901) [В. Георгиев 1986: 25]. Their doctrines, focused as they were on spiritual renewal and social reform, proved to be an attractive ideological proposition in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The Theosophic Version: the Magi

The earliest polemical reaction of the modernist generation to Vazov's concepts of Bogomilism was *Богомилски легенди* (*The Bogomil Legends*) by Nikolai Rainov (1912). Published anonymously, it quickly attracted

¹ Not coincidentally, as Eliade noted, the most incisive critique of those formations came from René Guénon, a convert to Islam and former gnostic, who questioned the authenticity of their teachings, particularly those of Blavatsky's Theosophical Society or his contemporary pseudo-Rosicrucians.

² A mystical movement within Shi'a Islam; present in Bulgaria since 1928 (based in Varna).

readers, but the hermetic nature of the text first soon gave it an aura of mystery and then, ultimately, led to its dismissal. The sense of impenetrability of Rainov’s early prose must have been widespread: one contemporary scholar dismissed it as an attractively packaged set of empty signifiers. Trendafilov dismissed Rainov as an intellectual imposter trying to dazzle readers by posing as an exotic magus, an attitude he interpreted in psychoanalytical terms as being symptomatic of Rainov’s complexes [Трендафилов 1991: 80–83]. He regarded Rainov as a trickster whose ambiguous position in Bulgarian literature was based on the critical defences of his work on the one hand, and their quick devaluation in the eyes of the reading public on the other. Vladimir Trendafilov attributed the critical justifications of Rainov’s work to the Bulgarian complex of their inferiority to European culture, mistakenly regarded in Bulgaria as a monolithic construct [Трендафилов 1991: 86–87, 90], and he interpreted the quick waning of popular interest in Rainov’s work as a defensive reaction of a national culture confronted with an amateur occultist risibly posing as a national revival leader and taking his educational mission (of sorts) altogether too seriously [Трендафилов 1991: 39].³ Trendafilov acknowledged Rainov’s contribution to the development of a Bulgarian artistic language, an opinion shared by many, but he dismissed Rainov’s ideological discourse as sterile and imitative of the apocryphal tradition and Nietzsche’s philosophy:

What he achieves is merely an attempt at imitation, not accidentally at that – neither road tolerates imitations [...] Actually, Rainov puts on airs and graces with his secrets and his wisdom, but at no point does he achieve any depth [Трендафилов 1991: 67–68].

At the opposite extreme from Trendafilov, who failed to understand the associative mode of Theosophic thinking, were the interpretations of Edvin Sugarev. In an essay on Rainov’s works [Сугарев 1989: 9], Sugarev created the literary myth of Rainov as a spiritual giant with superhuman creative powers, immediately apparent from his remarkable productivity alone.⁴ According to Sugarev, Rainov’s works were characterised by unprecedented levels of erudition compared to the general Bulgarian cultural context of his time. Unable to unlock the hidden meanings of

³ “This means that our national culture is actually defending itself against the phenomenon that is Nikolai Rainov, and refuses to accept it, fearing that this alien element, once planted in its soil, will break it open from within” [Трендафилов 1991: 39].

⁴ By the end of World War I, Rainov had followed his first book (1912) with seven more books, followed by short stories, a play, two collections of poems, fairy tales and a 12-volume study of art.

the texts, his readers fell victim to cultural misunderstanding as Rainov's texts went straight over their heads [Сугарев 1989: 10].

It must be conceded that Rainov was a remarkably erudite writer, commanding a knowledge not only of history, art, classical philosophy or mythology, but also of esoteric topics, Christian and Jewish mysticism, the hermetic tradition of the Renaissance, alchemy, and various forms of Gnosticism [see Врина 1995].⁵ Rainov's fascination with occultism dates back to his years in a theological seminary. Combining an excellent knowledge of the Bible with surreptitious study of esoteric journals, Rainov quickly became an eminent authority on occult knowledge, apparent from the various roles he played over a number of years. Between 1924 and 1933, he headed "Орфей," a para-Masonic Theosophical lodge, edited the Theosophical periodicals *Зорница* and *Орфей* (1924–1926), and worked to popularise his ideas through talks and publications including *Мистицизъм и безверие* (*Mysticism and Unbelief*, 1925), *Наукама теософията* (*The Doctrine Against Theosophy*, 1926), *Ремкеанство и теософия* (*Remkeanism and Theosophy*, 1926). He edited and translated a series of pamphlets published as the "Theosophical Library," and owned a large collection of occult and Kabbalist writings, which would later be used by Lyudmila Zhivkova in her dual capacity as Minister of Culture in socialist Bulgaria and an adept of the occult (see Chapter 3). From 1929, Rainov was also a member of the Masonic Lodge "Parsifal," where he had attained the degree of Master. Between 1934 and 1935,⁶ he

⁵ This was noted by critics, many of whom presented Rainov as an erudite sage.

"Undoubtedly there is a connection between the epigraphs used by Nikolai Rainov and the respective legends. Besides, they contain information about the author's sources of inspiration and preferred readings which he surrounded himself with when writing the Bogomil legends. And more than anything, they testify to the internal cohesion and essential immediacy of the sources that may appear so varied in the eyes of an unenlightened and uninitiated reader. [...] Is there any need to comment on the author's erudition and the reader's ignorance, who can do nothing but fall silent in reverence for this powerful knowledge of Anonymous?" [Андрейчева 1989: 52].

Nikolai Rainov's writings in the early decades of the twentieth century continue to provoke a level of scholarly emotion rarely seen in relation to other texts. Perhaps for that reason both biographies of Rainov published in the 1980s [see also Андонова 1980], which sought to reconcile the directives of Marxist literary criticism with an impressionistic tone, contribute little to our knowledge of the writer's oeuvre. An altogether more inspiring dialogue came from Trendafilov and Sugarev, published in 1991 by the journal *Литературна мисъл*. Critical interpretations of Rainov's prose and his position in Bulgarian literary life are closely tied to the critics' values.

⁶ During the period when the infamous State Protection Act in Bulgaria, a piece of legislation used to hobble associations and to curb artistic freedoms in Bulgaria, was in force.

published articles on Freemasonry, defending the secret society against defamation and persecution [see, among others, Н. Райнов 1933]. He quit all such societies in the mid-1930s for unknown reasons, possibly out of conformism. In the opinion of his son, Bogomil Rainov, he remained loyal to Theosophy, and he regarded the Russian Theosophist Nikolai Roerich as his greatest master until the end of his life [Б. Райнов 2001, see also Сугарев 1991].

Although Rainov’s books appear to bear a loose relationship with the life and concerns of his day, they were in fact deeply grounded in the ideological dilemmas of the period. His acquiescence with fashionable esoteric spirituality made him receptive to influences from various Eastern religions, though he regarded them from the perspective of Western spiritual needs. It was also not insignificant that although the nineteenth-century variant of the Theosophical movement took its shape in the West, it had been originally established by Helena Blavatsky, a woman born into an aristocratic Russo-German family in Ukraine. Rainov’s ideas were also influenced by Russian Slavophilia [see Walicki 2002, Н. Димитрова 2002], an intellectual movement with esoteric underpinnings, which was succeeded in the twentieth century by a number of different Euro-Asiatic intellectual constructs [Massaka 2001] including the Neo-Gnosis of Nikolai and Elena Roerich [see Stephens 1997: 359–365]. Their influence on Rainov, though noted by his biographers [Андрейчева 1989: 133], has not been studied to date.

Rainov was fascinated with stories filled with ambiguous symbolism, and at the time he was writing *Богомилски легенди*, his views were eclectic rather than syncretic.⁷ Although he may have meant his *Bogomil Legends* to be a hermetic text addressed to a select group of acolytes, his plan to draw attention to the Bulgarian Gnostic tradition appears to be indicative of his intention to put an end to Bulgaria’s ideological isolation, and to domesticate his ideas by presenting them in more familiar trappings. In any event, the Bogomil connection existed in name only. Given the paucity of sources, the book (despite its title) was in fact a pseudo-reconstruction of Bogomil cosmogony, tailored to conform to

⁷ At the time of publication the text was treated as a “mosaic” by critics who emphasised the decorative qualities of its style [see Милев 1913: 1]. Rainov used some elements from esoteric literature of that period as normative constructions for his texts. For instance, the legend *Трите небеса* contains a vision of the seven temples, often found in Jewish Merkava mysticism. In Éliphas Lévi’s version (*Dogma and Ritual of High Magic*, 1861) this motif became known in occult circles. Rainov, argues Isabelle Vrinat, used that trope in his short story *Трите небеса* (and later vulgarized Papus’s 1892 *The Kabbalah*), reworked in the modernist literary style.

the associative logic of nineteenth-century comparative religious studies. Rainov ignored Jireček's moderate opinion on Bogomil dualism, and favoured instead the opinion that Bogomilism was the crowning point of Eastern dualism, a universal syncretic philosophy that combined and reconciled all ideological contradictions.⁸

In the essay “‘Богомилски легенди’ от Николай Райнов. Алего-рично резюме на западния езотеризъм от XIX век. Един модерен апокриф” (“Nikolai Rainov's ‘Bogomil Legends.’ An Allegorical Resume of Western Esoteric Thought of the Nineteenth Century”),⁹ the French scholar Isabelle Vrinat demonstrates how Rainov adapted the Bogomil tradition to align it with the needs of Theosophy at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries using the knowledge of Bogomilism available at the time, based, among others sources, on Slavic indexes of prohibited books (mainly the one discovered by Pypine in 1862). Vrinat argues that Rainov must have been familiar with scholarly work on those indexes as his *Bogomil Legends* include literary variations on apocrypha classified in those sources, not always accurately, as being of Bogomil origin: the story of Adam and Eve (*Цар на мрака*), Cain (*Каин и Авел*), Melchizedek (*Мелхизедек*), Enoch (*Трите небеса*), Moses (*Жрецьт на Озирис*), the Revelation of Ezdra (*Видение на Ездра*), the legend of Solomon (*Соломон и Вавкида*), and Old Testament texts including the Book of Ecclesiastes (*Слово на Блажения*), the Book of Daniel (*Даниел*), and two parables about Jesus (*Исус на планината*, *Път на звездите*). As Vrinat notes, it is not coincidental that all those figures had long been known in esoteric literature, where they are referred to as Sages, Priests or Magi, i.e. bearers of the hermetic tradition.¹⁰

Only four of the “legends” in Rainov's book (*Цар на мрака*, *Каломан*, *Каин и Авел*, *Трите небеса*) contain actual references to Bogomil apocrypha, though not to the *Secret Book* itself (which remained unpublished in Bulgaria until 1925, when it was first anthologized by Y. Ivanov), but rather to versions recorded in Euthymius Zigabenus's *Panoplia dogmatica*¹¹ and Iraeneus's *Adversus haereses* [see English translation: Irenaeus 1872], widely distributed in esoteric circles. Vrinat's comparative close reading isolates the semantic layers of the text, revealing not only their provenance but also the internal contradictions in Rainov's model:

⁸ Similar views were expressed at the time by a number of authors including B. Boev, N. Filipov or Ivan Grozev, a poet, Theosophist and Freemason; see Грозев 1925.

⁹ See footnote 7.

¹⁰ For more on the subject, see Lévi 1922: 35–52; Butler 1948: 15–86.

¹¹ The text was published in French in 1865.

the Kalomain myth of the Byzantine Bogomils meets the Valentinian myth, which meets the doctrine of Helena Blavatsky and the feminist messianism of the Theosophist Anna Kingsford. The most striking demonstration of the internal inconsistency of those texts comes in their reflection on the problem of evil and the figure of Lucifer.¹² Although Rainov imitates gnostic terminology and devotes as much attention to Evil and Knowledge as the Bogomil apocrypha, he nevertheless modifies the idea of gnostic dualism, which he views not so much in terms of a split or rupture, but rather in terms of connection and harmony between good and evil, an underlying idea in the Theosophical concept of salvation.¹³ He refers to the traditional gnostic interpretation of Satan as the demonic creator of the material world, only to reconcile it with the modernist rehabilitation of Lucifer as the keeper of the keys to the temple of knowledge, a creative spirit standing above good and evil who refuses to make allowances for the moral consequences of its actions. Defined and predetermined by their role as protagonists of ideas – pawns in a game they never chose to join, but rather found themselves thrust into it – the characters in *Богомилски легенди* are marked by internal contradiction. They question not only themselves and their fate, but also the roles assigned to them by mankind’s mythological and cultural memory. In the characters of Satanail and his son Cain, begotten out of his father’s desire for Eve, Rainov values evil (an active force which creates new worlds) more than good (which is passive and subordinated to external norms imposed in a top-down fashion). According to this Faustian idea, creative evil is only perceived as negative when it remains unrecognised. Once recognised as such, it becomes a necessary precondition for good – a creative original force that in turn animates all creative effort [Сугарев 1989: 18–19].

In Rainov’s writings this modernist, neo-Romantic cult of creativity and individual creative genius unconstrained by traditional ethical norms gradually takes on the conventional form of admiration for the “founding fathers.” His collections of short stories *Видения из древна България* (*Visions from Ancient Bulgaria*, 1918) and *Книга за царете* (*The Book of Tsars*, 1918), Rainov leaves the territory of gnostic myth, and turns

¹² This is because his interpretation of Bogomilism views the movement as an Orphic tradition; see Грозев 1925: 456.

¹³ To nineteenth-century occultists, Satan – evil incarnate – is a Grand Magus, Guide of Light, a creator and destroyer, an agent of liberty, a force of good which may also serve evil purposes. Blavatsky interprets Lucifer as a second Logos: Logos in his highest form, an enemy in his lowest form.

instead to a historical canvas in narratives of the great figures who had left their mark on Bulgarian history. Among the tsars, their wives and lovers we find the figure of Boyan the Magus, the legendary son of Tsar Simeon and brother of the inept ruler, Tsar Petar. Rainov connects the story of Boyan the Magus (a proto-Bulgarian shaman reported to be able to take on animal form) [Бешевлиев 1981: 84] with the Bogomil movement. The short story *Цар Петъ* arguably contains certain parallels between Rainov's portrayal of the Bogomils and interpretations that had become *loci communes* in Bulgarian identity discourse. By variously referring to the Bogomils as "sons of destruction" [Н. Райнов 1969b: 246] and "children not of this world" [Н. Райнов 1969b: 276], Rainov portrays them as religious martyrs who freely choose to sacrifice themselves to defend the oppressed people.

And again they built tall stakes, and at night one could hear the haunting moans of many men bound and set on fire. And in the dark streets of the plague-stricken city the smell of burning human flesh rose with the smoke, and high pillars of fire soared above the city. The souls of nobles and clergy grew cruel, and their thirst for suffering was unquenchable, so when they went to watch the burning of people it was as if they were going to a feast [Н. Райнов 1969b: 306].

The burning stake becomes a metaphor for the fate of people faithful to the ethical injunctions of the *pneumatics*,¹⁴ fighting the good fight against injustice: the sole enlightened keepers of secret books, people who can control the instincts of the mutinous crowd [see Н. Райнов 1969b: 264].¹⁵ Bogomil/Jeremiah, Simeon Antipa, Nikita Strannik, Lazar, Anton the Librarian, are the few companions of Boyan the Magus that the narrator mentions by name. They accompany a man who mediates between the people and the tsar, but also between different worlds:

A dark child of dark times, Boyan the Magus was a mystery. No one could see him in the daytime, and at night they feared him. Vague rumours had

¹⁴ This trope would later be used by B. Dimitrova; see pp. 142–153.

¹⁵ Rainov must have been preoccupied with the problem of revolution. He uses Boyan the Magus as his mouthpiece to express a prophetic vision of destruction wreaked by uncontrollable mass mutiny:

"You haven't seen the crowds, my brother; you do not know how dangerous those festivities of the mob can get. Those people are superstitious and hungry, mercenaries and miracle workers, innumerable and insane. They believe recklessly, and they kill with dexterity and without scruples. They follow miracle-working icons and unknown prophets. Any monk can sway them, and at his word they will break the iron in your doors so they can melt down the gold in your crown [...]" [Н. Райнов 1969b: 264].

long been spreading about him: that he had sold his soul to Satan; that he knew terrible secrets; that he had limitless magical powers. [...] Yellow parchments rolled up inside silver and iron were unrolled there, with strange signs engraved in them – and unknown books divulged unheard of secrets. [...] A holy pentagram of gold trembled at the sound of powerful spells – and spirits of hell and heaven cast wide shadows across the magic mirror. [...] People wandering at night saw the huge shadow of a praying hermit [...] above the monastery of St. Paraskeva [see Н. Райнов 1969b: 251–253].

Alchemist, seer, hermit, sorcerer, sage and charismatic speaker; victim of the sinful passion of Irina, the spurned tsarina (*Царицата Ирина*); a mystic entangled in the historical web of human error: as a character, Rainov's magus combines the power of all those figures. As Quispel noted, the magus drew his stature from the divine power that submerges him in the archaic contents of life of the soul: a figure who can work powerful magic – attract women, turn back streams, levitate, foretell the future – thanks to his powerful spells. Because he can compel the gods to share their potency, he is a figure endowed with divine powers, living and acting within a field of magical forces and identifying with the great power of God [Quispel 1951: 53–54].

In the variant described by Quispel, the figure of the magus is a popular topos in Judaeo-Christian culture. One particular instance of that topos in Bulgarian culture took shape in the period of the national revival, inspired by Yuri Venelin, an explorer of the southern Slavic lands in the early nineteenth century, and an immensely influential figure in the shaping of Bulgarian national discourse. This Russian emissary – half scholar, half dreamer – connected the references to Boyan/Benjamin in medieval Greek and Latin documents with references to the singer/magician Boyan in the famous *Tale of Igor's Campaign*, an anonymous epic poem believed to date back to the twelfth century [Венелин 1849: 264]. Venelin's Boyan is a mighty magus, but also a poet, who shuns the din of battle and courtly intrigue. Influenced by Venelin, the Russian writer Alexander Veltman made Boyan the Magus a character in his *Raina, the Bulgarian Tsarina*, giving rise to a new legend.

The first Bulgarian writer to make literary use of that legend was the indefatigable myth-maker Georgi S. Rakowski. In 1857, he published a forged folk song portraying Boyan the Magus as a heroic military leader and commander in a victorious battle against Byzantine forces [Пундев 1923: 34–35]. He reused the same trope in the patriotic poem *Горски пътник* (*The Silvan Wanderer*, 1857), setting Boyan within the historical context of the first Bulgarian state, and shaping his portrayal as

a member of the anti-Greek faction, the better to serve the interests of the nascent nationalist ideology. A similar message appears in the first historical drama by Dobri Vojnikov, *Райна княгиня* (*Princess Raina*), an adaptation of Veltman's novel. As noted by Pundev in 1923, the figure of Boyan the Magus must have been a highly impactful literary creation given that he found his way into the first Bulgarian chemistry textbook (1871) by Enchev, who described Boyan as the earliest Bulgarian chemist and astronomer, mistaken by the ignorant populace for a sorcerer [Пундев 1923: 37]. In 1907, Dimitar Marinov (an eminent student of Bulgarian folklore) follows in the footsteps of Venelin and Rakovski to make use of the forged folk legend in his article on the holiday of *boyanik* to create the figure of Boyan, an Orphic singer, as noted by Pundev.

The only Bulgarian writer to resist the temptation of perpetuating the attractive portrayal of the magus was Stoian Mikhailovski, who derided the figure of Boyan in his poem *Боян Магьосника* (*Boyan the Sorcerer*, 1884), placing him, in a tongue in cheek manner, within the context of the Satanic paradigm:

Могъщият Дух на злото власт пълна му е дал!
 [...] Боян лекува болки телесни и душевни
 Певец е той, философ и безподобен врач...
 От билки чародейски, от сказки и от песни
 Подире си те влачат и безконечен плач!
 [Михайловски 1997].

(The mighty Spirit of evil has given him full power! / [...] Boyan cures the pains of body and mind. / He is a singer, philosopher and a healer nonpareil... Stay away from magic herbs, talks and songs, / s they carry in their wake / everlasting torment and endless tears!)

At the turn of the nineteenth century, there was a spike in interest in Boyan the Magus among the Theosophists. Rainov was not the first to use this figure; Ivan Grozev had attempted a poem on the subject, *Боян Магьосника* (*Boyan the Sorcerer*, 1900–1906). Boyan also appears in a play written early in the twentieth century by Kiril Hristov (a writer who otherwise showed no interest in esoteric subjects or Bogomilism) entitled *Боян Магесникът* (1905, published in 1914). Portrayed as a mediaeval scholar and patriot, Hristov's hero combined the poetic sensitivity of Goethe with a kind of Napoleonic pragmatism, representing a new synthesis in the spirit of Nietzschean philosophy [see Христов 1966: 419, 1944: 215; Куюмджиев 1967].

Rainov's magus was similarly a character combining two different personality types. Above all he was intended to function as a pre-figura-

tion of the future perfect man anticipated by Nietzsche (with his cult of liberty and power) and by the esoteric literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through the Bogomilism of the Perfect Ones (of whom Boyan the Magus was the best representative) Rainov was discovering a creative spirit – a figure free from religious dogma, in revolt against constraining norms. As Sugarev notes, “In a way, the Superman becomes intertwined with his mythological prototype – the Old Iranian Zoroaster; the main locus of this interweaving turns out to be the dualistic religious and philosophical concepts that underlie the Bogomil doctrine” [Сугарев 1991: 94–100].

However, this ideal disintegrates in Rainov’s fiction, where it is saddled with a distinctly non-Nietzschean attachment to the common good of the community. The figure of magus and benefactor gets appropriated by the idea of the nation, built on the foundations of heresy as myth. Rainov creates an alternative model of the experience of national identity, where the image of Boyan the Magus – “the greatest of Bulgarians” [Н. Райнов 1969с: 159] – effectively relegates the hermit St. Ivan of Rila to the status of a secondary cultural hero by bringing his spiritual greatness into question: perhaps even removes him from the cultural pantheon altogether [Н. Райнов 1969b: 282].¹⁶ This neo-Romantic mystification is an attempt to reconstruct the old national culture in such a way as to bring to the fore its primary connections with the hermetic tradition (considered a modern tradition). In effect, Rainov manages to airbrush the image of Bogomilism, repackaging a mass religious movement as a current of esoteric knowledge with universalist ambitions, corresponding to the views of those historians who looked for ways of portraying the Bulgarians as a cultural community comfortably at home in modernity.

In 1923, as Bulgarian journals were commemorating the 1000th anniversary of Boyan the Magus,¹⁷ Vasil Pundev came up with an analysis of the way Boyan was being exploited in Bulgarian culture. He placed him within the broader context of Bulgarian complexes of inferiority to Europe:

It seems that we very much want to believe in a historical illusion that would allow us to grow in our own regard. [...] Our history is meagre. It is an offensive yet not altogether unfounded notion that European culture would have lost nothing if we had never existed. [...] Uninvited guests,

¹⁶ In the 1930s this idea appears in the writings of P. Mutafchiyev, and in the 1990s in V. Zarev’s version of the Bogomil myth; see pp. 202–217.

¹⁷ N. Sheytanov, the ideologue of the extreme Bulgarian right, saw Boyan the Magus as the codifier of Bogomilism; see Шейтанов 1923: 4.

disrespected neighbours, silent table companions, we feel awkward in the great community of European nations. This is why we strive to find some undiscovered, significant content within the confines of our deaf history. [...] Perhaps in him [Boyan the Magus – G.S.G.] we can find some forgotten wealth. Perhaps his secret is a treasure that we could dignifiedly show the world... We can see the eagerness of that hope in the fact that the image of the prince is the best developed image in our literature compared to any other historical figure [Пундев 1923: 8].

The subsequent literary career of Boyan the Magus is a demonstration of that enduring desire to build up Bulgarian cultural self-esteem by conforming to what was seen an attractive model. In interwar literature the magus appeared in a number of texts, including a fictionalised biography by Tsvetan Minkov, *Боян Магесникът* (*Boyan the Sorcerer*, 1930), and a poem by Ludmil Stoianov, “Боян Магесник. Житие” (“Boyan the Sorcerer: A Life,” 1929). Both of those left-leaning writers were perpetuating the image of Boyan as a protector of the people and victim of political oppression, an immortal alchemist and healer who evades his oppressors and, in Stanov’s interpretation, sets out on a mission to the West:

One winter evening / in the blue dusk, / when the sun was setting over the Danube / and shadows swayed like drunks, / somewhere in the depths of the horizon, / faint, ragged, / (a tiny speck in a snowy field), / a stray wanderer, / insane perhaps, but bold too [...], with burning and fearsome eyes / a great mind sparkling / and dashing against the future – / was headed for the West [Стоянов 1929: 31].

After World War II, the figure of Boyan the Magus lost its distinguished standing as a figure of Bulgarian literature [see Петров 2001].¹⁸ Advancements in historical research and the official rejection of mysticism as an ideology hostile to materialism meant that Boyan became replaced in Socialist realist historical fiction by a different hero, the Bogomil healer Vasili Vrach [Богданов 1962, 1988; М. Попов 1979], burned at the stake by the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos. The Bogomil was being portrayed as a heroic and rational figure: a man true to his beliefs and wanting to serve mankind, becoming an ideological and moral exemplar included to the national pantheon of pre-Communist heroes.¹⁹

¹⁸ It was assimilated into scholarship on proto-Bulgarian tradition by a number of academics, including Stancho Vaklinov, Veselin Beshevliyev, Ivan Venedikov, and more recently Dragomir Petrov.

¹⁹ The literary myth of Boyan the Magus was revived in the 1990s, when the monthly *Български месечник* devoted two issues to the figure. See Йорданова 2000.

History wrote an interesting postscript to Rainov’s story. In 2000 and 2001, *Житно зърно*, a journal published by the White Brotherhood, featured a series of articles entitled *Богомилство и богомили (Bogomilism and Bogomils)*, written under the pseudonym of “Bishop Simeon.” An editorial note introducing the first in that series of articles speculated that Nikolai Rainov might have been their actual author [Епископ Симеон 2000a: 10] but Rainov’s authorship is highly doubtful, if only for reasons of style and structure. The piece is a sensationalist, pseudoscientific discussion of a supposed collection of secret books of Bogomilism, but Rainov’s influence seems palpable primarily in the selection and portrayal of the characters: Boyan/Benjamin the Magus (father of the Bulgarian Bogomils), and his closest associates: Bogomil/Jeremiah, Patriarch Stefan, Simeon Antipa, Vasili the Byzantine and Gavril Lesnovski. Like SS. Cyril and Methodius, the characters are portrayed as heroes on a mission of enlightenment, bringing hermetic knowledge to lands stretching from the West to the Urals. The text is an avalanche of absurdities and factual errors unworthy of polemic, listing countless titles of esoteric writings supposedly authored by Boyan the Magus and his learned followers (it should be noted that the existence of those supposed monuments of esoteric literature is not confirmed, or even hinted at, in legitimate scholarship). A general description of the contents of those “parchments” (supposedly held in Malta) suggests that the mysterious “Bishop Simeon” was using his counterfeit version of Bogomil tradition to present a gnostic system of his own, differing quite markedly from Bogomilism, and reviving the neo-gnostic cult of the snake, which will replace the old Christianity and spread to great masses of people:

His face covered, Boyan roams Bulgaria and gathers disciples. People listen to his words of truth, grandeur in life and silent meekness. The Bogomils are already many. They account for a half of the church. They speak softly, calmly, they preach disinterestedly, and people flock to follow those unknown apostles. The people go and pave the way for that great Destruction which will leave a vast desert in the soul, and ashes and ruins in people’s lives [Епископ Симеон 2000b: 12].

Today, ten centuries after those great events, when the echo of the last step of the last Bogomil died away a long time ago, I recall the words Simeon Antipa put at the conclusion of his History: “And someone from the posterity will walk amid the ruins, and look for great treasures” [Епископ Симеон 2000b: 13].

The text under discussion here shares certain affinities with *Богомил – създател на европейската цивилизация (Bogomil: Founder of the European Civilization, 2002)*, a book by Yolo Denev, a post-Communist

known for his nationalist views, whose missionist message reproduces the model outlined in “Bishop Simeon’s” text. According to Denev, the full impact of the Bogomils came from the remarkable scope of their missionary activity, which supposedly stretched all the way from the English Channel to the Urals, and from Riga and St. Petersburg to the Aegean Sea and Syria [Денев 2002: 5], also including Warsaw and Krakow (*sic!*). The same kind of obvious hyperbole and disregard for basic plausibility is palpable in Denev’s portrayal of Bogomil, supposedly a member of the chosen few, known as the pope of the Bogomils:

The Bogomils are rising from the dead in order to resurrect Mankind, to save it from destruction, so it can live in a just world.

The Bogomils were a sun which got expelled from Bulgaria, but it lit Europe and the world, and gave us light, ideology, it became a driving force – the heart of Spiritual rebirth, the Renaissance, European and world civilisation. [...] Once again the Saviour – Bogomilism – is resurrected because Bulgarians are a chosen people.

Bogomilism has changed Europe.

[...] This voice of a great Bulgarian – fighter, apostle, prophet, writer, ideologue, organiser, revolutionary – shook Europe. And Protestantism was born, [...] the sun of the Reformation was born, the Renaissance, the French Revolution and European civilisation [Денев 2002: 3–5].

This extensive quote, which is a testament to the human need for myth (bordering, in this case, on sheer absurdity), is a handy demonstration of the mythologems of Bulgarian culture in an extremely falsifiable form. By appealing to the reader’s received opinions, sensationalist instincts and delusions of grandeur, Denev creates an image which – despite its patent irrationality – seems capable of perpetuating the conspiracy theory that Bulgarian culture was perverted because “the books were destroyed or hidden away.”

A Rediscovered Book of the Magi: Glogov’s Forgery

In 1935, a work came to light that was calculated to fill in the gaps in Bulgarian collective memory. The volume, entitled *Богомилското учение според “Златната книга на богомилските магове”* (*Bogomil Doctrine According to the “Golden Book of Bogomil Magi”*), was a forgery by Anton Glogov. In his preface, Glogov claimed that the esoteric treatise of his own devising was a faithful reconstruction (made from memory) of an authentic Bogomil book. To create a more effective illusion, the preface included a detailed description of the manuscript supposedly kept

by Glogov’s family, written in the Glagolitic and Turkish scripts, which his grandfather had prudently instructed Glogov to commit to memory. As corroborating evidence, the preface included letters from the Vatican and from European universities, expressing interest in this text snatched from the jaws of oblivion.

Anton Glogov did not make a secret of his motivation. In a patriotic gesture, he dedicated his book to Priest Bogomil on the 1000th anniversary of Bogomilism, arguing that any patriotic Bulgarian regardless of worldview or ideology should approve of Bogomilism:

The interest and attention shown by world-famous scholars to the teachings of Priest Bogomil, a great man of his time and our great ancestor, are obviously flattering to every Bulgarian’s national pride, surely inducing a desire to gain a possibly complete knowledge about one of the most interesting moments in Bulgarian history, concerning the nature of the highly social, religious and philosophical doctrine of purely Bulgarian origin, whose impact on the course of historical events was felt far outside of Bulgaria in almost all religious and social movements of medieval Europe [Глогов 1935: 7–8].

Although his work followed patterns of interpretation concerning the importance of the Bulgarian heresy to European culture which had by that time become conventional in Bulgarian culture, Glogov took a more independent approach in conceptualising its dualist ideology, ignoring the standards of scholarly research in the process.²⁰ Glogov’s cosmogony bears a superficial similarity to the sophiological thought of the Russian Silver Age [Paprocki 1996b; Walicki 2002: 417–419; Н. Димитрова 1998: 57–72], of which his arguments appear to be a vulgarised variant.

Glogov describes the beginning of the world as an emanation, coming from a “dead point” (nothingness), of two equal and mutually hostile forces – the creative force and the destructive force – and portrays the process of creation as the effect of a struggle between the two:

Stage 0

DEAD POINT

DOGMA: In the beginning was the dead point,
and originally there were only
the force of creation, and
the force of destruction [Глогов 1935: 22].

The creation of the first man – a female – was in a way a consequence of this cosmic struggle; the being thus created was meant to bring solace

²⁰ Y. Ivanov’s anthology [Иванов 1925], which systematized the knowledge on the subject, had come out several years earlier.

into the lives of animals, using her love in order to appease the aggression planted in the animals by the destructive force. In retaliation, the destructive force collected body parts from the most ferocious of animals, and fashioned out of them a being outwardly resembling the woman, but endowed with the demonic qualities of its maker and compelled by sex drive. The union of the first woman (who is raped and also “descends” to lust) and the first man (whose savage breast is soothed by the woman’s influence) produced modern men, in whom the two elements (divine and demonic) gradually became so thoroughly commingled that they lost their bearings in the world of value. Spiritual clear-sightedness was restored by Priest Bogomil, who preached the idea that people could be saved by rejecting the objectification of women. This made it possible for divine love to be reborn in women’s hearts and to restore the world to original harmony.

Though couched in modern language, the concept of impersonal forces competing for primacy in the universe has a very ancient and quintessentially gnostic pedigree. The notion that the the first woman was an emanation of deity is a key clue to its reconstruction. Passed down in innumerable variants (and also present in Jewish Kabbalist mysticism), this particular myth is summarised by Quispel as follows:

In the beginning were the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness; then a divine hypostasis, usually called the original man or Sophia, shows the original light to the demons belonging to the world of darkness; those archons, usually described as the seven planetary spirits, become lustful and chase the light, which tries to flee. [...] There are different variant accounts of how the light came to mingle with the darkness. In some versions it is said that light itself became lustful and peers down (*spectandi libido*), in others it is said to have sacrificed itself to forestall an invasion of the dark demons. [...] One way or another, sparks of light penetrated the darkness. Those sparks are human souls which live scattered in the world, but also the soul of the world and the life of the cosmos in general. At one point the light and the darkness must separate, and the light will return to its source [Quispel 1951: 66].

For humans and the world in general, salvation will take the form of a restoration of the original order or the One. For Glogov, with his dualist agenda, the hope of world repair involves resisting the strategies by which people are enslaved by the force of destruction. In his understanding, this resistance should take the form of rejecting sexuality as the basis of relationships between men and women, and freeing women from its domination. Glogov must have been familiar with the Theosophic ideas of the Silesian mystic Jakob Böhme, whose writings were being popularised in interwar Bulgaria [*Учението* 1920, cited in Ганева 1999]. His portrayal

of the first human being as a sexless woman who embodies immaculate beauty uses an inverted version of Böhme’s androgynous myth [Wehr 1999: 123–190]. Böhme regarded the first Adam (who combined the male and the female elements, a tincture of fire and spirit) as a spiritually and physically perfect being, whose pure image was destroyed when that union was lost and marred by the addition of “a gross belly and bestial genitals” [Wehr 1999: 144]. Unlike Böhme, who conceived of a return to the state of eternal harmony in Christosophic terms [Wehr 1999: 149–157], Glogov revives the old gnostic tradition which views human sexuality as abhorrent, an attitude he disguises as modern feminist missionism that goes hand in hand with a utopian vision of world redemption through ideal, spiritual union between man and woman that restores woman’s original connection to the creative force. The connections between Glogov’s ideas and the sophiology of Soloviov [Н. Димитрова 2002: 81–86] seem too superficial to argue for any genuine influence between the two. It seems more plausible to argue that Glogov uses the popular Russian mythologem of the Silver Age in order to adopt a sophisticated theurgic-erotic utopia for the purposes of unsophisticated Bulgarian readers who were expecting salvation in the here and now. According to Glogov, this salvation may be achieved within a larger spiritual community (*общинария*). Glogov’s idea of the community appears to be his only hard and fast link with the idea of utopian order actually proclaimed by Priest Bogomil – all other elements of Bogomil’s doctrine are interpreted with considerable latitude. Glogov destabilises the fundamental Bogomil assertion that the material world was created by Satan, thus moving away from Bogomilism and towards a pantheistic ecstasy inspired by the beauty of nature – his dualism only applies to human spiritual life. His idea that the humans were the only element introduced into the created world by the destructive force updates the old gnostic distinction between the *pneumatics* (whose souls are free of sin) and the *hylics* (who have no souls at all). The former are creators and servants of ideals such as truth, peace, love and equality, whereas the latter are players in a world of power games, committed to falsehood and exploitation [Глоглов 1935: 19]. This dichotomy was politicised, with detailed instructions on how to organise social life in communities providing the rules for building a new social order guaranteeing a final solution to the problem of evil by eliminating the *hylics* and creating the new man.

Similar to the Bogomil apocrypha in the past, *The Golden Legend of the Bulgarian Magi*, turns out to be a popular version of neo-gnosis, targeted at ordinary readers and packed with eclectic connections, offering its own version of a promise of paradise on earth.

The Teacher Version: Peter Deunov

At the turn of the nineteenth century, when writers were reconstructing the figure of Boyan the Magus and coming up with his fictional interpretations, Deunov was already a notable figure as the founder of the White Brotherhood. Peter Deunov (1864–1944) was a Bulgarian mystic who came up with a peculiar doctrine which drew, in a number of ways, on esoteric doctrine, and whose sermons referenced, among other things, the Bogomil heritage.

Deunov's enormous homiletic output, comprising over 7,500 texts, mostly survives in the form of records in shorthand kept by the White Brotherhood. Starting in 1989, those records have been gradually transcribed and published as collections of aphorisms, books of advice, and sermon fragments arranged by topic [see, e.g., Грива, Майсторова 1994; Табакова et al. 1995; Дънов 2000] and distributed through a variety of channels, including online.²¹ Although the White Brotherhood's strategy to popularise the teachings of Peter Deunov is motivated by practical concerns, the fragmented nature of the publications actually makes it harder for researchers to develop a more comprehensive picture of Deunov's ideas. This means that religious studies scholars, historians of ideas, and biographers of Peter Deunov are facing a special responsibility; most of the studies on Deunov to date are panegyrics, polemics or memoirs [Томалевски 1997; Дойнов 1999]. One rare exception is an essay by Kamen Mitev, *Ято бели птици* (*A Flock of White Birds*) [Митев 1995: 41–49], which places the phenomenon that is Deunov within the broader context of the modernisation process. In the terminology proposed by Jerzy Szacki [2000], Mitev draws attention to those aspects of Peter Deunov's teachings that can be interpreted as a modern utopian order, offering a worldview immune to the general crisis of values:

This teaching is a modern utopia, a utopia of human self-realisation (according to which, through mystical revelation or by other means, one “remembers” their forgotten true nature, learns anew to commune with nature, renews their contact with the Universe [Митев 1995: 49].

Deunov's holistic doctrine, based on the principle of syncretism and regarded by his disciples as a *Third Testament* revealed to their Teacher, is an interesting attempt to “re-enchant the world” and to reappraise the comfortably familiar, local elements of Bulgarian identity and historical tradition which got discredited in the modernisation process.

Deunov came to appreciate the comfortably familiar, local elements of Bulgarian identity following his experiences in the United States. Deunov

²¹ See <http://bialobratstvo.info/>.

came under Methodist influence already in his early youth from Wesley Prettyman and Albert Long,²² missionaries of the Episcopal Church in New York who had settled in Shumen in 1857 to teach what were then new religious practices in Bulgaria. Peter Deunov’s father, Orthodox clergyman Konstantin Deunovski [Danovski], sent his son to a seminary school run by the American Methodist School of Theology in Svishtov.²³ Aided by his teachers, Deunov graduated and received a scholarship to study in America. Starting in 1888, he spent a total of seven years in the United States, first as a seminarian at Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, than as a student of theology and medicine at the Boston University School of Theology. Although he received a solid education as a future minister, Deunov rejected an offer to work for the Evangelical parish at Yambol. The reasons for his decision are unknown. One biographer, Nikolai Doinov, argues that Deunov feared losing his spiritual independence, but it is difficult to tell whether this interpretation might be merely an element of the Deunov legend constructed by Doinov. Deunov’s experience at American universities, where the faculty were facing increased ideological pressure at the time, may have catalysed Deunov’s fear of losing spiritual independence. Although Deunov maintained contacts with Rosicrucians and Theosophists, as noted by his biographers [see Томалевски 1997: 214–218], he never became a member of either of those societies. Over time it became clear that he was intending to create a doctrine of his own. Although in terms of ideas Deunov considered himself to be a continuator of the hermetic tradition, as a Teacher he moved away from rules the typical rules governing occult societies. In practice, he retained only some of the organisational aspects of esoteric schools (such as groups based on levels of initiation or special lectures for the best students). As a result, he created a community that was open to representatives of all faiths wishing to adhere to strict ethical rules and evincing a particular sensitivity to the mystical aspects of individual and collective existence [Атанасова 1999: 373].

The connections between Deunov’s “school” and Wesley’s model of religious association have not been studied, but it appears that this early experience shaped Deunov’s general preferences in terms of organisational structures and his preference for preaching. The Methodist movement, which became the prototype for today’s “denominations,”

²² Incidentally, in 1863, Long became one of the initiators and authors (besides Petko R. Slavejkov) of a modern Bulgarian translation of the Bible.

²³ In 1876, the first conference of the Methodist mission in Bulgaria resolved to open a number of schools throughout the country.

at its beginning [...] didn't aspire to churchhood, just to being a current within the national Church of England. [...] Denominations are like affinity groups. They don't see their differences from (at least some) others as make-or-break, salvation-or-damnation issues. Their way is better for them, may even be seen as better tout court, but doesn't cut them off from other recognized denominations. They thus exist in a space of other "churches," such that in another, more general sense the whole group of these make up "the church" [Taylor 2002: 72-73].

According to Taylor, such phenomena were (and continue to be) evidence of what he terms the "culture of authenticity" [Taylor 2002: 83] emerging late in the eighteenth century along with romantic expressive individualism. In this approach, everyone realises their own humanity in harmony with oneself, rather than accept an external model imposed by society, the earlier generations or by religious or political authorities. Denominational identity combines ethical fundamentalism with a tolerance for other forms of religion and an acceptance of individualism; in this sense, it appears to be a telling refraction of the liberal idea in religious life.

Deunov's syncretic esoteric system evinces strong links to the teachings of Madame Blavatsky. As Erik Davis notes, her

endless books are cut-and-paste collages of Freemasonry, Hermeticism, potted "Eastern" metaphysics, and her own science-fiction tales of telepathic Tibetan masters and Atlantean cataclysms. [...] Blavatsky's group also represented Enlightenment values that had nothing to do with Buddha's claim to fame and everything to do with the freethinking spirit of progress. The Theosophists loathed conventional Christianity, embraced emancipatory social movements, and called for a new global politics of "universal brotherhood." They were the gnostics of modernism.

As such, the Theosophists mixed and matched their mysticism with the new evolutionary and electromagnetic worldviews of science.

[...] Given their debt to Indian Vedanta and hermetic Neoplatonism, Theosophists rejected materialism out of hand; they put mind well before matter and embraced the notion that our "thought-currents" had the power to create reality itself. But they refrained this ancient view by latching onto the language of eccentric waves, vibrations, cosmic frequencies, and fields of force. [...] The Theosophical attempt to inject spiritual qualities into a universe colonised by physics was also accompanied by the West's first great spiritual turn to the East [Davis 1998: 51].

In Deunov's case, we are arguably dealing with a Theosophical adaptation of ideas that formed a kind of subterranean current of the Age of Reason, which the Polish philosopher Bronisław Baczko regarded as

symptoms of the intellectual degradation and disintegration of high Enlightenment. When discussing the popularity of “concepts in which occultism mixes with exaltation” [Baczko 1997: 385], Baczko highlights their importance for the general climate of the period, primarily among the plebeian masses. Tadeusz Cegielski has argued that the esoteric tradition lay at the root of the most important ideas of that period, a considerable shift of interpretive accents [Cegielski 1994].

The connections between the teachings of Deunov and the thought of Madame Blavatsky are evident in their respective systems of cosmogony²⁴ and occult historiosophy. Similarly, both Blavatsky and Deunov adopted for their systems the modern evolutionist theories of the time. Deunov used the then-fashionable concept of human races, borrowed from Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, and although his understanding of human races was spiritual in nature, he devoted many years to painstaking phrenological research. Under the influence of Darwin, his model portrayed the world as experiencing linear progress, moving ahead towards the future (a process he viewed in positive terms). Directed by an extra-terrestrial lodge of sages, this evolution was aimed at producing an ideal, spiritual “sixth (and final) human race” endowed with supernatural abilities. According to Deunov, Bulgaria played a special role in the march of mankind towards that astro-historically predetermined future, and Bulgaria’s ideological choices (past and future) impacted the past and the future of the Universe [МИТЕВ 1995: 46–49; ДЪНОВ 2000: 188].

On a macro scale, the model of the universe in Deunov’s doctrine has certain qualities in common with the Lurian Kabbalah. Like Luria, Deunov taught that the universe was a living organism, on which Adam Kadmon (the original or primordial man) was modelled: a luminous being formed from God’s first emanation. However, when some of Adam Kadmon’s lower *sephiroth* shattered the vessels that were meant to contain them, sparks of light were trapped in the shards. God partly repaired the process of creation, but it was man who would be responsible for completing this project of rectification by releasing the sparks trapped in matter to allow them to reunite with their divine source [Unterman 1991: 12; Scholem 2011]. This is how Deunov imagined the process:

Just as there are billions of beings in my body, in the same way many people can live together in the world. All the people on Earth can be gathered together into one single body – this is the large, great cosmic man named Adam Kadmon in whom nothing dies, but everything is subject to change.

²⁴ Deunov rejected the existence of inanimate matter, believing that all beings had a cosmic awareness.

[...] Man is a fragment of the whole, and consequently the conscience of all the people on Earth forms a unity. The conscience of all these people forms the cosmic man [ДЪНОВ 2000: 9–10].

An individual's place within the macro world symbolised by Adam Kadmon is determined by one's ethical attitudes. This aspect of Deunov's doctrine contains many contradictions. In his sermon *За дървото на познание на добро и зло. Силовите линии на доброто и злото* (*On the Tree of Good and Evil: Lines of Good and Evil Force*) Deunov rejects the axiological heritage of philosophy as a useless product of empty casuistry, and accuses scholars of perverting the forms that were created by beings of genius. He dismissed centuries' worth of philosophical reflection, and argues that the fundamental mistake consisted in asking the wrong question about the origins of evil. In Deunov's interpretation, good and evil were categories of human thinking: they do not apply to God, who stands above them: "For you, there is evil, but what is evil for you is not evil for God. For God, evil does not exist" [ДЪНОВ 1995b: 164]. In one fell swoop Deunov negates the cultural consequences of this basic dichotomy, dismissing it as an instance of faulty reasoning, and goes on to prove this with the analogy of the human body, a subject on which Deunov was regarded as something of an expert after spending a year in medical school in the United States. To him, instances of evil were like the process of perspiration seen on micro and macro scales. The Sun, which is the source of life – he explained – causes one's brow to perspire (i.e. produces an effect that is evil), but it later returns that water in the form of rain or spring water. Sweat (evil) returns to man in a form that is beneficial not only to himself, but to nature in general. On the other hand, Deunov considers perspiration (i.e. manifestations of evil) as evidence of physical health, or at least a way of restoring the same:

When evil comes, you will sweat, and as you sweat, you will get well. [In this context – G.S.G.] good and evil are relationships between two points. You start with good, and you will end up with evil. This is the first inevitable rule of life. This is descent. If you start with evil, you will end up with good. This is ascent, climbing upwards [ДЪНОВ 1995b: 164].

On Deunov's scale of values, good and evil are merely different points, with the human soul moving back and forth between them. By equating the laws of the natural world with the laws of spiritual life, Deunov demonstrates that good and evil can in certain contexts turn into one another: evil will inevitably proceed from good, and vice versa. This statement, surprising for a man widely acknowledged as a proponent of "heroic ethics," is supported by examples of situations where the experience

of evil teaches people a lesson.²⁵ And that being the case, good and evil can be interpreted as positive and equally desirable “figures” or values, which can only appear to be opposites to an unenlightened individual.

Despite the mystical and pragmatic arguments Deunov marshals in support of this relativistic rule, his argument is essentially based on common sense reasoning, with all its heterogeneity and *bricolage*. The folk wisdom that every cloud has a silver lining and every bad thing has some good effects, which becomes the starting point for Deunov’s argument, can easily masquerade as the supposedly occult principle that “Every good thing has some bad effects.” By oscillating between the fossilised ideas embedded in the collective consciousness and their antitheses, Deunov was on the one hand trying to challenge the established patterns or habits of thought in his listeners, and on the other hand he was perpetuating them, though in a significantly modified form.

Another of his talks, *Положителни и отрицателни сили в природата. Добро и зло в живота* (*Positive and Negative Forces in Nature. Good and Evil in Life*), cast some extra light on those problems. Deunov interprets the meaning of binary systems in nature by reversing the usual values of common sense thinking. He argues that the forces of destruction were a positive force in nature, and the forces of construction were in fact negative.²⁶ This sentiment carries easily recognisable overtones of the familiar gnostic abhorrence of matter, moderated by an internal dialectic of a process where the poles of spiritual experience keep shifting and reversing depending on an individual’s inner vibrations:

Now, there is one morality, the morality of good and evil. Good in the world is a negative force – it is constructive. And you will note that all good people are weak people in the world. [...] Evil in the world is a necessity; it is just as necessary as good. Remember this: In that tree, which they call the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – all of philosophy is hidden there [Дънов 1995a: 179–180].

Deunov’s explanations regarding the relationship between good and evil involve an affirmation of the balance between the two powers

²⁵ For instance, a guest dissatisfied with the indifferent welcome he received, beats up his host. Later, he gets beaten up in similar circumstances, and this way he learns about correct behaviour. See Дънов 1995a.

²⁶ He illustrates that using the example of human weakness: people are weak and therefore need security, so they build houses to defend themselves from the positive forces active in the world (ie. the forces of decay and destruction). Based on this preliminary thesis, he constructs a concept of the creation of the human body as a product of the negative, constructive forces; see Дънов 1995a: 178.

in the world,²⁷ but they also have a liberating potential, freeing people from the oppressive Judaeo-Christian sense of sin and guilt. The road to spiritual development as portrayed by the shape of the Pentagram²⁸ (recommended to the Brothers as an aid in contemplation) is circular rather than linear, implying inescapable repetitions whose internal dynamics make it possible for people to recognise the evil they commit or experience as a seed of good in this incarnation or the next.

In this specific structure of the world, individuals as well as groups occupy places given to them by Destiny. According to Deunov, the Bulgarians occupy a special place. A comprehensive analysis of the Master's views on Bulgarian missionism is contained in Boyan Boev's short book published in 1937, *Мисията на богомилството* (*The Mission of Bogomilism*). Boev was one of Deunov's most gifted and loyal disciples, and also an initiate of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. His book synthesises Deunov's scattered references into a unified concept that could be described as an occult version of the Jewish idea of a chosen people. The grand hermetic ideas that spread across the world had their origins in the Bulgarian lands: the Orphic mysteries (which paved the way for Christ), Bogomilism (which produced a deeply humanistic vision of social life predicated on liberty, equality and fraternity, taken up and continued centuries later by the French Revolution), and finally the teachings of Deunov (which would bring on the coming of the "sixth race," helping mankind to attain

²⁷ To explain why it is necessary to accept evil people, Deunov points out that they produce good. He uses a somewhat insulting example of the human excretory system or that of the sanitation system in a house – without which, life would not be possible. This clearly implies that the human community is a single organism where evil people apparently play a key role because they detoxify the cosmic man (Adam Kadmon), and serve as an egress for the evil in this world – i.e. they have a salutary effect. This association of evil people with defecation and sewerage, combined with their validation as functionally necessary and temporary (since their karma may change in another incarnation), is a demonstration of Deunov's pragmatism. He acknowledged that such people have a social and cosmic utility, and dismissed as fools those who wished to eradicate evil. At the same time, Deunov admonishes evil people that their ultimate end would be a sorry one, as they end up placed in the "impure" parts of Adam Kadmon's body. This Rabelais-like, sensualist and slightly obscene metaphorical image, a vulgarised variant of Luria's ideas, steers clear of the dichotomies of heaven and hell, forming a parallel with the idea of man as a being experiencing change within the span of a single life as well as over the course of later incarnations. People have the opportunity to evolve all the way until the end of time, when good and evil become one; see Дѣнов 1995a: 178–194.

²⁸ Deunov gave his earliest lessons about the Pentagram scheme (symbolising the micro- and the macrocosm and the evolution of the soul in accordance with its laws) in 1911, recommending that his disciples should study it on a regular basis until they have unlocked its full symbolism (of Christian and hermetic provenance).

a spiritual endpoint). This quasi-Enlightenment belief in progress based on a specific interpretation of “the law of the historical development of mankind”²⁹ is characteristic of the occult concept of history as a process aimed at producing the ultimate redemption of the universe. In this system, Deunov’s compensatory and essentially nation-centric mythmaking is a reinterpretation of the mythmaking project of Paisius of Hilendar. According to Deunov (who in this case is evidently following in Paisius’ footsteps), evidence that the Bulgarians are a chosen nation is visible in the history of Bulgarian thought. This idea is communicated in a language which the Teacher considered particularly suited for communicating occult messages:

The Bulgarian language is the most precise language in which the occult law and the Word of God can be expressed, as the Bulgarian nation is the oldest nation on earth.

Literacy did not emerge in an arbitrary manner. There is a specific way in which language appeared in the world. Languages were not created on Earth. They are a copy of the things from the invisible world. And every nation’s language is adapted to its stage of development. [...]

Behind me are the entire Heavens. The word I preach to you does not belong to me, but to the creatures that stand behind me, and they are millions. My ideas are ideas of God, of the great Spirit, which permeate the entirety of Being. [...]

My word is not literature. You think I do not know much about grammar! My word comes from the Original Source, it cannot fit into ordinary speech [ДЪНОВ 2000: 169].

Deunov’s speculations about Bulgarian being the world’s oldest language are not only an echo of the naive ideas of G. S. Rakowski, who considered Bulgarian the ancient successor of Sanskrit [see Раковски 2008; Rakowski 1983], but also a polemic against gnostic notions of the holy language [Steiner 1998: 63–65]. Deunov was rejecting the belief (present in esoteric thought since the times of Jakob Böhme) that the original language was not Hebrew, but rather some other language which sank into oblivion after the collapse of the Tower of Babel, meaning that the later defective languages of mankind were incapable of expressing the truth about God [ДЪНОВ 2000: 106]. Although Deunov referenced Böhme’s idea of “sensualist speech” or the natural, God-inspired language, he

²⁹ “Cultures are led by the advanced brothers of humankind. If we study history we see the greatness of their work. They follow the great divine principle upon which all of being is resting: ‘The strong shall serve the weak!’ This law can also be expressed in the following way: ‘The law of love and sacrifice.’” [Боев 1937: 87–88].

considered himself as being particularly well-suited for articulating it. The fact that its grammar conformed to the rules of the Bulgarian language, once used by another great teacher, Priest Bogomil, was sufficient evidence to elevate the Bulgarian language as the language of mystics and the mysterious emissaries from the Lodge of the Sages. As a corollary, the natural users of that language (i.e. the Bulgarian nation) enjoyed a similarly elevated status.

The idea, formulated by Paisius of Hilendar, that the Bulgarians were intellectual pioneers was an inspiration for Deunov, even though he fleshed out Paisius's paradigm in a different way. *In lieu* of the myth that portrayed the Bulgarian Christian tradition as elder among the Slavic nations, he proposed the myth of the Bulgarian esoteric tradition; similarly, the saints and teachers Cyril and Methodius were replaced in his teachings by Orpheus, the heresiarch Priest Bogomil, and Peter Deunov himself; the simple man of the Gospels became replaced with the figure of an occult initiate endowed with cosmic awareness. Although he described the Turkish occupation of Bulgaria as punishment, for Deunov, the sin in question was not Christian disunity (as Paisius would have it), but rather the rejection of Bogomil teachings, a gesture which defied the cosmic order:

In the old Tsardom of Bulgaria, the leaders at the time expelled the Bogomils, who were carriers of a great doctrine proclaiming reforms of life and social order in the most ideal manner; but the Bulgarians paid for that expulsion with the five hundred years of Turkish oppression; for when a nation does not obey the great word of God given by Providence, and does not apply this great word in their life, they are left to bear the consequences of their imprudence, and then the greatest evil happens to them. Exiled from Bulgaria, the Bogomils took their ideas to the West. The nations that understood and applied their ideas in practice to implement social reforms flourished [Дѣнов 2000: 154].

The argument was that only by accepting the doctrine revealed by Beinsa Duno³⁰ could the nation be assured of averting a future catastrophe, and ensuring future Bulgarian prosperity:

But now, if the Bulgarians realise the mistakes of their past, and do not repeat the same mistakes in the current ideological developments, they will get much better results in the life of society. [...] Now is the golden age of the Bulgarian nation. If they squander the present conditions, everything will be given to another nation. And Bulgaria will be left trailing other nations, hanging by a thread [Дѣнов 2000: 155].

³⁰ Deunov's spiritual name.

I tell you, if the Bulgarians do not accept the teaching we preach, nothing will remain of Bulgaria, not even a memory! Even the name of Bulgarians will be erased, do you know that [ДѢНОВ 2000: 188]?

The promise of a Bulgarian “golden age” went hand-in-hand with the idea of predestination, though not of determinism. The Bulgarians were portrayed as a chosen nation, a member of mankind’s spiritual avant-garde (which to Deunov meant the Slavic nations), and as such they had borne the burden of responsibility for the world’s fate for centuries. However, only by fully and deliberately embracing this role that they can bring about the coming of an era of the “children of light”:

The flourishing of the Slavs will just be a precondition for the emergence of the sixth race – a race of new people, a race of “luminous ones” – a race that can be called “children of the light!” [ДѢНОВ 2000: 123–124].

His biographer Atanas Slavov connected the sources of Deunov’s worldview to his American experience of the universal human longing for transcendence, highlighting not only Deunov’s connections with the mysticism of Emerson and Thoreau, but also the American pedigree of the Teacher’s lasting fascination with the ideas of Theosophy, Slavophilia and Tolstoyism [Славов 1998: 274–275]. Imported from America, such Slavophile inspirations confirmed the Slavic myth³¹ (inculcated in the Bulgarians since the national revival period) in a way that could not be dismissed as parochial and peripheral navel-gazing. In Deunov’s teachings, this recapitulation of the Bogomil doctrine in connection with the idea of Slavic missionism [see Szwat-Gyłybowa 2001] was a powerful impulse meant to remove the self-imposed stigma of inferiority and cultural retardation from the Bulgarian experience of European identity, giving the nation the sense of belonging in the universe that it needed.

By anchoring this supposedly immanent worldview within a mythologized version of the history of ideas, Deunov was at the same time legitimising his political aspirations. A lot of information on the subject can be found in publications from the 1990s [Табакова et al. 1995; Боев 1993; Константинова 1996; Кирилов 1995], even though they stick to the intellectual horizons defined in Deunov’s diaries [see Пенева 1995: 220–223] and *Благословение* (*The Blessing*), an autobiographical book by Lyubomir Lulchev [Лулчев 1999 [1940]] who was a member of the community led by Deunov. *The Blessing* can be variously interpreted as a Bil-

³¹ We should bear in mind that the knowledge of the religious and philosophical thought of the Russian Slavophiles in Bulgaria was superficial, even though many members of the elite were Slavophiles.

dungsroman, a fictionalised guide to the teachings of Peter Deunov, or a historical document revealing the sensitive issue of the Teacher's political involvement. Although Deunov stuck to occult ideas, his commentary on the political situation in Europe and Bulgaria at the time often showed common sense, a moral sense and even a certain brilliance of insight: he recognised the degenerated nature of Nazi and Bolshevik ideologies, which he described as false religions (*sic!*) [ДЪНОВ 2000: 189–191], and he was openly critical of the aggressive policies of the Coburgs [ДЪНОВ 2000: 184–186] (for which he was duly interned in 1917). He appealed for social reforms in Bulgaria, and pleaded for Jews threatened with deportation to Nazi death camps [ДЪНОВ 2000: 393]. Finally, he campaigned to make paneurythmic exercises³² part of the Bulgarian school curriculum as a tool of spiritual and physical improvement.

The role played by Peter Deunov at the tsar's court at the time is not sufficiently well-researched. Stefan Gruev, the author of *Корона от тръни* (*The Crown of Thorns*), a political biography of Tsar Boris III, presents the tsar's contacts with Deunov (mediated by Lyubomir Lulchev, the tsar's personal advisor) skeptically, dismissing the suggestions the Teacher's opinion might have had actual impact on Boris III's policies [see Грueв 1991: 313–314].³³ However, accounts coming from members of the White Brotherhood offer quite a different portrayal of Dynov's connections with the court and the higher echelons of power. Lulchev's novel is not only a hagiographic portrayal of the Teacher, but also the foundation for the myth of Boris III as a good tsar who was open to truth and cared for the nation's well-being. Lulchev emphasised the personal tone of the conversations between Deunov, the tsar and himself, and highlights the tsar's humility and patience in the face of the Teacher's often quite aggressive jeremiads intended to move

³² This was a form of exercise practiced for full effect to the sound of Deunov's music. Deunov floated the idea in talks with Boris Yotsov, minister of education in Bogdan Filov's cabinet (incidentally, Filov was one of Bulgaria's most eminent Freemasons). A preliminary course was even held for teachers in the Tsar Boris Park, but the plan to introduce paneurythmics to schools was frustrated first by the Allied bombing of Sofia, and later by the so-called revolution of 9 September 1944, when the communists took power. Deunov died in December of 1944. In February of 1945, Filov, Yotsov and Lulchev were executed by the Communists. See Дойнов 1996.

³³ "Boris's relationship with Lulchev had a special character that was not necessarily political. This way we sought to satisfy his personal curiosity in mysticism and the occult, even though he never joined the White Brotherhood. At the same time, Lulchev was a good source of information on a very little-known social group to which Boris showed sympathy: the poor and humble folk that gravitated around the White Brotherhood" [Грueв 1991: 313–314].

the ruler’s conscience [Груев 1991: 224, 230]. Lulchev’s portrayal of the Teacher as superior to the tsar carries an overtone of pride: in this context, the myth of the Bulgarian magus and its embodiments through history place Beinsa Duno – a seer and a sage – among the modern mystics capable of providing occult knowledge to those modern political leaders seeking supernatural support [see Goodrick-Clarke 1985: 179–191]. The myth of the magus, which remains alive in the Bulgarian cultural tradition, makes it possible to frame events in the real world in terms of self-fulfilling prophecies. Unsurprisingly, the magus theosophist who, as it were, negotiates the image of the world – mediating between a revitalised tradition of neo-gnosis and the utopia of a bright future – becomes the symbol of a new synthesis.

Peter Deunov died in 1944, but his teachings are being revived in modern day Bulgaria. Since 1989, following a long period of repressions (of varying intensity) under the communist regime,³⁴ the White Brotherhood is noticeably gaining strength, attracting new members, mostly young people from the intelligentsia. According to official data, the community (which used to have 40,000 members during the interwar period) [Атанасова 1999: 375] now has only 4,000 members across all of Bulgaria [Т. Петков 1998: 165]. However, not included in that figure are the numerous sympathisers whose support and financial contributions made it possible for the White Brotherhood and its international branches to actively pursue various projects. Their publications mostly include texts from the interwar period with updated commentary. With titles like *Bogomilism. The Slav Nations: Rebirth* [Табакова et al. 1995], *The Mission of Bogomilism* [Боев 1993], *The Dream of the Bogomils: Towards Each Other. A Poem* [Константинова 1996], or *An Apology for Bogomilism* [Кирилов 1995], many of the books are self-evidently united by the common idea that Bulgarians are natural inheritors of the Bogomil tradition, and as such they are the avant-garde of mankind. Because the Bulgarians carry a culture of “fraternity, equality and liberty,” the Bulgarian destiny is to bring about spiritual enlightenment for others:

Bogomilism is cosmopolitan, world-wide, universal. Slavdom is associated with that part of contemporary humanity which will form the spiritual body of the coming sixth race. The rebirth will mainly affect Bulgaria, the Bulgarians [Табакова et al. 1995: 7].

³⁴ The most spectacular example involved the bulldozing of the Brotherhood quarter in Sofia (*Изгрев*) and building the USSR embassy in the location of Deunov’s former salon. The Teacher’s grave survives and is lovingly maintained.

The publishing arm of the White Brotherhood has an online presence,³⁵ with websites containing information about the history and current activities of the community, complete with a biography of Deunov, a comprehensive collection of his teachings, a bibliography, score sheets for the Teacher's compositions created (presumably under the influence of Steiner) to accompany a form of prayer called paneurythmic exercises, as well as descriptions of helpful physical exercises, dietary and medical advice, and current news about the community and contact forms for people interested in learning more about the doctrine.

The holistic nature of Deunov's doctrine, appearing in a form updated for the world of modern science, with its universalism and "cosmic" dimension, and an emphasis on ecology and man's connection to nature – all that suggests a connection with New Age spirituality, a category with which most Theosophies usually get bundled [Атанасова 1999: 373–379; see also Occhiogrosso 1994: 532]. Although Theosophical ideas draw on the language of traditional religion, they are actually engaged in developing a shared platform that transcends religious differences and opposes any form of institutionalised orthodoxy. As regards the Bulgarian context, the society portrays opposition to the Orthodox Church as a long-standing element of Bulgarian spiritual culture, rooted in the nation's tradition since the times of Bogomilism. On the other hand, the tolerant stance of Deunov's denomination on (vaguely defined) Orthodoxy makes it possible to assimilate its doctrine without detriment to national identity, which involves a religious dimension [Babiński 1999; Borowik 1999]. With its experience of forcible ideological unification under Communism, Bulgarian culture is marked by a special kind of tension between universal values and its attachment to locality, familiarity and particular identity. Any resulting frustration depends on the extent of cultural devastation caused by Communism, and the confusion this produced in a society that is trying to reconstruct its own identity. This reconstruction of Bulgarian "cultural roots" is accompanied by adaptationist tendencies in a community struggling to find its own place within the cyberspace of the global village. As a result, the need for demonstrative originality gets uncomfortably tied to conformity with regard to broader global models.³⁶

³⁵ <http://bialobratstvo.info/>.

³⁶ Sociological research conducted over the past decade indicates that Orthodox Christianity remains an inseparable element of Bulgarian national identity, as reported by 85% of the population identifying itself as Orthodox Christian. This said, only 60.2% of the respondents believe in God, 16.5% believe in miracles, 12.4% believe in the dogma

In *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, a book on the problems of religious tradition in post-modern times, Danièle Hervieu-Lèger draws attention to the phenomenon of the “folklorisation of religion,” first noted in 1973 by Michel de Certeau and defined as the processes of decay and disintegration affecting historical religions as assemblages of meanings in highly developed societies [Hervieu-Lèger 2000: 89–92]. This decay stems from increasing rationalisation, resulting in a disintegration of global systems of meaning which used to provide meaning and cohesion to the chaotic experience of past societies. The old visions of an orderly world accepted in societies past have now been replaced by individual creation, and the great religions can do no more than to provide individuals with symbolic material unifying their individual experience [Hervieu-Lèger 2000: 90]. This tendency to “folklorise” religion, or what she calls parasitical suppression of the great religions, produces special kinds of paradoxes. To summarise her argument, the questioning of the religiously unified universe of tradition not only removed institutional religion to a specialised social sphere, but also cleared a path for novel applications of symbolic capital represented by the historical religions: aesthetically, culturally, ethically and politically. This resulting tension between religion and politics made it possible to mobilise religious symbols in the service of political utopia. Over the centuries, the religious memory of modern nations “provided the chief imaginative source for visions of the coming order, those of a golden age for instance” [Hervieu-Lèger 2000: 91]. In this context, the very modernity that tends to be associated with the affirmation of the autonomy of independent individuals, in defiance of the authority of tradition, results in the revived need to invoke the authority of that tradition as a safeguard of individual and collective security. In that case we are dealing with a special reaction to modernity, which involves protest and de-modernisation, a rejection of rationalism as a universal value, interpreted as an important symptom of cultural and social regression, a return to the tribal reflexes which are opposed to the autonomy of the modern subject going back to the Age of Reason [Hervieu-Lèger 2000: 94].

of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and 26.6% believe in the immortality of the soul, 26.3% believe in the Holy Spirit, 17.5% believe in the Resurrection, 28.4% believe that the Scripture was divinely inspired, 26.8% believe in paradise, and only 23% seek help in the Church when confronted with problems in their life. According to the responses, the Church does not meet the expectations of the faithful, and the internal schism affecting the Church since 1989 contributes to the growing number of believers leaving the Church. See Николчев 1999: 382.

When Deunov first addressed the Bulgarians [Дѣнов 1994], he was speaking to a nation that was on the one hand undergoing the effortful process of modernisation and secularisation, but on the other hand was still locked within the mental structures produced by the collective consciousness of folklore. Deunov's texts were primarily addressed at the Bulgarian intelligentsia, whose members often shared a lower class background that guaranteed the preservation of collective memory, including religious memory, described by scholars in terms of syncretism. By incorporating his doctrines into Bulgarian culture, Deunov was engaging in a different kind of effort to "suppress" institutionalised Christianity than those described by Hervieu-Lèger. His updated version of the "tribal tradition" involved highlighting the rending of its nature into two paradigms – faith and gnosis – in order to transform this internal cultural rift into a precondition for the unifying meaning. The attempts to obtain and domesticate the Gnostic tradition (a tradition which implicitly undermines any trust in the world) were a dramatic attempt to solve the great mystery of Bulgarian history at the price of transforming Bogomil cosmogony and axiology. The quasi-reconstructions of Bogomilism undertaken in the interest of a Theosophical utopian future dulled the edge of gnostic pessimism inherent in Bogomilism by effectively removing its dualist character. In the place of the former abhorrence of the world appeared its pantheistic affirmation, and the escapist tendencies were replaced by activism and a will to power. Those fundamental shifts in the sphere of values produced a blurring of the difference between good and evil, as shown above. In this particular aspect, modern pseudo-gnostic thought appears to overlap with the tradition of atheistic and anti-Christian humanism which, as Kołakowski noted,

having obliterated all traces of its [Christian – G.S.G.] origins and done away with all limits to our freedom in establishing criteria of good and evil, has finally left us in the moral void that we are no so desperately trying to fill [Kołakowski 1997: 29].

In this context, the characteristic belief of the White Brotherhood that there were no limits to human spiritual self-improvement (a belief that is typical of Theosophy in general) finds support in an axiological system based on many-valued logic, adopted in Europe by mystical movements fascinated with Asia.

In the case of Bulgarian culture, the trivial violation of the hermeneutic principle of loyalty towards the texts of one's own culture (in the belief that the end justified any factual distortions) could be interpreted as

the result of a struggle with an image of the past understood as a chaos of squandered opportunities, now calling for a reevaluation. In this particular instance, Bulgaria’s adaptation to Western culture in its esoteric variant takes on the form of long awaited self-realisation.

3

BOGOMIL FASCINATIONS IN COMMUNIST BULGARIA: THE BULGARIAN QUEST FOR A MODERN IDENTITY

The Marxist Variant

As World War II ended and the proponents of Communist ideology launched a project of reinterpreting history in their own intellectual mould, their reactions to the Bogomil legacy were a continuation of pre-war Marxist thinking on the subject (including the ideas of Dimitar Blagoev, see the previous chapter). A number of such studies came out [see Гечева 1997], marked by an unquestioned belief in progress combined with a crude form of sociologism. The orthodox version of Bulgarian history as endorsed by the Communist Party became shoehorned into a Marxist model of class warfare, with an axiology predicated on unambiguous dogmatic dichotomies of good versus evil, justice versus exploitation, the people versus the ruling class, etc. In the interest of furthering Communist ideology by identifying its historical connections with the nation's past, writers on Bogomilism typically emphasised the social aspects of the movement, which they described as "Europe's earliest anti-feudal revolt"; the esoteric aspects of this folk variant of neo-gnosis were either portrayed in a simplified form or ignored altogether.

One representative example of such an approach was the seminal *Богомилството в България* (1969) by Dimitar Angelov, who began to

emerge as an authority on Bogomil history from the 1940s onwards.¹ Angelov portrayed the Bogomils as proponents of social equality and early rebels against feudal oppression: a kind of avant-garde of European left-wing movements, virtually a “pre-proletariat” surrounded by a halo of Promethean glory radiating to the furthest corners of Europe.

Angelov’s interpretive strategies were embraced as a model at all tiers of Bulgaria’s educational system. Between 1947 and 1989, school textbooks (which devoted a considerable amount of space to this interpretive model of Bogomilism) were all coordinated into undeviating consistency [see, among others, Диковски, Близнев, Велев 1947: 37–39; Бурмов, Косев, Христов 1976: 57–58; Чолакова, Велева, Иванов 1961: 16–17; Гюзелев, Касев, Георгиев 1984: 43–47]. The system favoured a portrayal of Bogomils as fighters for social justice: Bulgarian patriots, motivated by a burning abhorrence of the Greeks or the Church. This crudely simplified vision was held up as a timeless moral example. Publishing series aimed at school students (“Библиотека за ученика,” “Библиотека Героична летопис”) were mostly designed to make this indoctrination even more effective with the use of entertaining ludic elements. Communist writers were reinventing the pre-war Bogomil themes in order to repurpose the mysterious mages of old, presenting them as enlightened scientists, doctors or rebel leaders working towards progressive ideals that were far ahead of their time. Narrated through stories of adventure and derring-do, Marxist narratives on Bogomilism sought to bolster the stature of that medieval “revolt of the masses,” treating it as a prefiguration of the victory of “social truth” in the twentieth century. The publisher’s preface to the historical novel *Друм се вие* (*The Road Is Winding*, 1968) by Maria Smilova is a case in point, praising the writer for her “deft portrayal of the collapse of central government represented by Peter I, and her demonstration of how the truth gradually dawns on the masses” [Смилова 1968: 4]. In the language of contemporary propaganda, that kind of dictatorship of the oppressed majority was seen as the culmination of the historical process.

This kind of wilful misinterpretation focused on identifying parallels between Bogomil teachings and communism as a secular religion competing with Christianity and the Christian idea of redemption. Leaving aside the official anti-Orthodox and anti-Catholic propaganda produced for “Атеист” and related periodicals, similar aspirations are apparent

¹ Incidentally, Angelov’s ideas still remain unquestioned. Two revised and extended editions of his book came out after 1989, devoting more attention to the problem of gnostic mysticism in the Bogomil community.

even in books by notable writers including Vera Mutafchiyeva or Ivan Bogdanov. Their Bogomil-themed texts, such as *Повест за доброто и злото* (*A Novel about Good and Evil* [Мутафчиева 1963]), *Клади край Босфора* (*Stakes on the Bosphorus* [Богданов 1962]), or *Василий врач. Романизован животопис* (*Magus Vasili. A Fictionalised Biography*, [Богданов 1988]) represent the genre of educational young adult fiction. Viewed in the general context of the time, and against the background of other works by Mutafchiyeva or Bogdanov, those stories of nonconformist Bulgarian heretics can be interpreted as allegories with a dissident, anti-Communist message. That said, the kind of historical disguise they use nevertheless places their books within an openly atheist and anticlerical agenda.

For instance, Mutafchiyeva's fictionalised history of Bogomilism does not shy away from the ideological inspirations of the interwar period. It relies on a familiar hypothesis from that period which argued that Christianity, a religion introduced to Bulgaria by violence, never really took root among Bulgarian people, who grew to detest the Orthodox Church for betraying the interests of the masses. In a fashion reminiscent of the moral relativism of the gnostics, Mutafchiyeva portrays this popular hatred as a positive force, in that it becomes the driving force behind the Bogomil revolt, which she identifies with the mutiny of enlightened reason against oppressive dogma and economic exploitation, the first such attempt in the history of the modern world.

People become attached to the forbidden words out of hatred for those who minded, out of hatred of prohibitions and of violence, or simply out of sheer hatred. As they say, out of spite [Мутафчиева 1963: 85].

Each nation has contributed to the development of human thought. [...] And if the Bulgarians are proud that Slavic literature first flourished on their land, that they transmitted it to the rest of the Slavic nations, it should be no less a source of pride – perhaps even greater – that in the darkest ages it was from Bulgaria that the road to free speech began, that it was Bulgaria that was the centre of heretical thought, the centre of the fight against the all-oppressive Christian dogma [Мутафчиева 1963: 7].

The myth of Bulgarians as precursors of the European reform movements appears in a similar mould of Socialist Realist historical fiction in the two books by Bogdanov devoted to Vasily the Magus, a man famed for healings and miracles he performed at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries:

Vasily was the first medieval man to die for universal ideals and for the liberation of the human spirit from the fetters of dogmatism. Many aspects

of his ideas were vague, but there appeared that flash of realisation that a person, in order to be free, must shake off social oppression. [...] The Bulgarian Bogomils [...] blazed a clear trail through the darkness of the Middle Ages to a bright future [Богданов 1962: 65–67].

In the two books, Bogdanov characterises his hero as a Christian martyr, but also as a mythical magus endowed with superhuman powers, respected even by Emperor Alexios Komnenos [Богданов 1962: 38], his death at the stake accompanied by supernatural events. By portraying Vasiliy as a larger-than-life spiritual figure, Bogdanov revives the early twentieth century myth of Bogomil ethicism, adding an element of militancy:

But those humble, simple-hearted people, zealously devoted to fasting and prayer, became ferocious tigers every time the Bishop of Maglen tried to forcibly break their resistance and make them return to the bosom of the Orthodox Church [Богданов 1988: 38].

In other words, Bogdanov’s fictionalised version of the events applauds rebellion against organised religion *per se*. Bogomilism is portrayed as a vanguard of progress; like Mutafchiyeva, Bogdanov reinvents the Bogomils, with their asceticism and their gnostic rejection of the material world, as fanatical revolutionaries: heroic defenders of the “utopian order” where the idea of everlasting redemption takes the form of ideological emancipation in the service of social justice. Religion is replaced not so much by enlightened rationality as by its secular substitutes. Suitably moulded in the interest of Communist Party propaganda, this image of Bogomilism was transparently co-opted into the service of Communism’s dualistic worldview which, as Dorosz puts it,

showed a vision of the Promised Land where the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven was guaranteed by History-as-God, and the Proletariat-as-Christ. In this vision, the proletariat became [...] an “esoteric” source of knowledge, certainty and faith, a deity which pursues salvation in the here and now, abrogating the existing moral laws to replace them with the Absolute (History), thus paving the road to a hell of moral relativism [Doroz 1999a: 27].

The idea that the world could be made whole by the new man who, once created, will be able to change the world in the spirit of universal good, had been one of the most actively exploited *topoi* in European culture since the beginning of the twentieth century. In recent decades, the rich literature on the subject has grown even more to include studies on the links between the gnostic tradition and the mythologems or ideologems of the twentieth century. The new research has examined

a wealth of individual problems and topics, notably including the provenance of the Communist idea of the forging of a new man. In this respect, Communism was a kind of reprobate offspring of the Enlightenment [Furet 1999; Aron 1957], a popular notion which the Polish philosopher and historian of philosophy Leszek Kołakowski put as follows:

Communism, which grew out of a desperate need for ultimate salvation, for a new era, is an instance of such a convulsion. The product of the tradition of the Enlightenment, emerging at a time when educated elites had largely forsaken their traditional faiths, it took the (inconsistent) form of a secular religion. [...] Its ideological bankruptcy was at the same time a defeat for the Enlightenment, of which it was the ultimate and most consistent – and therefore the most destructive – expression [Kołakowski 2012a: 41].

The view that Communism was a substitute for religion – that the pedigree of Socialist Realism included an occultist streak, and that there were certain connections between it and the concepts of the Silver Age in Russian culture [see, among others, Agursky 1997] – are currently a subject for verification by historians of ideas. It seems that the vicissitudes of Bulgarian reflection on Bogomilism tinted by Communism throws some interesting light on the problem.

The Occultist Quasi-Marxist Variant

The deification of the Bogomils/the masses/the proletariat as a subject in the historical process was problematic to writers of socialist historical fiction. Those elements of their actual worldview that were at variance with the communist utopia needed to be dealt with in order to bring the characters safely in line with Marxism. The predominant approach was to shift the narrative focus in such a way as to play down or obscure certain aspects and ramifications of the Bogomil Manichaean outlook.

For instance, Boris Primov, author of the 1970 book *Бузрпме. Книга за поп Богомил и неговите последователи* (*The Bougres. A Book on Father Bogomil and His Disciples* [Примов 1970]), justifies at length any non-rationalistic cracks in the Bogomil worldview as being, regrettably but excusably, part of the intellectual baggage of the period:

Bogomil was a man of the Middle Ages. Therefore, he believed deeply. And this is why, as he unmasked the official faith, he sought to replace it with another. He did not reject faith per se.

However, he was also a man of reason, and this fact was quite unusual in the Middle Ages. His conviction that true faith should not contradict

reason underpinned the efforts to reform the church in accordance as dictated by common sense. Combined with the deep moral principles of his doctrines, this conviction lead him to reject everything that was not compatible with them [Примов 1970: 138–139].

Primov latches onto one aspect of Bogomilism, namely its attempt to come up with a fully coherent model of the world based on quasi-rational principles (an aspect found in any form of gnosis), and holds it up as an alibi for the Bogomils, portraying them as rationalistic rebels who stood up to the “superstitions of Orthodox Christianity” with its veneration of icons, crucifixes and holy relics. Other Bogomil virtues, according to Primov, included their rejection of the pessimistic outlook characteristic of extreme Manichaeism [Примов 1970: 147] and the courage of their convictions, which prompted them to explore new intellectual horizons, an attitude which won them followers throughout Europe. This, argued Primov, was a unique phenomenon at the time, one that would have been impossible outside of Bulgaria, where Slavic writings were “widely available” (as Primov incorrectly asserts) and understandable to common people, producing a ferment in the minds of people not habituated into comfortable intellectual conformism, and therefore reluctant to discard the tried and tested elements of their centuries-old tradition [Примов 1970: 171–173]. Accordingly, Primov treated the eclectic nature of Bogomil teachings, combining pagan pantheism with Orphic and Christian elements [Примов 1970: 27], as being typical of Bulgarian pragmatism, where enlightened public interest always took priority.

The same compensatory approach to national complexes is palpable in the interpretations of Vladimir Topencharov. In his book *Две жарави – един пламък. Бугри & катару. Есе (Two Burning Coals – One Flame. The Bougres & the Cathars – An Essay* [Топенчаров 1982]), Topencharov argues, not without oversimplification and factual inaccuracies, for the primacy of Bogomil spirituality in medieval Europe, praising the originality, courage and flexibility of Bogomilism, as shown in its capacity to refashion an existing intellectual legacy in the spirit of rationalism. According to Topencharov, the new worldview, which Bogomil fashioned out of fragments of old religions, was a breakthrough achievement which stirred the people into social activism and gave them a sense of agency and self-reliance. In common with Primov, Topencharov believed that the Bulgarian origins of Bogomilism were not accidental; they were instead a product of Bulgaria’s cultural superiority over Latin Europe, which he attributed directly to the decision of the first Bulgarian state to promote writings in a language understood by the common people:

In popular written language, the Bogomilian pen had defined at an early stage – already in that distant medieval century – the basic position of the anti-clerical and anti-feudal struggle of the nations that were attaining maturity in Europe. Bulgarian literature set out like a pilgrim on the roads of Europe, to give a theoretical dimension to a pan-European movement [Примов 1970: 128].

In this case, Topencharov reworks the myth that Bulgarian vernacular writings supposedly produced centuries' worth of pollination in the Slavic Orthodox lands by imposing an expanded, universalist dimension on the idea of the Bulgarian cultural mission. He repurposes the myth of education as an agent of progress (originating in the Western Enlightenment) within a new ideological context to glorify the Bulgarian tradition as the original wellspring of all progress.

Topencharov's optimistic belief that history was ultimately a purposeful process was accompanied by reflection on Bogomil cosmogony. He interpreted the moderate dualism of the Bogomils in terms of ideological superiority over the profoundly pessimistic dualism of Manichaeism, an advantage Topencharov attributed to the fact that the Bogomils were able to break free from the superstitions of a bankrupt religion: "The reason of the *bougres*, rebelling against the sclerotic 'teachings' of the Church (dogma), opened the gates of the mind to true knowledge" [Примов 1970: 113]. Topencharov praised Bogomil optimism as being typical of the rebellious, illiterate, exploited masses who came to believe that their struggle would be ultimately successful [Топенчаров 1982: 41–43], and portrayed a supposedly Bogomil vision of future happiness in a world bathed in perfect beauty and light:

Despite its highly specific interpretation of evil and the people who were bearers of evil, the position of the Bogomils concerning the victory over evil, as well as their optimistic attachment to life, reason, beauty – light, make it in no way possible to bundle the Bogomils with the world's pessimists. Striving for good, sensitivity to beauty – light are not typical of pessimists. Beauty is associated with optimism [Топенчаров 1982: 94].

Topencharov refused to accept that the Bogomil worldview was marked by a gnostic abhorrence of the material world, dismissing the idea as pseudo-scholarly fallacy. In doing so, he came close to the modernist view, which deified beauty as a force capable of transforming the world.

Topencharov's book was written at a time when ideological cracks were becoming increasingly apparent among Bulgaria's Communist authorities. Today, the period between 1969 and 1987 is laconically described in Bulgarian literary history textbooks as a period of stability and stagnation; however, a more fine-grained image is apparent to researchers of Bulgarian

culture, revealing a degree of internal variation [see Juda 2004]. Notably, one important anomaly resulted from the political activity of Lyudmila Zhivkova (1974–1981), daughter of Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian satrap and long-time First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

When Lyudmila Zhivkova became the Minister of Culture, nobody expected her to treat the position as anything more than a comfortable sinecure, her excellent educational background notwithstanding (she had been carefully educated in the West as an art historian). However, Zhivkova quickly turned out to be an effective promoter of Bulgarian culture abroad, and a protector of the country’s cultural heritage, which won her plaudits and respect at home. Some of her achievements were undeniable: she helped to open Bulgaria up to a carefully managed set of Western cultural values, and she reinvigorated Bulgarian art after its long period of hibernation under the doctrines of Socialist Realism: achievements which have gone largely overlooked since 1989. One rare exception is a comment Yordan Vasilev makes in his memoir *Патила и радосту* (*Woes and Joys*, 2002), where he admits that he and his wife, the well-known writer Blaga Dimitrova, had always appreciated Zhivkova’s genuinely positive impact on Bulgarian painting and culture [see Й. Василев 2002: 246]. Other members of the Bulgarian intelligentsia are mostly keeping an embarrassed silence on the subject, a surprising and paradoxical reaction. Given the fact that not many writers have published memoirs from the period (whether to take stock of the nation’s historical experience or to settle scores in Bulgarian cultural life), we can only speculate about the possible reasons for this resentful “conspiracy” of silence, presumably motivated by a desire to distance oneself from the Communist past. Artistic achievements and professional careers in Communist Bulgaria, once a source of prestige and privilege, have come to be regarded as an uncomfortable and (to some) shameful reminder of past opportunism. Perhaps this past involvement in Marxist ideology, as embarrassing evidence of participating in the Communist “engineering of human souls” or a personal friendship with “Lyudmila” (as Zhivkova used to be familiarly known), has now become awkward for a number of reasons, not least because of the political and criminal undertones of her tragic death. Having said all that, some literary testimonies on the ideological choices made by writers in that generation² seem to suggest that the ideas promoted by Zhivkova, which had precious little to do with official Marxism, were increasingly present and developed in their writings.

² This subject is discussed at length in Chapter 4.

Nikola Georgiev partly revealed the sources of those paradoxes in his famous essay *Нова книга за българския народ* (*The New Book of the Bulgarian Nation*, 1991), an analysis of the nepotism present in Bulgaria's political system and the role the idiosyncratic minister of culture once played in that system of power. It was an open secret that Zhivkova stood apart from the *apparatchiks* in the Eastern Bloc as an unapologetic follower of European and Asian spirituality dressed up in a Marxist guise. The people Zhivkova surrounded herself with were a truly singular set, described by Georgiev as “modern artists, philosophers, icon painters, Thracian studies scholars, Suggestopedia specialists and Indian mystics.” Unsurprisingly, Zhivkova's idea of Bulgarian spiritual growth attracted to her “court” a motley crew of “frauds, cultural faddists, mountebanks domestic and foreign, quacks, [...] clairvoyants, [...] specialists in Suggestopedia, talentless hacks, Indian fakirs, experts in hydrotherapy, hypnotists, et cetera” [see Ъ. Василев 2002: 32].

Zhivkova's set of closest associates and the language of her speeches scandalised orthodox Marxists regardless of rank or influence. Those private criticisms of Zhivkova presumably led to some kind of political initiatives, whose documentary evidence currently remains locked up in Bulgarian state archives. Boris Delchev, a literary critic and a policy-maker at the time, left some sarcastic comments on the atmosphere of those times in a memoir (which remained unpublished until 1995). His entry for 26 August 1979 reads:

A speech by Ludmila Zhivkova was published in today's issue of *Работническо дело* (238) [*The Workers' Deed* – the leading newspaper of the Bulgarian Communist Party], delivered during the unveiling ceremony of the Banner of Peace monument. This is a gem of the Bulgarian language – a thing unique and unheard of, which should be carved into a marble slab and exhibited at the entrance to the Committee of Culture. Such insightful thoughts must not remain confined to the yellowed pages of newspapers. [...]:

“Dear children,

Creators of a new world,

The solemn choir of light, resting in the infinite spiral of development, echoing the clear voice and aspiration of all peoples of the world, cut from the monolithic monument of unity. The voice of light lit the fire of life, and joined your hands in the name of brotherhood; in fearless flight, courageous dreams crossed the universe, and the universe echoed the spiritual torches of creativity. Shining in the song of light, the beautiful pursuit towards the future lit the fires of space, the chime of the community, lighting the way of the bold, opened a treasure trove of the heart and it accepted the call of beauty!”

[...] And all that is presented by a member of the Politburo, and is supposed to pass for... Marxism [Делчев 1995: 361–362].

The metaphors and turns of phrase Delchev quotes from Zhivkova’s speech at the opening ceremony of the Banner of Peace International Festival of Children and Youth³ reveal her ideological inspirations, which by 1979 were no longer a surprise to anyone. The previous year, Zhivkova had already expressed her creed in a less explicit form in an introduction to Bogomil Rainov’s biography of Nikolai Roerich.⁴ The book was published to accompany a major exhibition of Roerich’s paintings organised by the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture. In Zhivkova’s introduction, newspeak mixes with the associative language of occultism to produce an open affirmation of Roerich and his Living Ethics,⁵ expressing faith in the theurgic power of (emphatically capitalised) Art and Beauty [see Живкова 1978].

The Russian writer Valentin Sidorov, one of Zhivkova’s biographers and a man very much under the spell of his subject’s magnetic personality,⁶ argued that there was a direct link between her personal spiritual experiences and her political activity. After a serious car crash, which almost left Zhivkova blind, she took an interest in yoga and self-healing methods. She became intensely ascetic in her personal life, studying *agni-yoga*, Living Ethics and other broadly esoteric subjects [Сидоров 1998: 10]. This personal experience would also influence Zhivkova’s political plans. Combining the unshakeable belief of a missionary with the powerful state apparatus she had at her disposal as the daughter of Todor Zhivkov (First Secretary of the Communist Party of Bulgaria), Lyudmila Zhivkova decided to spearhead the mission of a wholesale cultural re-education of Bulgarian society. The project, planned on a timescale of decades, would have involved a revitalisation of the ancient cultural heritage of

³ 1979 was celebrated in Bulgaria as the year of the Banner of Peace International Festival of Children and Youth, with the slogan *Unity. Creation. Beauty*. The high point of the festival involved the unveiling of the Banner of Peace monument. The upper part of the obelisk was decorated with seven large bells, symbolising the seven main principles of the Mahatma and Teacher Roerich, a fact Zhivkova did not try to hide.

⁴ A. Donchev also published a biography of Roerich. His text reconciled the propaganda strategies of the communist period with the popularisation of Theosophical knowledge; see Szwat-Gułybowa 2003; Дончев 1979, 1989.

⁵ The Living Ethic is a syncretic esoteric system predicated on Euroasiatic missionism, created by Elena and Nikolai Roerich; see Pawluczuk 1998: 183–185; Stephens 1997: 361–365.

⁶ Sidorov also wrote a biography of Roerich; see Сидоров 1983.

the Bulgarian territories,⁷ combined with educational efforts such as major commemorations of the figures who shaped human civilisation, with the entire nation participating in conferences, seminars, symposiums and exhibitions devoted to the nominated artists, with Nikolai Roerich heading the list. Zhivkova declared that 1978 would be a Roerich Year, followed by a Da Vinci Year in 1979 and a Lenin Year in 1980 (to be followed in due course by Tagore, St. Constantine the Philosopher, Lomonosov, Goethe, Patriarch Euthymius, and Jan Ámos Komenský).

According to Sidorov, what made it easier for Zhivkova to put Roerich at the top of her list of commemorative celebrations was the fact that the centennial of Roerich's birth had been acknowledged in the USSR after many years of frosty silence.⁸ Probably not coincidentally, the Kremlin took a dim view of Zhivkova's initiatives, her sincere and demonstrative love of Russian culture notwithstanding – allegedly (according to Sidorov) because of fears concerning her popularity in the USSR, where her book *По законите на красотата* (*According to the Law of Beauty*), strongly influenced by the Living Ethics, quickly sold 100,000 copies. Bogomil Rainov suggests as much today, and his book *Людмила. Мечти и дела* (*Lyudmila. Dreams and Deeds*, 2003) constructs a legend of Zhivkova as a precursor of occultism in Bulgaria.

It has long been high time to say this loudly and clearly: Ludmila Zhivkova set herself the strategic goal of gradually relegating, and then completely replacing, all of the philosophical, ethical and aesthetic postulates of Marxism-Leninism, accepted at the time as irrevocable dictates on social life. [...] [Б. Райнов 2003: 78].

This view is corroborated by a comment from Svetoslav Roerich, Nikolai Roerich's son, who argued as early as 1980 that Lyudmila Zhivkova was engaged in a lone and heroic struggle to incorporate the ideas of Living Ethics into the fabric of the Communist state:

Lyudmila Zhivkova is the only state figure in the twentieth century who has profoundly adopted the Living Ethics and saw in it great potential for improving and spiritualizing the state system through culture and high philosophical thought. She understands very well that a state should be built

⁷ In this respect, this translated into state support for research on Thrace, Cyril and Methodius, and the proto-Bulgarians. On Zhivkova's initiative, a major exhibition of Thracian treasures toured the world in the second half of the 1970.

⁸ This acknowledgement was not merely a token gesture. It involved the publication of numerous biographies of Roerich and new editions of some of his works in the 1970s (even if the print-runs were modest by USSR publishing standards); see, among others, Рерих 1974, 1979; Беликов, Князева 1972; Полякова 1973.

and run in accordance with the rules of beauty. However, it is very difficult for her, and not just difficult, but positively dangerous [quoted after Б. Райнов 2003: 79; cf. Б. Райнов 2003: 194].

Despite all this busy mythmaking, Zhivkova’s efforts can on no account be regarded as a form of struggle against the regime. On the contrary, the pro-Soviet ideological orthodoxy of Roerich, who fully approved of the “new man” being hammered out in the Soviet Union,⁹ served to legitimize her ideological explorations, which not only combined Marxism with Theosophy, but also certain preferred values of the East and the West, with Russia as their hypostasis. According to W. Pawluczuk, Roerich

termed the approaching era the “Russian Age.” He believed that a “fiery revolution of the spirit” would commence in Russia, as opposed to the USA, where the industrial revolution was no longer yielding human progress. In the words of the Bulgarian prophetess Vanga, “Russia will soar up like an eagle, and spread its wings to protect the earth. Once united and bound together by ties of brotherhood, the Russian nation is capable of bringing spiritual revival to the planet [Pawluczuk: 1998: 184].

Zhivkova’s decision to launch a renewal of mankind, beginning with the intelligentsia, produced an atmosphere where posing as an occultist and dropping conversational references to Roerich or Madame Blavatsky was more socially acceptable than quoting from Marx or Lenin. Unsurprisingly, Bulgarian Marxists were alarmed at her efforts to undermine the orthodox foundations of communist materialism, and denounced her in letters to the Soviet embassy. Zhivkova combined Theosophical hopes for spiritual progress with a long-term plan to include an experimental component in the project [Б. Райнов 2003: 55]¹⁰ by establishing a research institute tasked with developing a scientific understanding of the mysteries of consciousness and the mechanisms by which it might be expanded, a first step in a proposed project of creating a new man whose spiritual potential would restore the sacred nature of the cosmos. Zhivkova’s personal esoteric experiences, such as Deunov’s legendary White Brotherhood¹¹ famed for its healers or Baba Vanga (a prophet-

⁹ For his connections with M. Gorky see Agursky 1997: 259–260, 264.

¹⁰ From the 1970s onwards, an Institute of Suggestology operated in Sofia, enjoying international scientific prestige into the 1990s.

¹¹ This finds confirmation in the very title of Blaga Dimitrova’s essay on the well-known Bulgarian healer Peter Dimkov, *Лечителят – най-древният български мит*, which traces the traditional healing practices back to the earliest substrate of Bulgarian culture:

“Known as the medicine man, the herbalist, the sorcerer, the magician, the wizard, since his birth he has the higher ability to cure diseases and to relieve people from physical and

ess whose advice was sought by Todor Zhivkov himself, and a personal acquaintance of Zhivkova),¹² probably contributed to her fascination with the occult.¹³ The myth that Bulgaria was predestined to play the role of a spiritual leader of mankind was being revived in a new form:

This small country had the audacity to undertake great things. It was ahead of everyone, even the Soviet Union, which it was supposed to obediently follow. "You are transforming Bulgaria into a vanguard of the White Brotherhood," I once told Lyudmila. "Even if this never moves beyond the experiment stage, it will never be forgotten" [Сидоров 1998: 17].

Though expressed by a Russian writer, the occult historiosophy that underpins Sidorov's message seems oddly familiar. In this interpretation, Bulgaria is viewed as special, a chosen country, a central point from which esoteric ideas of utmost significance emanate to the world: a pioneer of the Living Ethics, the most perfect sublimation of the free Eurasian spirit. Unexpectedly returning to Bulgaria in a new, Socialist Realist guise is the modernist dream of the theurgic power of art and the "new man" who will lead humanity to a "bright future."

The ideas of Zhivkova, who died prematurely, could be interpreted as a case of insanity affecting a member of the establishment. Sensational revelations coming to light in Zhivkova's panegyric and hagiographic biographies written by people connected with the Communist regime should be viewed through the lens of an especially potent hermeneutics of suspicion, and their claims that it was Zhivkova who initiated the process of ideological change in Bulgaria should be taken with a grain of salt. Still, she certainly had a lasting influence on the Bulgarian intelligentsia. Lyudmila Zhivkova may have found those ideas in the private library of Nikolai Rainov [Б. Райнов 2003: 15–16, 38–44], but society was made receptive to them by the increasingly pronounced fascination of Bulgarian writers with Bogomilism.

spiritual suffering. Recognised as the sage of the village [...] a skilled diviner of the wise book of nature. [...] He lived like a hermit [...], and he kept his healing abilities secret" [Б. Димитрова 1996: 257].

For more information about the White Brotherhood, see pp. 101–116.

¹² A charismatic figure shrouded in mystery for decades, Baba Vanga has finally become of the subject of several recent biographies revealing important details of her worldview and life in Communist Bulgaria, where she played the role of trusted advisor to the highest echelons of power. From 1967 onwards her activities were officially monitored by the authorities to impose control over her clients. Still, she was visited by foreign diplomats and public figures from the USSR; see Стоянова 1990; Костадинова 1997, 1999.

¹³ This has also been noted by Toncho Zhechev, a respected historian of Bulgarian literature; see Жечев 1999: 190–197.

Stefan Tsanev’s *Hylics* and *Pneumatics*

Stefan Tsanev’s play *Процесът против богомилите* (*The Trial of the Bogomils*, 1969) came out in the late 1960s following an outpouring of fictionalised histories of Bogomilism (several of which were discussed in the earlier chapters). In the Zhivkov period, the play was performed in Bulgaria and abroad with considerable success. In 1974, Blaga Dimitrova wrote *Богомилката. Мистерия* (*The Bogomil Woman. A Mystery*), a play that long remained unpublished, and did not come out until 1989, when it finally appeared in “Съвременник.”

Those two tragifarical pieces have a number of elements in common. The world portrayed in each is a grotesque blend of irony and tragedy, heterogeneous motivations and different time periods. In order to produce narrative vehicles capable of settling scores in the real world, both writers combined a historical setting with a ludic outlook, and laced their works with philosophical references. In a cultural context where the heretical tradition was appreciatively portrayed by the state as a prefiguring of Communist ideology, Tsanev and Dimitrova were able to propose a *reductio ad absurdum* of this dialogue with a politicised version of Bogomilism, and fashioned it, in their respective ways, into a tool for attacking modernity. Both writers turn their satirical edge against the authorities, who work in tandem with its subordinated institution of the Orthodox Church (meaning the Party), which fabricates spurious myths and serves as an instrument of mind control. However, certain differences in terms of dramatic emphasis meant that the two plays had very different fates.

The central narrative axis in Tsanev’s play is a historical event: the synod of Tarnovo, which Tsar Boril convened against the Bogomils in 1211. The play is set in the the Tarnovo church, and the Bulgarian heretics are prosecuted by a series of characters from different historical periods: Presbyter Cosmas, author of an anti-Bogomil polemic (tenth/eleventh century), Anna Komnena, daughter of the Byzantine basileus, laid down in a coffin inscribed “Main Witness for the Prosecution” (twelfth century); but also Robert the Bougre, first a Bogomil missionary in thirteenth century Provence, later a notorious inquisitor and scourge of the Bogomils, a Bogomil turned a “hammer of the heretics” [Цанев n.d.: 23]. The only character to defend the Bogomils is a professional barrister sent in from the twentieth century, who represents the viewpoint of posterity, though one reduced to a Marxist perspective. In a speech that opens the play and provides it with an ideological commentary, the barrister explains his credo as a defender of the “ideals” once professed by the Bogomils, and currently embraced by the Communists:

The Bogomils, as it is known, reject, in the form of religious heresy, the political and social foundations of feudalism, namely: the power of the Tsar, the state as a tool of oppression, material inequality, as well as demagoguery, which is used to justify these three things. [...] The ideas of the Bogomils are an early and naive variant of communist ideas. And I will defend the Bogomils as communists, [...] I defend the progressive negation, and if someone feels offended or does not agree with me - please, let him come out, we will put one empty chair on the stage, right here, next to the throne of the Tsar [Цанев n.d.: 2-3].

The shrewd suggestion that any dissenting voices in the audience who contest this interpretation of history should join the action on stage alongside the preferred party in the trial was a clever ruse. Given the disrupted communicative context of dramatic performance, this virtually guaranteed that the chair kept free for any potential defenders of the authorities hostile to the ideologically committed Bogomils (in this case represented by Tsar Boril) would remain empty. Tsanev was engaging in a piece of protective camouflage to mask any suspicious intentions that might draw the attention of the state control apparatus.

In the world of the play, the idea of the ruler and the grotesque, anachronistic elements together form a model of historical reality as an endless cycle of reiterations, where each regime is predestined to become an enemy of the people it governs. Physically as well as metaphysically, Tsar Boril is indestructible. Represented by countless doubles, the tsar loses his life in a series of scenes, only to be revived again. The quasi-carnavalesque mask – the costume, the grotesque guise that transforms a condemned masquerader into a ruler – takes on a kind of semiosis. Boril's red boots and gold crown become identifying tokens of his successive incarnations: a pathetic link in an unending procession of seedy players. An institution whose power is based on a diabolically consistent exercise of physical and symbolic violence, the tsar is always renewing himself, representing an allegory of the evil that continues to be present in the world. This vision is complemented by the Byzantine principle of Caesaropapism, which Tsanev reduced *as absurdum* to demonstrate how its logic turns clergymen into cynical yes-men for the secular authorities. In the play, a tragicomical instance of the tsar's dominance over the church hierarchs occurs in a scene where Tsar Boril places a horse behind the iconostasis and announces that he has seen Archangel Michael, an apparent miracle that the church officials confirm with alacrity and conviction. Their comments unwittingly slip into obscenity, compromising their standing as men of God:

Cosmas: Yes... Archangel Michael... his wings are about that white, they're white... and the sword like this one!... red, bloody... He nodded to me and said, "be strong in faith...." Yes... yes... [...]

The Patriarch: O Lord, I have come!... I have come to see at the end of my life... such a... miracle! Miracle, my Lord... [Цанев n.d.: 28–29].

In the world of the play, this group of characters is connected by a special bond of toleration with the layfolk or the “profanes” (*profani*), who form what Elias Canetti might describe as a “hunting pack” [Canetti 1981: 97–98] stalking the palace, out to kill the tsar even if they only succeed in killing his doubles.

The profanes appear to be dregs of society, their material status defined by their clothes, a preposterous mix of rags and clown costume. And yet they are involved in shaping the rules that determine the tsar’s actions, in that the tsar’s masquerade is a reaction to the threat they pose. Contrary to pragmatic logic, the profanes are the only group in the world of the play who suffer no repressions. Their taut bowstrings speak for themselves: the inexorable logic of absurdity releases them from any responsibility for the crimes they perpetrate. The tsar’s doubles are defenceless against the group that stands outside of law, and whose members are stuck in a murderous trance that seems positively carnivalesque. They fulfil their need for revenge/play by participating in a necrophiliac mystery play of destruction, affecting all the values appropriated by the state and the church. They are inveterate scoffers, whose state of mind gets revealed through obscene gestures and vulgar songs, unmasking those aspects of their imagination that push them to defile any external values, religious dogma in particular:

Ха, намери я
дева Мария!
Пак се е скрила
със Гавраила.

Старата църква
нещо проскръзва,
нещо се друса...
Правят Исуса!

Старият Йосиф
радостно носи
два дълги рога,
щом са от бога...
[Цанев n.d.: 16]

(Well, find her / Virgin Mary / she is hiding again / with Gabriel. / The old Church / is somewhat creaking / somewhat jolting... / They’re making Jesus! / Old Joseph / joyfully wears / two long horns / because they are from God...)

In this sense, the profanes can only exist insofar as there is an opposing paradigm they can negate, and thus define their own worldview. Paradoxically, their identity is conditioned, *à rebours*, by the very secular and ecclesiastical authorities they oppose.

The Bogomils, the grand defendants of the Bulgarian Middle Ages, have a different status in the play. In contrast to the homogeneous profanes, they comprise a heterogeneous group of people: an essentially random assortment of various nonconformists shoehorned into a uniform worldview by the witnesses for the prosecution (Presbyter Cosmas, Anna Komnena). Tsanev is far from viewing the Bogomils as scapegoats. On the contrary – each of them is guided by a personal motivation as they freely embrace their fate.

Several personalities stand out from this nameless crowd: the blind man Avitokh, Princess Maria, the Bogomil Perfectus, Stefan, Bosota the boyar and courtier, or Yoan Kukuzel, a medieval composer of Orthodox sacred music. They differ in terms of biographies and ethical values, but what brings them together is intellectual independence and the courage to stand by their convictions. Those medieval dissidents appear to pose a threat to Boril precisely because of their inner freedom, which threatens the uniform fabric of a culture based on Caesaropapist principles. The diabolical Tsar Boril derides their values:

Come on, old man, admit that you have been recruited by the Bogomils. Magic, predictions... mysticism embellishes everything, makes it look romantic, this is why they need you, they need your blind eyes – as decoration; you don't think that they need your predictions, do you? They do not believe in them [Цанев n.d.: 46].

Boril's cynicism is indicative of his *hylic* nature, *hylics* being soulless people who rule the world at any given time in history. The tsar uses a kind of newspeak which, though it sounds anachronistic in the thirteenth century setting, functions as a vehicle of satire and a shibboleth of every person in power.

Standing at the opposite pole are similarly timeless types: the prophet, the teacher, the poet. They combine to form a collective portrait of the pagan Bulgarian: disenfranchised and standing apart from the community of power, yet representing the most enduring and vital values of Bulgarian culture, such as its egalitarianism, its attitude of pragmatic survival, and its sense for the metaphysical.

All this is reflected in the crooked mirror of unexamined Western stereotypes spouted by the inquisitor, Robert Bougre/Peter, a Bogomil apostate turned cruel oppressor, characterised by Tsanev as a flexible player who is always prepared to turn his coat:

This is what they call heretics in Europe – Bulgarians. This is because the heresy set out from Bulgaria. And in all languages “Bulgarian” means: heretic, scoundrel, rake [Цанев n.d.: 23].

Inwardly, however, the Bogomil priest Stefan has a very different interpretation of Bulgarian spiritual reality. It is the Bogomils who are pure believers, Stefan asserts:

We are the true Christians, you are the heretics! [Цанев n.d.: 33].

Although on the face of it he uses a language of values, where Christianity is associated with the sphere of the sacred, Christianity means something different to Stefan than it does to the Caesaropapist faction. He is unremittingly hostile to the demiurge’s earthly representatives, an attitude which translates into a political radicalism coupled with a general disgust towards political power as a domain of evil. This radicalism will make it impossible for Stefan to accept Boril’s offer to make Bogomilism a state religion:

Better to side with God, having faith in good and justice, and hating you, than to side with you, but without faith, without ideals, without anything, without God... Why can’t you understand that we are restoring the faith that you have destroyed in people... Is it better to tell people: God is wrong and unfair, do not believe him! Or, perhaps it is better to say that you, God’s servants, are evil and unjust, so that they do not believe you? [...] But if we are not able to change the priests, we will change the religion [Цанев n.d.: 74].

Stefan freely chooses to die at the stake. This decision of the Bogomil leader, shown in a proto-Communist guise, is commented on by Robert Bougre/Peter, who belittles its moral significance. In his understanding of Stefan’s choice, the condemned man was guided by pride, and chose to die in order to impress the posterity, an opinion that finds some support in Stefan’s somewhat megalomaniacal prophecy that the burning stakes of the Bogomil martyrs will set the whole world alight. In this context, Tsanev appears to be referencing the view, sanctioned by all Bulgarian tradition to date, that Bogomilism had a remarkably far-reaching impact. This mythologizing treatment of the Bulgarian contribution to European culture is connected with an obsession with immortality, which is conditioned by the memory of future generations. This idea has obviously served as a source of consolation since the Enlightenment, with people hoping to leave a major and lasting mark on a world gradually improved by the force of the human mind free from the fetters of dogma [Taylor 1989: 352]. However, this prophetic vision of a world revolution produces a jarring dissonance with the Bogomil understanding of the world as

an irretrievably corrupt realm condemned to an eternal circle of repetition. Paradoxically, the same vision of history appears in the comments of the twentieth century character in the play, the counsel for the defence of the Bogomil cause, who speaks in the language of Communist propaganda. As a result, the homage to Bogomilism made on behalf of history is tempered by the skeptical sense that those ideals might never be actually implemented. The Bogomils are ahead of their time:

The verdict is clear. And history confirms this verdict. My defence is unnecessary [...] The Bogomil movement weakened the Bulgarian state and contributed to its downfall under Turkish slavery. That's right. And a twentieth-century writer vilified the Bogomils in one of his books, adding his voice to the accusations of Presbyter Cosmas [...] But, gentlemen, if nothing else, there is an invisible victory, there is an intangible benefit – it is worth the great sacrifices. Because the Bogomils sowed in the soul of the people a refusal to be reconciled to injustice – and that's a lot! There is defeat, but no resignation. There is no victory, but there is heroism. This heroism became a legend, and legends, gentlemen, have proved to be more enduring than victory. Like a torch, the Bogomil spirit has been passed through the darkness of the eight centuries that separate you from me. This torch flamed in the fifteenth century and illuminated the Renaissance, and in the nineteenth century it was taken up by the Communists [Цанев n.d.: 78].

In other words, the Bogomil victory is moral rather than pragmatic. Their success consisted in the fact that they alerted Bulgarian people and taught them to mistrust power and not be taken in by duplicitous political messaging:

Generations learned to read historical documents, Father. Where it said “anathema!” – we read “glory,” where it said “glory!” – we read “disgrace,” where it said “traitors” – we read “freedom fighters,” where it said “enemies of the homeland” – we read it as “patriots,” et cetera, et cetera [Цанев n.d.: 25].

In the context of conformism among the Bulgarian intelligentsia, Tsanev's modern allusions were an exhortation rather than a sober surmise. His overly generous conclusion that Bulgarians were endowed with an exceptional amount of political nous were probably intended to be cautionary:

Since when did the ideals which establish the state become a danger to the state, and was considered heresy? Why do you condemn those who preach your own ideals? It is you who should be tried – and you should be tried twice! Because there are two options: either you lied earlier that you have ideals, or today you betrayed those ideals. So I press charges of lies and betrayal on you! [Цанев n.d.: 47].

This dichotomy between illusion and disillusionment about the chances of a Bogomil-Communist utopia ever coming to fruition becomes particularly significant in the context of the national utopia communicated in the text. Besides the descendants of proto-Bulgarian boyars, this vision is expressed by a key character, Yoan Kukuzel, an artist inspired by folklore, for whom the pagan roots of the people/nation are the only thing with authentic value. Yoan Kukuzel’s impassioned speech before the tribunal invokes the pagan tradition, identifying it as the cradle of prevalent ideas of justice, equality, and respect for human beings. His character appears to be Tsanev’s *porte parole*, and his argument is boosted by a reference to the words of the proto-Bulgarian Khan Ormutag, a pensive reflection on life which inspired pride in twentieth century Bulgarian patriots:

Even if a man lives well, he dies, and another one is born. Let the one who comes later upon seeing this inscription remember [Цанев n.d.: 80].¹⁴

In invoking the proto-Bulgarian tradition more than a decade before it was fully vindicated by the Communist regime, Tsanev finds ideological support for such postulated ideals as democratic government and social justice. Thus, the counsel for the defence portrays Bogomilism and proto-Bulgarian paganism as contributing factors that shaped the nation’s moral sense and shaped its cultural identity, as it were in opposition to oppressive politics of any kind. Yoan Kukuzel’s opinions about art and the calling of an artist, which sound anachronistic in the world of the play, are a transparent allusion to real life under a communist regime. Yoan Kukuzel’s thoroughly modern argument is a veiled suggestion that people should be allowed to exercise their human right to freely develop as artists. Unlike the other voices in the play, all of which are brought into question by an underpinning of grotesque irony, only Kukuzel’s comments appear candid and sincere.

I am dying for that day when man will get free from the bondage of things. I’m dying for the sake of the true realm of freedom, which will come when human abilities become an end in themselves [Цанев n.d.: 81].

In praising freedom, Tsanev’s character remains loyal to the projections of communist utopias; with this bullet-proof ideological alibi, he also becomes a personification of the perfect man (understood ahistorically). In this he shows a similarity to the eponymous heroine of Dimitrova’s

¹⁴ This is a quotation from the so-called Inscription of Tarnovo, carved into stone at the behest of the proto-Bulgarian Khan Ormutag (814–831) and signed with his name. Pre-Christian proto-Bulgarian inscriptions are considered the oldest set of medieval Bulgarian writings.

Богомилката. Мистерия, a play suppressed during the Communist period. Intertextual links between those two plays suggest that Dimitrova wrote *Богомилката* as a response to Tsanev's play, even though Dimitrova does not mention this explicitly in the lengthy afterword appended to the first edition of her "mystery" as a separate publication. Dimitrova realises the importance of Tsanev's settling of accounts, however she offers her own interpretation of the Communist obsessions with Bogomilism, as well as her reflection on the position of an outstanding individual in a binary world. However, a closer reading of the play reveals that it tackles other problems as well. The settling of political scores is merely a ludic and journalistic facade,¹⁵ hiding an artistic record of a mystical experience of life.

The Paradigms of a Heretic. *Богомилката* by Blaga Dimitrova

Dimitrova shares the premise that the Bogomil movement had a plebeian, "anti-feudalistic" provenance, stemming from the frustrations experienced by oppressed people, and she does not reject the Marxist angle in interpreting Bogomilism. However, by equating Communism and Bogomilism she explodes the Bogomil-Communist utopia of a bright future, replacing it with a vision of a world where society is dominated by those in power: a passive and disenfranchised mass prone to manipulation.

In the play's vague chronological and geographical setting (a Balkan empire in the late thirteenth century, with a Turkish invasion looming large),¹⁶ the strings of history are pulled by those in power. They include the tsar and his ideological opponent, a Bogomil leader known as the Perfect One. The two characters are mirror images of each other: they are doubles, perfectly exchangeable, and made distinguishable only by elements of theatrical makeup or costume (an upturned or a drooping moustache, different clothes, a crown or a wreath of thistles), and by their contrasting interests (the tsar wants to hold on to power, the Bogomil

¹⁵ This is a separate interesting problem connected mainly with the question of wordplay in Dimitrova's play. Her wordplay, which ranges from parodies of official newspeak and Todor Zhivkov's idiolect to a lyrical recycling of forgotten archaisms and dialecticisms, serves not only as an instrument of political allusion, but also an element of philosophical reflection of language as the thing that conditions humanity, a problem which I will omit here for reasons of space.

¹⁶ Dimitrova is taking liberties with historical fact – Bulgaria was in fact conquered by the Ottoman Empire late in the fourteenth century.

leader wants to seize it). The characters in their respective retinues are ciphers: the courtiers are only distinguishable by inscriptions on their ribbons, which give them the appearance of an identity (personal or political). One courtier is a “leftist” (*Левак*), another a “rightist” (*Десняк*). A third, a “bothist” (*Двуяк*), wears both ribbons. The attendants of the Bogomil leader are made of the same servile stuff, except they are dressed in rags. In the play, Dimitrova consistently implies that almost all of the characters are interchangeable, their differences merely a matter of appearance. In doing so, she equates the “Luciferic” nature of secular power (as seen by the Bogomils), and the “sacred” nature of authority in the Bogomil community. In her interpretation, people who reach for power share a fundamental psychological affinity, regardless of ideological differences. In the world of the play, the grotesque Tsar (a cynic who makes no effort to conceal his scheming and heavy-handed political intrigues, and who gloats about his power and influence), is a twin brother of the Perfect One, the heresiarch who views enlightened social ideology as a springboard to power and a way to manipulate people.

Dimitrova’s use of the dramatic device of the double takes on an extra significance in the context of the play’s events. The grotesque Tsar (and, in his other incarnation, the Bogomil leader) are both relying on a logic of collective manipulation to forge a new ideologem and use it to bolster their respective status. The former seeks to intimidate his subjects by highlighting the terrible power of his machinery of repression. The latter senses an opportunity to consolidate the fragmenting Bogomil community by activating a new heroic myth. For this purpose, a victim will be needed, to serve as the canvas for a suitable narrative. Paradoxically, and meaningfully, both select the same person: Smaraida, a Bogomil woman who is loved by the common people, a fortune teller and herbalist who sings traditional songs and comforts the suffering. They trap Smaraida into a scheme that will force her to engage in theological dispute with a monk named Onuphrius.

Perfect One. Do everything that comes to your mind! [...] If you want, undress completely in public squares [...] When you’re dancing, sway and bend like a snake to take his breath away! Sing charms, cast magic spells if you like, but do not let him win over you!

Smaraida. I swear to you that I am strong when my words and songs are free! Then they are wonderful [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 38]!

Contrary to the assurances of the Tsar and the Perfect One, the aim of the debate is to trip up the Bogomil woman into making some kind of

unguarded statement to provide incriminating evidence in charges of heresy and witchcraft, leading to her imprisonment and death at the stake. When the monk calls her “a witch” (despite his burgeoning love, and contrary to his intuitions and actual intentions), the heroine will be martyred, a fate Onuphrius cannot, or maybe will not, prevent from happening. In the event, the “heretic” woman will embrace her fate, accepting the sacrifice that will become the “mystery” of the title.¹⁷

In the play, public execution as an organised spectacle is presumably treated as an instance of a universal pattern, the same as the struggle between the plebeians and the patricians taking place in the background. In Dimova’s interpretation, both of those groups of historical agents and animators – the courtiers and the Bogomil teachers – are two opposing sects, personally and ideologically interconnected, and indifferent to the people whose hearts and minds they are trying to win. Members of the monarchist faction as well as the Bogomil leaders despise the ordinary people, whom they view as a passive and easily manipulated mass. Hated by this binary structure of the government and its opposition, the people will select groups of representatives who will join each of those symmetrical and opposing structures to engage in history on their available terms. By delegating its representation to each of those groups/sects, society is getting mired ever deeper in stagnation and a sense of disenfranchisement and powerlessness in the face of history, a condition where the only safe option is to be a passive onlooker. The play’s numerous allusions to life under Communism give this diagnosis of Bulgarian society a timeless quality, as the world of the play becomes an allegory for contemporary reality.

With her gift of prophecy, the Bogomil woman of the title is the only character who can straddle both of the play’s timespaces. Dimitrova characterises her as the only righteous character in an objectified and morally compromised mass of humans who seek her assistance but also fear her. Particularly the men are almost visibly frightened of Smaraida’s femaleness (which they regard as a challenge and a threat), her verbal lashings (in which she speaks openly about their most secret machinations), magic and herbs (which threaten their personal autonomy), and the venomous snake coiled meekly around her waist. In accordance with the misogynist stereotype, this exceptional woman must die, or the uniform world of male domination will come crashing down.

¹⁷ The title is ambiguous and it is not easy to tell whether we are dealing with an allusion to the ancient mystery cults of the initiated, or perhaps a reference to medieval mystery plays, a genre not found in the *Slavia Orthodoxa Orientalis*.

Does that make Dimitrova’s play a kind of feminist addendum to the patriarchal narrative? Or is it another attempt to allegorise an abstract idea and present it in familiar historical trappings, a run-of-the-mill approach in European culture, where a Bulgarian female heretic becomes an all-too-predictable face of freedom? In the former case, Dimitrova would be part of critical reflection on the “negative tradition.” In the latter, Smaraida the Bogomil woman would be another addition to the set of mythologized women of European culture as yet another local allegory of liberty [see, among others, Sennett 1994: 285–292; Janion 1996a].

It seems that those questions are crucial to the correct interpretation of Dimitrova’s complex and multi-layered text, where the different meanings are a product of a kind of semantic interference between meanings drawn from various strata of Bulgarian cultural tradition, including the so-called “vicarious tradition.”¹⁸ Some of those interactions between diverse cultural codes may not have been conscious or intentional.¹⁹ In the afterword, Dimitrova admits that the play was taking shape at an acutely existential point in her life, when she looked for an escape from suffering through the ludic element.²⁰ Those circumstances find reflection in Dimitrova’s allusive and punning writing method, heavily relying on free association. Combined with Dimitrova’s literary erudition and her extensive knowledge of Bulgarian cultural tradition, this “spontaneity” of artistic creation produced an eclectic strategy of interpreting the world.²¹ This complexity of discourse is particularly apparent in the case of the Bogomil woman, who is the central character of this self-styled mystery play. Dimitrova had woven a rich cultural background for her character, with inspirations drawn from folklore, Thracian mythology, Orthodox Christian iconographic traditions, esoteric speculation and past literature. The product is an easily relatable literary character who loses nothing of the power to evoke the relevant cultural connotations.

The character’s name is first step in the creative process: because we are dealing with the only named character in the play, the name of

¹⁸ Meaning a body of texts produced by European culture translated into Bulgarian since the period of national revival to fill what the nineteenth century animators of Bulgarian culture regarded as the nation’s cultural void. In terms of cultural impact, those texts were substitutes for the non-existent local literary tradition, shaping reading tastes and providing literary models to Bulgarian writers.

¹⁹ On the subject of intertextuality see Kristeva 1980; Mitosek 1994.

²⁰ Dimitrova wrote the play during a long period of hospitalisation. The act of writing was a way of escaping suffering through play, and she involved her fellow patients in the project; see Б. Димитрова 1999b: 164–166.

²¹ See Симеонова-Конах n.d., a text I used in typescript.

Smaraida is particularly significant.²² First of all, the name *Smaraida* is a transparent reference to the name of Esmeralda, the tragic heroine in Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831). This reference to the French Romantic tradition is not coincidental. Dimitrova draws on Rousseau's topos of woman as nature's child, a figure initiated into the mysteries of nature and the sky, who knows the past and the future, a free enchantress that men desire and hate. By invoking the trope of the beautiful sorceress, known in European culture since the Romantic period, Dimitrova remains grounded in the realm of familiar aesthetic motifs. As pointed out by the Polish literary scholar Maria Janion, the emergence of a canonical version of this figure can be traced as far back as Jules Michelet, who compared the figure of the sorceress to Medea: "Michelet writes that the eternal Witch was: 'with the form of a Medea, with the beauty that comes from pain; an eye deep, tragic, lit up by a feverish fire, with great serpent tresses waving at their will: I refer to the torrent of her black untamable hair' [Michelet 1863: 151]" [Janion 2006b: 69]. Similarly, Hugo describes Esmeralda, Smaraida's original model, as a graceful, black-haired woman endowed with supernatural gifts:

She was swarthy of complexion, but one divined that, by day, her skin must possess that beautiful golden tone [...]. She danced, she turned, she whirled rapidly about [...] and each time that her radiant face passed before you, as she whirled, her great black eyes darted a flash of lightning at you. [...] [with] her two pure, rounded arms raised above her head, slender, frail and vivacious as a wasp, with her corsage of gold without a fold, her variegated gown puffing out, her bare shoulders, her delicate limbs, which her petticoat revealed at times, her black hair, her eyes of flame, she was a supernatural creature [Hugo 1888: 65].

Dimitrova constructs her heroine by consistently referencing a specific model of female beauty, supplementing that image with certain meaningful attributes that emphasise the local cultural genealogy of the Bogomil sorceress. One of the key elements is the use of a rather puzzling variant of the heroine's name. The name of Esmeralda (obviously derived from the word "emerald," Bulgarian *смапазд*) is given a more Bulgarian-sounding form. In esoteric teachings, the gem is interpreted as a symbol of immortality, unity and power, an instance of permanence as opposed to the decay and fragility of biological life [see Cegielski 1994: 31–37]. Presumably this symbolism informs the title of *Tabula Smaragdina*, one of the books in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of Greek esoteric texts

²² Briefly, the Monk is another such character, but he loses his name when he loses his face.

from the second and third centuries, purportedly containing a record of the revelations experienced by Hermes Trismegistos, a Hellenistic deity, popularised in early modern Europe in a 1463 Latin translation. In Bulgarian culture, this tradition was mostly known in Theosophical circles. This is documented by N. Rainov in his short story *Цар на мрака* (from the *Богомилски легенди* collection), which features an emerald as a gem adorning the biblical Eve, mother of all living people.

... And one morning Adam saw before him a woman dressed in clothes of sun – and with an emerald tiara on her forehead. And on the tiara it was written: Secret. [...] I am Eve. He who does not pass through me he will not reach God. That is why my creator called me the mother of the living [Н. Райнов 1969: 58–59].

By virtue of her name alone, the heretic woman Smaraida, whose character is constructed using an associative technique, becomes the hypostatis or underlying essence of ideal and eternal femininity, giving expression to what Maria Janion calls the “spirit of female otherness,”²³ where women are viewed as being predestined for a special role in history. Dimitrova does not consistently explore this Theosophical element in her play. Having referenced the modernist tradition in this manner, she uses a different specific embodiment of the idea of femininity as a special, elect state: her character is an example of “the bride of the sun,” a popular motif in Bulgarian folklore, whose first literary appearance dates back to 1905, when Petko Todorov, a member of the first wave of Bulgarian modernists, used it in the poem *Слънчева женитба* (*Sun’s Wedding*). Although Dimitrova’s play is a far cry from the neo-romantic pathos of Todorov’s poem, the interpretive connections are unmistakable. Influenced by the fashionable literary tendencies in Europe, Todorov joined the modernist cult of the sun popular at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This tendency was probably influenced by the revival of the solar myth, the development of Theosophy and the concept of “the sun’s children” proposed by the German astronomer H. Klein [see Malej 1999: 27–28].

The Sun’s Bride

Within the system of Bulgarian folk culture, the sun is regarded as a friendly but potentially dangerous presence. Accordingly, the sun’s erotic overtures are viewed as a serious threat, both to the woman

²³ I use this term in the sense defined by Maria Janion in *Kobiety i duch inności* [2006b].

who finds herself the object of the sun's attentions, and to the world as a whole. The idea of solar offspring provokes fear, and folk songs negotiate the release of the chosen woman (who usually does not reciprocate the sun's feelings) on behalf of the community [Маринов 1994: 40–46]. As a consequence, the all-knowing and all-present sun is made to accept the rules of cohabiting with people, who commit it to solitude. Filled with longing for love, the sun becomes a special ally of women, a confidant and a guide who helps them locate healing herbs, living water or lost individuals [Маринов 1994: 45].

As in Todorov's play, the heroine of Dimitrova's play transgresses the social norm; she requites the sun's love, which inevitably changes her standing in the world, condemning her to solitude but also elevating her status. Conspicuously present in Smaraida's textual self-portrait are attributes of power and sanctity which she is entitled to by dint of her special status, one that she proudly embraces:

Смарайда. Там на брега в утрото, като изскоча от вира, да изпея един
химн на Слънцето – Любимата на Слънцето съм аз –
Избрана слънчева невеста.
С горещи пръсти то ме гали,
с пламтящи устни ме целува.
Навред където и да ида,
женихът лъчезарен мой
ме придружава неотлъчно. [...]
То пали огън в моите очи,
и гордо стъпвам аз, сияеща,
достойна слънчева невеста
с корона от лъчи!
[Б. Димитрова 1999а: 79–80].

(Smarayda. There, on the shore of the morning, when I jump out of the pool, to sing a hymn to the Sun: – Beloved of the Sun I am – / Chosen bride of the Sun. / With hot fingers it caresses me, / with burning mouth it kisses me. / Wherever I go / my beaming groom / accompanies me constantly. [...] / It lights a fire in my eyes / and proudly I step, radiant / worthy bride of the Sun / with a crown of rays.)

Smaraida's solar anointment, symbolised by the halo surrounding the woman's head, is a special element used to characterise her as an extraordinary individual.²⁴ This context suggests that her high

²⁴ Her relationship with the Sun is described in a language that brings to mind the songs sung by members of the White Brotherhood during the dawn paneurythmia practice. The songs feature images of the earth as a virgin in love with the sun, who runs out to meet the sun and

mission is not a matter of self-delusion. Instead, the mission is given to her by a cosmic entity dominating the world with its life-giving power. Presented in those neo-pagan trappings, Dimitrova’s mysticism is not constrained by the system of meanings invoked in a dialogue with Bulgarian folk culture, but actually revisits and updates mythological themes from classical antiquity. Dimitrova’s Smaraida is more like Bendis, the Thracian goddess of untamed nature, than a folk singer raised in a culture of shame. Dimitrova appears to draw on deepest sources of the myth of the sun’s bride, a literary instance of the folklorist hypothesis that we might be dealing with a Christianised variant of the myth of the goddess of light, Apollo’s sister: the virginal Diana/Artemis/Bendis.²⁵ Some of Bendis’ significant attributes can be found in Smaraida’s characterisation: she holds power over the world of plants and animals, she protects the people, and her image is connected with the symbolism of light and fire. Bendis was the patron of rites of passage involving ordeals by fire, and was depicted bearing a torch, or even as a torch itself [Павлова 2002]. Dimitrova draws on this symbolism in the play, where the heroine dies burned at the stake; as she dies in the flames, Smaraida becomes a burning torch that will “light up the future.” This powerful image, which ends the “mystery play,” takes on some extra connotations. The first is connected with the conventional motif of wings and flight towards the sun, which is duly invoked in the play. Although Dimitrova’s heroine has nothing but the “incorporeal wings of the spirit” (identified with her poetic talent), this attribute, which brings humans to physical destruction, makes her potentially a victim of the perennial longing to become one with the Fullness:

submits to his soft caresses, or the image of sunrays bringing the gift of joy, peace and love to the world (e.g. in the song *Пентаграм*): “Тя жадува слънцето /И към него се стреми / То я милва от далече / И целува я с лъчи” (“She longs for the sun / And walks out to him / He caresses her from afar / and kisses her with his rays”) [Дуню 1996: 213].

Other than an approving essay on the famous healer Peter Dimkov, Dimitrova’s *oeuvre* contains no clear evidence of personal connections with the White Brotherhood. However this clear parallel indicates Dimitrova’s openness to all strata of Bulgarian culture compatible with her creative concepts, including folk culture. The connection between her personal religion of freedom and love with the solar cult takes on an extra meaning given Smaraida’s allusion to the “flower children” ideology (Smaraida poses as a thirteenth-century hippie), bringing her system closer to the holistic ideas of the New Age movement.

²⁵ Bendis (whose personifications include Saint Marina) was also the mistress of snakes; see Стойнев (ed.) 1994: 26.

От каква сте направа,
 От каква най-тънка тъкан? [...]

Криле на духа!
 Изтъкани от тайна,
 Те порят пространство и време без край.
 Човеко-птица!
 Накъде си политнал?
 Пазе се, пази се!
 Жив в огъня ще изгориш! [...]

Ако сте от огън,
 криле на духа,
 човек като сламка ще изгори.
 Ако сте от вятър,
 криле на духа,
 той на вси страни ще се пръсне на прах.
 Ако сте от слово,
 криле на духа,
 тогава и след смъртта
 човек ще лети
 завинаги през времената,
 човеко-птица
 от уста на уста,
 от дъх на дъх!

[Б. Димитрова 1999а: 35–36].

(What are you made of, / of what finest fabric? [...] / Wings of the spirit! /
 Woven from mystery, / they cleave space and time endlessly. / Man-bird! /
 Where are you flying? / Beware, beware! / You will burn alive in fire! [...] / If
 you are of fire, / wings of the spirit, / a man will burn up like straw. / If you
 are of wind, / wings of the spirit, / he will crumble into dust. / If you are of
 words, / wings of the spirit, / then even after death / a man will fly / forever
 through time, / man-bird, / from mouth to mouth, / from breath to breath!)

The metaphor of the spiritual wings (a secret Smaraida wishes to master) in connection with the symbolism of words as the fabric the wings are made of offers an interpretive angle that evokes a different semantic field, rooted in Orthodox Christian tradition. The image of a winged being with a halo around its head can be associated with the icon of Divine Wisdom, a popular depiction in Slavic territories with Orthodox Christian populations, identified with Christ as Logos or with the Mother of God. As a rule, Divine Wisdom is depicted holding a caduceus as a symbol of its theurgic powers [Флоренский 2003: 48ff].²⁶ Dimitrova references this attribute as well, in the reduced,

²⁶ This ambiguous symbol became assimilated from the Greek mythology, where it was the attribute of Hermes; see, among others, Kopaliński 1987: 448.

metonymic guise of a snake coiled around Smaraida’s waist; the snake is wisdom, says Smaraida, and poison is medicine [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 46]. The circular symbol of a serpent eating its own tail is a hermetic symbol signifying eternity and the power of self-revival [Kopaliński 1987: 451], values also represented by the emerald stone.

With this construct, the playwright provides her audiences with one more point of interpretive reference for her character. By making Smaraida a synthesis of mythologems from various traditions, Dimitrova triggers semantic interferences between meanings not usually combined in the original folk culture in question. In folklore, solar and lunar symbolism are diametrically opposed; as part of the chthonic world, the serpent is viewed in folk tradition as an enemy of the sun, accused of mutilating the sun by sucking out its eye [Беновска-Събкова 1995: 12–14]. However, this symbolic connection is present in the hermetic tradition and in sophiological thought, which remains in a certain correspondence with the hermetic tradition and often draws on esoteric sources [Paprocki 1996a], where Divine Wisdom (Sophia) is what Florensky describes as the

truest, purest and most perfect humanity, the highest form of social existence, the living soul of nature and the universe, united with God and with all that is alive since the beginning of time, expressing without a doubt the meaning of the Great Being [cited in Флоренский 2003: 316].

Dimitrova does not go into intricate ideological detail, but rather uses those references as a kind of emblem. She positions her heroine within each of those paradigms, but does not contain her in any one of them. Smaraida’s views may have a varied provenance, but they combine into a coherent, though highly individual, interpretation of the world. In this sense, Dimitrova’s heroine appears to embody a modern understanding of heresy as a universal principle, synonymous with the individual right to choose freely between ideologies [Borowik 1997: 18; Berger 1967: 16]. Though formally she is a member of the Bogomil community, her thinking is free from sectarian dogmatism. She has the “spirit of otherness,” distinctly separating her from the two worldviews of the play, neo-Manichean dualism or Christianity.

I reject fanatical service to dogma! I glorify blessed love! [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 62].

My faith is not superstition, nor is it disbelief, it has no connection to the church, nor to the demolition of ancient churches. [...] I believe in the good that people carry in their hearts. [...] Everyone is free to understand and feel it in their own way. [...] And freedom knows no bounds. Endlessness. It makes your head swim! [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 139].

People who lack love replace it with faith. But there can be no substitute to love. [...] Love is freedom! [...] This means that you have to break your chains and become a man. Because man is freedom! And freedom – is love [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 76].

Smaraida's emphatic apology of individualism has nothing to do with the fideistic determinism of hermetic thought, and her love of nature and its Maker, hidden in his work, goes against Gnostic mistrust of the material world:

My God hides himself, he does not appear crowned with halos, adorned with gold and precious stones, as they paint your God on the altars. That's flashy kitsch! My God is everywhere. He has left no fingerprint on the magnificent oak he created, or on the amber scales of the river at sunset, or on the eternal snows on the mountain tops. Modest and nameless is my God, and he wants us to be nameless and modest as well! [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 69].

This absent God bears only a superficial resemblance to the "Alien," "Other," "Unknown," "Nameless" or "Hidden" God of the gnostics [Jonas 2001: 49–51]. He is the creator of the natural world, which is viewed as beautiful and good, removing the demonic stigma of demiurgy. At the same time, this God withdraws from the world, leaving man with no support other than the forces of nature. In this respect, Smaraida is one of the chosen people who know the secret knowledge contained in the book of nature. This knowledge has a magical character, and makes it possible for the character to influence reality, giving her an awe-inspiring power over people whose limits she says are only constrained by the decrees of the stars.

I confess that the wonders of nature are everywhere around us. I read the future from the open palm of walnut leaves. From the whispering of osiers I can guess the coming change in weather. The buzz of the May beetle tells me what will the summer and the winter be like. On the sloughed off skins of snakes I catch the fingerprints of the stars that guide the destinies of living beings, from mosquitoes to jaguars [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 63].

Smaraida's worldview takes the form of a pagan natural theology. Her individual hedonism is based on her strong integration with the world of nature. In this sense, it is not interpersonal or dependent on other people. As a result, Smaraida's sensual (but not sexual) ecstasy at the beauty of life aggravates people:

[...] to get up early before sunrise, to walk barefoot in the dew, to stand on the shore of the blue pool, to throw off the horse blanket that serves me as clothes, to look at myself in the clear water, to take in a deep breath, until

my breasts fill up with the morning, to throw myself into the pool, where fresh waters will embrace me [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 72–73].

This self-sufficiency of the Bogomil woman is shaken the moment she spots an unmasked, genuinely human face in the uniform crowd: this is the face of the Monk, her adversary in the debate. Smaraida’s burgeoning love gives new weight to her enjoyment of life.²⁷ Now she has a need to share her private world and possessions with a different human being, if only through words [Lévinas 1979: 209–212]:

I know a secret place! It’s beautiful! [...] It’s very clean. In it, a pure spring bursts forth in the deep shadows. The breath of the eternal soul of the forest will waft at you. I wanted to share with you what I’ve read in the book of grass, leaves and wild flowers. I wanted to tell you about a herb they call “enchantment,” a sootherlet, a frightfullet. I wanted to say charms against disease, somniloquy. And I would use henbane, a herb they call “dreams of yearning,” to foretell for you a love that lasts a lifetime [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 48].

To Smaraida, words are more than a tool of communication. They have a creative power stemming from individual freedom in reading the book of nature. In this sense, Smaraida creates the world by naming it, a fact that reveals the demiurgic aspect of her personality. Though childless, she is a joyful mother of a world animated by words, and regards the removal of its liberty as a spiritual death:

Когато човек е с вързани ръце,
той не е човек, а дърво,
по което птици не вият гнезда.
Когато човек е с вързани мисли,
той не е човек, а скала,
по която не кацат орли.
Когато човек е с вързан език,
той не е даже дърво и скала,
защото дървото шушне с листа,
скалата с ехото се откликва.
Човек с вързан език е прах!
[Б. Димитрова 1999а: 116].

(When a man’s hands are tied / he is not a man but a tree, / where birds build no nests. / When a man’s thoughts are tied / he is not a man but a rock, / where no eagles land. / When a man’s tongue is tied, / he is not even a tree or rock / because a tree whispers with leaves, / a rock responds to the echo. / A man whose tongue is tied is dust!)

²⁷ I am using Emmanuel Lévinas’s term; see Lévinas 1979.

Smaraida's understanding of liberty threatens the increasingly totalitarian and tragicomical order of things set up by the fearful yet effective political players. The evident analogies to life under Communism should not obscure the fact that Dmitrova's ideas go well beyond narrow utilitarian constraints of topicality. Smaraida, who is prepared to die for her freedom of speech, is more than a defenceless victim of a petty and grotesque dictator. The biblical connotations of her monologue suggest that she is deliberately undertaking a dangerous poetic mission, branding her body with a burning coal as a self-proclaimed prophetess and martyr.²⁸

Белязана съм аз
от собствената си ръка
с клеймо от живи въглени:
да бъда нарушителка
на рибешкото ви мълчание.
И с острието на езика
да срещна кървавия нож.
И с гол език да разгоря
езиците на огъня. [...]
Да викна: – Светлина!
[Б. Димитрова 1999а: 128–129].

(I am branded / by my own hand / with the mark of live coals: / to interrupt / your fish-like silence. / And with the blade of my tongue / to counter the bloodied knife. / And with a naked tongue to light up / the tongues of fire. [...] / To cry: – Light!)

This image builds on the topical import of the text, which increasingly comes to the foreground in connection with Smaraida's death at the stake. Her initial impulse to revolt against the prospect of torture (a natural human instinct of self-preservation) gives way to resignation as she becomes reconciled to martyrdom. Filled with vitality, and open to the hedonistic values of life, Smaraida views socially sanctioned patterns of behaviour or ideals predicated on binary oppositions as dead [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 138]. Faced with the prospect of compromise with deception and lies, she chooses to die at the stake instead. Without a doubt, her decision can be seen as a variant of the romantic attitude which glorified suicide and personal sacrifice, often found in Polish Romantic literature. Unlike those Polish Romantics, however, Smaraida sacrifices

²⁸ In the Old Testament, an angel touched a live coal to the mouth of the Prophet Isaiah in order to make it worthy of spreading God's truth.

her life not for political purposes but simply to defend the autonomy of her inner life, and she rejects ideological motivations as false and delusional:

The pyre is tall, I can be seen and heard from everywhere! I have no wish for life at the price of lies! [...] I do not want to sell this light for darkness, to descend and be chained by faith and disbelief, the canon and the anti-canon. I want to stay up here, high above everything. A sip of freedom before the end, this is a lot for one human life! [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 143–144].

In her effort to break free from ideologically prescribed diktats, Smaraida refuses to become an icon for any one ideology. The only authentic character in the play, she pays for this act of courage with social isolation, left with nothing but the natural world [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 140]. Smaraida experiences ultimate social rejection, both from people motivated by a voyeuristic desire for her death, and from those who are merely a passive and curious crowd of onlookers. In this context, freedom is the privilege of an innocent victim, a rising above the oppression of the systems that govern the world and of their demagoguery.

The pyre is the highest peak of this century [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 142].

Three heights: the throne, the pulpit and the pyre. Nothing can be seen from the throne and the pulpit, only the dense smoke of incense. But from the pyre – there's space, radiant truth! The pyre is higher than the tsar's throne or the church pulpit [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 147].

Turned into a banal symbol of shameful death, the stake in Dimitrova's play is the only alternative to a cross available to a woman. In this semantic layer of the play, Dimitrova's Christological discourse appears to be particularly significant. The character of the heretic woman shares certain typological similarities with Christ. Christ's priestly status in Christian culture as a teacher and a miracle worker, a martyr and an anachoretic figure who fasts in solitude, furnished a series of narrative models for hagiographic writings. Can we apply the same context of meanings to unlock the code of the socially isolated female heretic woman in Dimitrova's play?

After all, Smaraida violates the strict rules that apply to every paradigm. Because she is a woman, she is shown to have a nature of simultaneity that brings opposites together. When she acts as a teacher of her people, she uses ludic elements to defuse pathos with humour. She lives alone in the wilderness, but she enjoys life, free from the self-serving privations of false asceticism. She accepts martyrdom, and yet she follows the impulse of self-love and chooses to die bitten by her pet viper rather than suffer. As a poet and a nonconformist, she not only weaves

her own narrative, but actually shapes her own life and death, unmoved by pressures from externally imposed storylines. Her words combine with her moral choices in a praise of human individuality and loyalty to God viewed independently of confessional models.

At the same time, Smaraida, a priestess of freedom and goodness, is brought close to Christ by her attitude of openness to the people, which is a way of revolting against the compromised, institutional priesthood of the Pharisees. Loyal to herself and to her pantheist love of the natural world, Smaraida is a hypostasis of the rejection of spiritual slavery. She experiences a double birth at the stake: as a tragic being, subject to the rules and laws of history, but also a prophetess and a martyr to liberty and truth. The Cassandra-like vision she narrates from the stake contains transparent topical illusions to the world in the second half of the twentieth century, and therefore takes on the characteristics of a fulfilled prophecy:

I can see the future. From century to century, from faith to faith, from disbelief to disbelief. Nothing but fanaticism and cruelty, nothing but blindness and suffering. And as before... Far away – an azure smile, freedom as hope and hopelessness. Still very far away [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 144].

Five centuries of slavery will level us like grass, they will obliterate all difference between us: faithful and unfaithful, white and black, trustworthy and untrustworthy. This equality will come to us at the price of five centuries of foreign slavery, of blood and tears, blindness and darkness, until our eyes open and see that we are equals [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 146].

[...] and we should live peacefully, drink beer and watch the spectacle! And as a standing jest, set tongues wagging. [...] I want to see at least a glimmer of hope! At least a glimmer [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 162].

This vision of a nation's spiritual self-destruction as it gives up all agency and independence is bleakly hopeless. The topical references to the real world make it apparent that Smaraida's death and sacrifice are pointless: there is no collective language a prophet might use to communicate with the people. The death of Smaraida is tantamount to the death of the mysterious soul of the nation, stretched out between pagan vitality, pragmatism and a romantic belief in the power of good.

Smaraida's attitude is independent and intellectually brave. She rejects both the Christian vision of a providential order of things as well as dualistic determinism. She rationally concludes that both of those worldviews are uncertain, temporary and subject to the workings of partisan political interests, however, she cannot avoid engaging in a conversation with them as significant others. This conversation helps

her create a world of her own. As Peter Berger noted in his discussion of the social conditioning of subjective views of reality:

the processes that internalize the socially objectivated world are the same processes that internalize the socially assigned identities. [...] Subjective identity and subjective reality are produced in the same dialectic (here, in the etymologically literal sense) between the individual and those significant others who are in charge of his socialization [Berger 1967: 16].

In this context Smaraida is a heretic from the perspective of each ideological system, with heresy understood here as independent selection or choice, the creation of a personal and individual vision of the world. The Bogomil woman finds no partners for dialogue within the world of Dimitrova’s play; however, as a literary character she is part of a broad network of intertextual associations which help unlock the message encoded in the play’s structure. The positive act of choice, which defines the worldview preferences of the Bogomil woman bearing a mark of Rousseau’s philosophy, makes her a thoroughly modern figure who tries to reconcile insights inherited from many layers of various fideistic traditions. Surprisingly, Dimitrova’s dramatised interpretation of Rousseau’s thought comes close to the insight of Charles Taylor:

Though his popular image has often been of the admirer of the “noble savage” [...] [T]he view Rousseau himself propounded [...] did not involve going back to the precultural or presocietal stage. Rather the idea of a recovery of contact with nature was seen more as an escape from calculating other-dependence, from the force of opinion and the ambitions it engendered, through a kind of alignment or fusion of reason and nature. [...] These very familiar ancient themes of austerity as a condition of true virtue become woven by Rousseau a modern one, the affirmation of ordinary life [Taylor 1989: 359–360].²⁹

The identity of the Bulgarian heretic woman – who is an allegory of freedom – is defined by an anachronistic horizon of Enlightenment morality: free thought and a striving for happiness and benevolence³⁰ [Taylor 1989: 351–351]. This attitude of private fulfilment is combined with a utilitarian orientation towards the good of the community. Such values have been diagnosed by scholars as “modern paganism” and as the Epicurean roots of the Enlightenment [Gay 1996]. Dimitrova’s anamnesis in search of the ethical roots of Bulgarian culture (since we can legitimately interpret the poet and nonconformist Smaraida as Dim-

²⁹ See also Taylor 2001: 142–143.

³⁰ I use this term in the sense defined by Charles Taylor; see Taylor 1989: 84.

itrova's *porte parole*) demonstrates their eclectic nature. It needs to be added that this vast philosophical supply base of fideistic thought can only be used by outstanding individuals who are capable of synthesising this tradition in a spirit of love and liberty. Smaraida's song of praise for such people brings to mind the songs of the Flower Power movement [Б. Димитрова 1999а: 75–76, 120], but the cultural habitation of Dimitrova's play positions the fashionable Western countercultural trends from the 1960s and 1970s (which were banned in Bulgaria at the time) within a comfortably local context. Although Dimitrova rejects the myth of Bogomilism as the source of the idea of liberty, she revitalises instead the myth of the heretical Bulgarian, which she views as a value that connects the Bulgarian identity to the world.

The play's numerous linguistic and topical allusions to modernity (in the language of the play and the exchanges between the characters and the audience) turned the story of a rebellious Bogomil woman into a parable of the human condition in modern times, where people seek their own identity in a context of spiritual oppression. In Bulgarian literature, Dimitrova's heroine becomes an icon of modern individualism, going hand-in-hand with a sense of isolation and a metaphysical and historiosophical pessimism.

The Spiritual Biography of Emilian Stanev

Although Emilian Stanev's historical novels of the 1960s and the 1970s featuring Bogomil themes³¹ were popular with readers and enjoyed critical acclaim, they continue to be an intellectual enigma. It seems that the secret of their popularity lies in their multiple intertextual and cultural references, which combine to form an important voice in the discussion on Bulgarian spirituality. *Легенда за Сибин преславския княз* (*The Legend of Sibin, Prince of Preslav*, 1968) and *Антихрист* (*Antichrist*, 1970) have a number of elements in common. They are linked by similarities in terms of historical context and typological analogies between their outsider protagonists, Sibin and Enio/Teofil. In both novels, the religious and social practices of Bulgarian Bogomils are an important point of reference in the life and spiritual development of the main characters, entangled in the ideological controversies of their time. The world of the two novels

³¹ Emilian Stanev (1907–1979) was one of the most eminent writers of the Zhivkov period; he was respected and even favoured by the authorities, even though his views were often in conflict with the official party line.

contains numerous references to historical events, notably to synods against heretics, which provide a symbolic chronological framework for the two novels, from 1211 (*The Legend*) to 1360 (*Antichrist*), and exemplify the relationship between the hybrid church-cum-state on the one hand, and heterodox believers and subjects on the other. As a writer, Stanev was highly sensitive to, and mistrustful of, the institutionalised machineries which exert pressures to constrain individual liberty in the interest of official ideology. However, that is not to say he shared the dualistic worldview of Bulgarian neo-gnostics. The logic of the discourse within the novels contains a different message, with several points of relevance to Bulgarian culture. Stanev explores the past in order to offer condensed and elliptical answers to the question of the meaning of Bulgarian history and the position of the Bogomil community in history. The novels also explore the mechanisms of totalitarian power, cautiously disguised in Aesopian language and laced with topical allusions to current political events. Last but not least, the novels focus on Bulgarian spirituality (viewed as being timeless).

Aristocrat and Plebeian

“Puritans” in the Trap of Hedonism

Stanev portrays Bogomilism as a plebeian movement animated by economic motivations: a movement of poor men that resent the rich. On the face of it, this approach appears to be toeing the line of the official Marxist aetiology of class inequality.

Here is how heresy levelled the masters and the servants, and shattered the established order. Did this beautiful girl realise that longing for God gave rise to rebellion? Satan always employs divine promises and heavenly goals [Станев 1982b: 29].

In the *Legend*, the element of ethnicity is added to this social dichotomy of masters and slaves. In the world of his novel this divides the world into the Slavs and the “black Bulgarians” (Sibin’s appellation for the fellow members of his proto-Bulgarian tribe). This has its consequences for his fictional world since it updates the myth of the Slavic slave who, in Stanev’s texts, makes a failed gnostic attempt to rationalise evil, identified here with the experience of economic exploitation, primarily motivated by the need to solve the problem of undeserved poverty. A slave is looking for a way to flee oppression, and understands self-redemption as a rejection of the social and natural order, and a flat refusal to play by its rules. In accordance with the famous Marxist dictum that “social

being is shaped by consciousness," Stanev offers a quasi-reconstruction of the way the Bogomil community forms, and then disintegrates. In a historical situation which may be considered a model, a handful of righteous people choose the way of isolation to keep safely apart from the corrupt influence of society. The need for social justice gives rise to a utopia of order, a process of recreating the social world from scratch through personal sacrifice and moral purity of its members, who choose physical or spiritual isolation from the majority so they can live by their own rules.

Gone is the universal perfection (or it has not materialised yet), and corruption is spreading all around. Those who can fully discern between good and evil have no other choice but the leave existing society and live apart to form separate communities that cultivate values which are not known or not practiced in society at large [Szacki 2000: 136].

As Jerzy Szacki demonstrated, the utopia of order is not an obsolete historical phenomenon: it gets continually rebooted in a new guise in the world of ideas [Szacki 2000: 131–152]. However, Emilian Stanev's take on the concept, presenting a crude version of the neo-gnostic worldview, brings into question the motivations of that "handful of righteous people." Though apparently portrayed as attempting to get away from the corrupt world and to create a new social order, the characters are in fact motivated by veiled consumerist attitudes and are experiencing frustration in a world that is unwilling to oblige. Hence the vague and fluid nature of the norms that regulate the life of the community which, when given a chance, moves away from a strict gnostic attitude of asceticism and mistrust for the material world to embrace exuberant neo-pagan hedonism and to reject spiritual values. The story of the Bogomil community as shown in those texts is a vivid illustration of the mechanisms of communal self-deception coming to the fore whenever a group is looking not so much for truths or universal values, but rather for pragmatic ideological solutions that offer an illusion of equivalence between the abstract worldview and the collective experience of reality.

Stanev problematised this in the character of Tikhik³² (a former servant of Prince Sabin, the book's eponymous character). Tikhik has a slave mentality; his psychological complexes breed in him a desire for power, and the rules of power push him towards moral relativism. This Bogomil usurper relies on lofty rhetoric characterised by a Manichaean disgust of the material world, however his personal life is far from ascetic,

³² The name of Tikhik is an allusion to a biblical character, a disciple of St. Paul.

and his relationship with the community of the faithful is ultimately a utilitarian power play:

Only a few of the brothers and sisters in the community had resisted the diabolical magic – the others had been harbouring secret desires to break free from God’s prohibitions, they had been lying to God and their brothers, craving self-will and freedom. Their guilt and wile must be constantly condemned to keep people humble and obedient [Станев 1982b: 97].

Within a short period of time the humble, God-fearing Tikhik turned into a real sage. Since he leaned on the people’s earthly needs, his arguments were irrefutable. He decided to wait and use violence at the right moment, because violence was the only means by which the ecclesia could be saved, and that moment would come when they had run out of food, and people got scared of their own folly [Станев 1982b: 88].

Once he has emancipated himself from Prince Sibir’s power and tricked his way to attributes of spiritual authority in the Bogomil community, Tikhik formulates an unambiguous creed reflecting a dichotomous worldview. The secular masters and church hierarchs are all *hylics*, servants of the devil:

All the depravation, the division, the rage came from the masters. The devil is lurking in them, in their churches, castles and fortresses – nestling, nurtured, esteemed... There, the masters pay homage to him because he is an autocrat and a prince of princes... He is on their coats of arms and flags, he feasts with them, hiding his tail under the red cloaks, priests’ cassocks and bishops’ vestments... He whispers audacious thoughts to the masters, unleashing demons in their minds, sowing doubt and disbelief [Станев 1982b: 86].

Faced with this kind of enemy, all moral rules appear to be suspended. Retiring and cowardly by temperament, Tikhik does not hesitate to use the scapegoating mechanisms so he can pose as a charismatic leader. The shared transgression – a crime perpetrated against “masters,” i.e. Sibir and Kalomea – is supposed to redeem the sins of the community and consolidate the group. Tikhik’s calculations turn out to be partly correct: the process of communal disintegration is briefly halted; however, the process of fragmentation, once started, is unstoppable, not even by the use of force (not that Tikhik finds the use of force morally questionable).

By bringing to light the mechanisms of power operating in a religious sect (which are typologically identical to the mechanisms of power operating in a totalitarian state), Stanev focuses equally on the ruling elite and the ruled populace. In *Tikhik i Nazari* (*Tikhik and Nazarius*), a short unfinished novel intended to be a kind of postscript to the *Legend*,³³

³³ For that reason, I treat the two novels as a single text.

Stanev portrayed the rivalry between the false spiritual leader Tikhik and an efficient robber, a brigand named Bikoglavia,³⁴ whose responsibility is to satisfy the material needs of the community. In this power struggle, it is the brigand who ultimately emerges victorious. Built on robbery (initially with Tikhik's tacit approval), the community's prosperity quickly produces changes in mentality. The period of affluence yields moral dissolution: the community embraces hedonistic values and no longer accepts its former strict doctrines. Even the long-awaited bountiful harvest does not induce them to change their new carefree lifestyle. Robbery turns out to be an easier way to make a living, quickly changing the band of ragged but high-minded starvelings into an amoral community of "corrupt" people guided exclusively by a philosophy of self-preservation. In this context, Tikhik's social background – the crude and manipulative cunning of a hateful and cynical shrewd villain (understood in the etymological sense of the word), but also a certain symmetry between the Bogomil and Communist utopias of order – reveal the text's allegorical message: a warning against the inevitable moral bankruptcy of a system based on a false anthropology and led by false prophets.

According to Stanev, the philosophy of self-preservation promotes an attitude of shifting loyalties, usually accompanied by a tendency to embrace a crude simplification of each new doctrine intended to serve as an excuse for a life of unbridled egotism, free from the constraints of the Law. Stanev often brings to light the complicated hidden psychological motivations that secretly inform the doctrines of spiritual gurus and ideologues. Father Silvester, the charismatic leader of the community, is a case in point. He enjoys a long period of unquestioned authority as a "Perfect One," until he abandons his earlier views, and Tikhik proclaims himself to be his successor. In Stanev's view, a guru's failure to adhere to the ideas that consolidate the community breeds scepticism, ultimately leading to agnosticism. The seeds of destruction are sown by the conversion of the Perfect One, caused by the evil in him. Tempted by carnal love, he wishes to adapt his worldview to the changed personal circumstances. He comes up with a new doctrine which, though based on gnostic symbolism, negates the sharp dualism of gnostic philosophy and glorifies love as the ultimate value:

The soul is like a lamb – gentle and humble about its fate. It has a fallen angel for its forefather. It suffers in its bodily carapace, but it's afraid to

³⁴ This proto-hayduk argued that he is not sinning because he is taking from the rich. This character is modelled on Stanoy, the hero of Zagorchinov's novel, who taught the humble Bogomils to be robbers; see Загорчинов 1979: 319.

become separated from it, as it will have to stand before the court of God for the hereditary sin of treason. It's struggling with flesh and its needs in its search for redemption. The realms under the stars and the seventh heaven are its homeland, and it exists everywhere where there is light. The soul drifts along with light across all of the universe, now tormented, now joyful. It is immortal. It knows everything, but it cannot utter God's word of truth, unless through love, and for the soul love is the only haven where, ever restless and perturbed, it finds comfort and peace [Станев 1982b: 61].

As a charismatic leader of the community, Father Sylvester expresses his ideas in a richly metaphorical, plebeian language. He comes up with a new cosmogony which, though partly based on Bogomil cosmogony, defines a new type of relationship between the world and people. In the original version of the doctrine, communicated by Sylvester as an apocryphal story, Satan created the mythical EVE as the first human in a kind of countermeasure to giving her a mission to bring an element of quality and stability to the world he had made, which was getting completely engulfed in frantic destruction. In that variant of the story, Eve was the only living creature on earth brought to life by the soul of an angel from the second heaven, who regretted his Luciferic rebellion against the Father. Thanks to this spiritual divine spark, the gaze of Eve was able to stem the fury of living creatures, and those she brushed with her hand became female, taking on all of Eve's spiritual attributes. In this manner, the androgyny of the original creatures, who were dominated by the satanic will of destruction, gave way to sexuality, bringing beauty, love and gentleness into Satanael's world. Then Satanael found a partner for the First Woman, who suffered from loneliness. In Sylvester's paraphrase of the Genesis story, the man is not created from the woman's rib, but rather from various bits of the most bloodthirsty animals. In this sense, the creation of man has an alchemical nature. Satanael breathes life into his *homunculus* with his own breath, giving rise to an aggressive monster whose relationship with the world is based on rape and violence. Under Eve's influence, however, his comfortable self-identification as an evil creature comes into question; his desire for the woman (a being at the spiritual antipodes of maleness) makes him question himself. This is the beginning of the history of humans as beings who are sexual but also spiritually androgynous, combining the opposing qualities of their first parents.

This is where the story of the creation of man and the beginning of the human tragedy on earth began – the creation of tribes, nations, masters and slaves, until the appearance of Boyan the Magus and Priest Bogomil, the greatest inspirers of humanity and teachers on earth who revealed the treacheries of the devil and pointed the way to salvation [Станев 1982b: 63].

In his commentary on the collected works of Stanev, Peter Dinekov describes the concept of female messianism proposed by Stanev's character as "a figment of the author's imagination" [Станев 1982с: 342]. While it is true that Father Sylvester is not a historical figure, and there is no historical evidence to suggest the existence of such a doctrine in medieval Bulgaria, Sylvester's gnosis was not invented by Stanev. Rather, it is a paraphrase of Anton Glogov's Theosophical system (discussed above), presented in a 1935 pamphlet *Богомилското учение според "Златната книга на богомилските магове."* Stanev's novel borrows from Glogov not only the idea of the rival impersonal forces of creation and destruction and their role in the creation of the world, but also the neo-gnostic sophiological concepts, not found in Bogomil doctrines but known in the Egyptian, Valentinian and Simonian traditions as well as in Lurianic Kabbalah, which taken together form the broad mystical current that attracted considerable interest among the intelligentsia in the interwar period.³⁵

From Stanev's perspective, the magus of the novel (Father Sylvester) ultimately rejects, like Glogov, the "personal" dualism of old gnosis, and replaces it with a doctrine of the harmonious unity of opposites, a doctrine of man-God based on a syncretic basis:

And when I felt remorse because I was teaching others although I was not educated, my spirit began to speak in concordance with my body, and my mind grumbled and rejected Satan and God – let there be unity in the world, and an end to the agony of division within man. Man himself is the measure of his own acts, and the interpreter of his own laws and regulations. If I set people free from those two, created by the imagination through ignorance, I believed, people would discover that they themselves were God-men... So, I replaced God and the devil with forces that everybody knows and feels – with the force of creation and the force of destruction [Станев 1982b: 94].

By using his character as the mouthpiece for Protagoras' famous aphorism that "man is the measure of all things," which forms the basis for the concept of liberty in modern nihilism, Stanev unexpectedly offers an updated concept of the man-God, which shows affinities with the utopian visions of a new mankind, produced with great alacrity by the various ideological systems at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the neo-gnostics of the Russian Silver Age.³⁶

³⁵ See pp. 97–100.

³⁶ For more on Theosophy as an ideological worldview functioning as an alternative to Marxism, see Н. Димитрова 2002.

For, when I rejected the tyrants of the mind, the sky and the earth no longer contradicted each other, and the world revealed itself to me united, and with an angelic voice present in everything. And it seemed to me that I got to know its secret [...]. A sweet-voiced love of life called, bringing tears to my eyes. I believed that by proclaiming a new doctrine, a day of great celebration would come, people would become stronger and come to love their brothers, as they would understand that they themselves were accountable for good and evil [Станев 1982b: 97].

Father Sylvester’s system was intended to free mankind from spiritual suffering of continually having to choose between good and evil. However, a rejection of faith in God and the devil did not produce the expected deification of man, but rather man’s fall as a spiritual being. In the world of the novel, the social outcomes of the new doctrine include despair for some, and triumph for others. Plebeian hedonism (a philosophy of material satiety and moral freedom) ultimately causes degradation in most members of the community, who make efforts to numb their conscience with moral relativism.

It is only the duplicitous and increasingly isolated Tikhik who rises to the defence of the old moral code, insisting that people need a stable moral fulcrum that is outside of themselves.

This is a lie and devilish deception, and it’s worthless, because good and evil are mixed together, and there cannot be any such truth... He said he wanted to liberate people from God and the devil in order for them to become god-men! But what will be the measure of our actions? Everybody will invent his own good and his own evil, as it happened in the ecclesia. [...] You won’t fool me with your perfect world or your perfect man!... Only God is perfect [...]. You beg the Almighty to save you, but because he is opposed to you, you remove him and proclaim yourselves gods, to reign over us forever and ever [Станев 1982b: 99–100].

Oh, you foolish man, did you not realise that if you leave people to choose for themselves they will mix up good and evil, they will spit on your perfection and start leading a wretched life. [...] having lost faith in the Father, a man will trust nothing but his own strength [Станев 1982d: 127].

Although Tikhik turns out to be a reader of people, he is ultimately unable to free himself of the resentment that will repeatedly push his diagnoses, no matter how accurate, into the same crudely sociologist patterns. To him, the class of “the masters” remains to be the primary source of evil:

The perfect one does not know how difficult it is to earn one’s bread because everybody must feed him; he does not know what temptations the Horned

One puts in front of penniless people who live in poverty... He says that work is an invention of the devil, so he must not sully his hands with it... He's talked to God, and now he suddenly says that there is no God... He was constantly dealing with him, and now he will begin dealing with those forces and the same will happen again... He is one of the masters as well! The masters are constantly seeking God... He says that there's no seventh heaven, nor any eternal world, only some kind of dead point from which everything took its beginning [Станев 1982b: 83–84].

Although his attitude towards other members of the community is ultimately exploitative, Tikhik nonetheless views them as the elect in the gnostic sense of the word. Perhaps this is why at a time of direct personal danger he does not succumb to Nazarius's suggestion to regain power by trickery, restoring in the process the hateful symphony of mutually supportive secular and spiritual power. Tikhik militates against the cynical musings of the painter Nazarius, a penetrating observer of human souls and mechanisms of power; he is unable to accept the conclusion that creating a new man and a new social order is a hopeless endeavour. Although Tikhik realises his own sinfulness, he remains to the last a believer in the utopia of order as a rule of life that guarantees salvation. By contrast, he views the new forms of quasi-religious cult as a satanic temptation to deity beauty and liberty to the exclusion of God.

No one knows where it came from, but Sylvester's gospel appeared among the robbers, and because it set them free from God's violence, everybody embraced it gladly. Tikhik found out that the Bull-headed one had taken Radul to himself – proclaimed him a philosopher – and now Radul preached, ate and drank together with the robbers, and made them laugh. He apparently insisted that they should build a temple of freedom and beauty, saying that people could not live without worshiping something, no matter what. Theft from the common granary became more frequent – all those who were running away would steal something. [...] The women remembered the dogma of Adam and Eve, so they reared their heads and refused to obey their husbands. [...] Faith disappeared from the teaching, mingled with the distorted gospel of father Sylvester, and planted general confusion in their minds [Станев 1982d: 158].

This peculiarly pragmatic translation of a sophisticated esoteric doctrine into a mass ethos results in a crude product where only the most convenient elements will be embraced by the populace. The former ascetic imperative will become replaced by the right of liberty and unbridled satisfaction of urges. The vacuum left by God needs to be filled with substitutes, as people are unable to function without a reference to a sacred sphere of one sort or another. In other words, Stanev's characters are proclaiming an anach-

ronistic idea of erecting a temple of beauty and liberty, which incidentally seems like an allusion to the ideas of the ideologues in Stanev’s time.

Stanev’s elliptical treatment is a dissection of two models of social organisation, revealing the false assumptions of each. The first model, based on quasi-Communist idealism, deploys gnostic dualism to promise a bright future to a handful of the elect; the second, which is based on a pragmatism characteristic of the consumer civilisation, negates the categories of moral good and evil and uses the appearance of liberty (as Nazarius puts it) in order to enslave people.

... [The Bull-Headed One] is lying to them about freedom, as thou hast lied to them about the heavenly thrones, and with freedom he will enslave them [Станев 1982d: 172].

In Stanev’s world, those individuals who are seeking truth choose self-imposed isolation, feeling out of place both in the corrupt consumerist society and in the fanatical community of gnostic pneumatics. At the end of the day, the escapism of those “spiritual aristocrats” is ultimately predicated on the same desire to remove oneself from a despised world that motivates the believers in the utopia of order. They are outsiders, insightful loners who disabuse themselves, and the world, of any hope or illusion. Nazarius,³⁷ Tikhik’s alter ego in *Tikhik and Nazarius*, is a case in point. Nazarius is an artist who contemplates the world, only to attain a level of insight that will destroy him as an artist [see Попова 1997]. The abyss he sees in himself and in others disabuses him of any illusions concerning human nature. The bitter taste of realisation that the world is not rooted in any kind of transcendent sanction, he believes, degrades people to the level of biological beings, deterministic bundles of drives and instincts. Consequently, Nazarius embraces a vision of the world as a homogeneous blend of good and evil, where each of those concepts negates the other. The human condition is based on a synthesis of those two elements, which are ultimately meaningless. Humans are free from the anguish of having to choose between good and evil, and they can gain inner peace from this freedom from moral injunctions:

Am I not real now, now that there is no line between good and evil and the world became uniform. I have been given power over animals and birds, and I am what created me – good and evil. My mind is calming down, my own secret and the mystery of the world no longer bother me. May God rule in heaven, and the devil in the pit of hell. They are both with me, so I can be a man [Станев 1982d: 168].

³⁷ An allusion to the name of a Bogomil bishop Nazarius, who brought the Bogomil *Secret Book* to Lombardy in the twelfth century.

Nazarius' concept takes us back to the unavoidable problem of first origins. His understanding of God moves away from the Christian interpretation of the Creator as an impersonation of ultimate good. Nazarius' God, like the God of the Kabbalists, combines good and evil [see Unterman 1981: 95], which he treats as a therapeutic liberation from the traumas of troubled conscience.³⁸

A Skeptic in the World of Ideas

The main area of interest in Stanev's texts as discussed in this book involves the problems of spiritual adaptation experienced by people who search for truth and God, and examine the ideological options available in the times they live in. In his fictional world, human thoughts and ideas are a realm of chaos, where any attempt to find ultimate meaning is bound to collide with other attempts to do the same. Stanev's characters are endowed with a special kind of intellectual and moral sensitivity, characterised by an ability to detect hypocrisy and an attitude of rebellion against dogma. Consequently, they are condemned to roam alone in the world of ideas, marginalised outsiders lost in the tangle of contradictory values they are obstinately trying to imbue with some kind of unifying meaning. Conditioned by the historical and cultural context, this process as interpreted by Stanev turns out to be identical to the formative process of human subjectivity and identity at individual and collective levels; this is connected with the very human need to find some kind of comprehensive intellectual purchase on the world, particularly when that world is undergoing a process of fragmentation.

In *Legend*, Stanev creates a world where the two ethnoses, the Slavs and the proto-Bulgarians, have not yet become fully homogenised to produce the Bulgarian nation, a process that will not be complete until much later in the future. The eponymous character, Prince Sibir [see Бешевлиев 1981: 56; Ангелов 1969: 468; Георгиева 1991: 159],³⁹

³⁸ According to the memoir of his wife Nadezhda Staneva, Emilian Stanev entertained doubts about the benefits of beauty unconnected to ethics:

"It's not good when an artist begins to realise that art knows no boundaries, but also that it cannot express the whole truth, that to some extent it is a lie, because it cannot reveal the mystery of existence and the essence of things. Then you begin to see the beauty in hell as well as in paradise, in a saint and in a demon, in good and in evil. Beauty without ethics. In the same way, a person can reject love as well. Then they also want to reject art, and ask themselves what use it is" [cited in Станева 1983: 128].

³⁹ The name of the hero is a riddle. It sounds similar to the proto-Bulgarian name of Sivin, conjectured to be the name of a member of the tribal aristocracy; see Бешевлиев 1981: 56. Sibir (Sibiu) is also the name of a town in Transylvania, where Bulgarian

is the last surviving male heir of a once great boyar (noble) proto-Bulgarian family. His physical appearance brings his Turan ancestors to mind, and his spiritual life seems to be similarly conditioned by his blood ties and a background of history as trauma, experienced by the warlike tribe condemned to destruction by the Byzantines:

Fond of astronomy like all proto-Bulgarians, the old prince cultivated in his family an insatiable curiosity about the stellar secrets that led minds beyond the boundaries of the Christian concepts, and threw them in the chambers of the distant pagan past, where the powerful, all-seeing and righteous Tangra reigned. [...] Since that time Sibin had lived in the conviction that the tribe to which he and his ancestors belonged were doomed. They had disappeared amongst the Cumans, Thracians and Slavs, and now a new nation was forming. The Byzantine church had destroyed them by instilling Christianity; Orthodoxy with its theocracy was still licking the red boots of Boril, was still provoking hatred from the common people. Already in those early years of his conscious life the prince began to hate the Church [Станев 1982b: 55].

The prince's anti-Christian outlook, largely a consequence of his anti-Byzantine stance, has roots in psychology and politics; it is primarily based on a sense of resentment against Byzantium, viewed as a hostile power which has deviously robbed the ancient Bulgarians of their rightful prestige. At the same time, Prince Sibin is an educated man, well-versed in the esoteric literature available in Byzantium, a fact which sets him apart, in equal measure, from Christianity (which is profaned by secular power), and from the heresies favoured by the people. This makes the prince an independent seeker of truth who is not afraid to question the validity of the competing systems that provoke his interest.

For Sibin, the ancient religion of the proto-Bulgarians is a natural point of reference, a comforting system free from any trace of dualism, where humans were positioned in a friendly and predictable cosmos run by a deity named Tangra, a harmonious blend of opposites. The sophisticated ideological syncretism professed by Sibin, who seeks to disengage from the pressures of a dichotomous system of values, makes it possible for the prince to maintain an arm's length perspective on the crude folk dualism of the Bogomils. Sibin replaces the metaphysical horror implicit in Bogomil anthropology (a natural human reaction to the experience of

Bogomils settled in the thirteenth century; see Ангелов 1969: 468. In Bulgarian folklore, there is the motif of twins delivered by a Sibin woman in the town of Sibin; on the other hand, the name of the epic hero Yanko Sibyanin and János Hunyady forms a link with the fifteenth century; see Н. Георгиева 1991: 159.

being thrown into a hostile material world) with a detached and ironic admiration for Satanael. In this perspective, the kingdom of the eternal God comes across as a realm of boredom where Sabaoth – the universe’s greatest “egocentric” – is lost in self-contemplation; by way of contrast, Satanael can be seen as active and creative, described by Sibin as “the great builder”:

Satan [...] did not only rule the eternal world, but was also its builder [...] Huge and bright like a comet, Satan flew up and down across this peaceful kingdom of God where nothing new happened and no voices could be heard except the roaring of the fiery sea, the noise of the water and the angels praising their God. How terribly bored he should be, doing his meaningless service in the boundlessness of time! And how foolish this endless glory to God would have seemed in the eternal world, which was created not by God’s work, but from Satan himself! [...] In the end, when he grew bored with that endless hosanna, Satan rebelled. The great builder wanted to create something that made more sense [Станев 1982b: 16].

This patently anachronistic description of Satanael, which would not look out of place in the mouth of a Freemason or a Theosophist, is a subtle allusion to the meanings that would come to be ascribed to Lucifer in later historical periods, primarily in the modernist era. The question arises whether this is an early clue that Sibin, Stanev’s proto-Bulgarian hero, is a prefiguring of the modern man, who peruses forbidden books to look for meanings which may not available in the official Church doctrine, but which promise to supply adequate answers to questions such as the meaning of history or individual or collective suffering? The prince, however, appears to represent a conservative attitude, where new ideas are rejected in the interest of loyalty to ancestral spiritual legacy:

He took greater satisfaction in the old books of Mani and his disciple Sis, which were once brought from Constantinople by the prince’s ancestors. The first man intervened on the side of God against the demon of evil, who was captivated by Satan and lost the light of the spirit. Total confusion of light and darkness, good and evil ensued in the human soul, and no one could tell them apart. The prince wanted to live like he did before – without drawing a line between them. Then what was it that he was looking for in the books? Was it an explanation for the misfortunes weighing down on the country and his home [see Станев 1982b: 16–17]?

And now the prince demanded explanations from God and Satan. Certainly, he was not the first, nor the last to do so. [...] However, they all held the magic key to peace of mind. They did not need comfort so necessarily or look for it so desperately where there was probably nothing. They read the Chaldean and Babylonian myths of Simon the Magus, Carpocrates, Marcion or Psel-

los in order to entertain and hone their minds. Their nations [Byzantines, the French, the Venetians – G.S.G.] conquered all tribes. The Byzantine Jesus was the link and strength of the first, as the Catholic one was the strength of the others. However, the thoughts of the prince wandered between heaven and earth, seeking an explanation of evil and comfort for himself [Станев 1982b: 55].

This sense of loyalty to the proto-Bulgarian tradition makes Sibir resistant both to the pseudo-rationalist nature of Bogomilism with its simplified worldview, and to Christianity as a religion of weak men who seek to deify their own suffering [see Станев 1982b: 49]. Sibir perceives Slavic Christianity and Bogomil metaphysics as being equally tainted by nihilism, and ultimately life-defeating. A personification of the Dionysian element, the prince leans towards the worldview of his ancestors and to Tangra, a god who is “virile, strong and just.” He counters the slave life philosophy that focuses on survival with the life philosophy of the last aristocrat of the spirit, brimming with Nietzschean vitality, will to power, dignity and courage to keep the external world at arm’s length:

He should believe only in Tangra, the mighty, noble and just Tangra who does not torment hearts or minds, who allows you to kill anything you despise, anything that does not obey you and that threatens you with destruction [Станев 1982b: 104].

In this manner Stanev adds his voice to the discussion on the national tradition which flared up in the interwar Bulgaria, leading to what would prove to be enduring changes to the Bulgarian self-image. The former image of ancient Slavs as evangelical figures of simplicity and nobility of heart, which dominated the collective imagination during the period of national revival, was replaced in the 1920s and the 1930s by competing figures inspired by an interest in neopaganism: the pagan proto-Bulgarians and the heretical Bogomils; as rhetorical tropes, those figures were often used for the purposes of Communist propaganda during the Zhivkov period.

Although Stanev’s novels are very much part of that context, they are a record of autonomous literary aspiration going beyond literary reactions to the expectations of state-sponsored cultural policies. This is apparent not only in the arc of ideological discourse traced by the novels, as discussed above, but also in the overarching message of those texts communicated by the model of the world embedded into their structure.

Within the fictional world of the novels, one privileged space is a cave where Sibir finds refuge after fleeing the revenge of Tsar Boril, who is equally hostile to the Bogomils and to the former followers of Tsar Kaloyan. In various mythological traditions caves were always viewed

as a refuge for people in hiding or undergoing ascetic trials, but also as a realm of demons and impure spirits [Bartmiński, Niebrzegowska (eds.) 1999: 136–137]. The chthonic symbolism of the cave in Stanev's novel is amplified by the presence of a subterranean river whose hot, crystal clear waters produce a set of ambivalent associations with ideas such as life and death, the sacred and the profane, and the archetypal crossing of the boundary between the two worlds [Bartmiński, Niebrzegowska (eds.) 1999: 324–325]. By choosing to live in a cave, Sibir banishes himself from human society in the eyes of the Bogomil community. He is a member of the master class, which makes him instantly identifiable with Satan, a fact which will undoubtedly contribute to the escalation of violence later on in the novel. When that happens, the cave will cease to be a dwelling to become a grave, and the river flowing at its bottom will become a chance for a new life.

The meaning of this symbolism is influenced by the Gnostic paradigm incorporated into the story of *The Legend*. One key to unlock the coded meanings of the novel takes the shape of Sibir's beloved, Kalomea, a meaningful name that contains an intertextual reference to Kalomain, the heroine of stories by Bulgarian theosophist Nikolai Rainov, collected in a volume entitled *Богомилски легенди (The Bogomil Legends, 1912)*. Although the title of Rainov's collection highlights the reference to the Bulgarian neo-gnostic tradition, the stories are actually modernist interpretations of the cosmogony found in nineteenth century occultism, not present in medieval Bogomilism.

Kalomain ("daughter of beauty") is described in a number of Rainov's stories including *Цар на мрака (Prince of Darkness)*, *Каин и Евел (Cain and Abel)*, and *Каломайн (Kalomain)*. She is the daughter of Eve and Satanael, the divine architect of the heavens, and Cain's twin sister. After eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, which was not meant for her consumption, she experiences a sudden desire for freedom, which drives her insane. One kind of suffering leads to another, namely a yearning to contemplate the Father of Heavens. Kalomain leaves her own world and falls into a giant abyss where, like the gnostic *Sophia*, she experiences the terror of solitude and abandonment. She is rescued from her lapsed state by the Lord of the Heavens, who carries her to lands far from Eden; later, the Comforter carries her up to Christ so she can become his bride. In Stanev's novel, this associative, Theosophical story of a cosmic catastrophe ending with a reconciliation of the fallen *Sophia* and her Beloved is reworked in the Orphic spirit.

Like Kalomain – the archetypal *Sophia* or *Helena* – the beautiful Kalomea initially clings to God with all her being. Stirred by desire,

however, she rejects ascetic practice as a path to heavenly glory, and embraces hedonistic values. In this story, Prince Sibir is the tempter, but his heart turns cold when Kalomea is filled with the sensual joy of life. This plunges her into spiritual apathy, from which she will be stirred by suffering. Pursued by a maddening crowd of lusty men and jealous women, she dies a sacrificial death that Tikhik insists will restore the world's order. Pushed right to the boundary between life and death she realises the role played in her life by the demonic lover. Stanev invokes the folk myth of the *zmey*,⁴⁰ a being whose love brings his lovers to a certain death:

Kalomea calls him Satan and zmey – so she has always considered him as such... That's what he was because he believed neither in the Byzantine Jesus, nor in the heretical God. [...] There is no other god but the God of your ancestors, and he passed away with them long ago... Without them, you are nothing! You are a wanderer, you are strange, misunderstood, a man apart... [...] With a dreadful rumbling and darkness the abyss devoured Kaloyan's soldier, vanquished by the Byzantine Jesus, against whom the people were defying their own heretical God, equally unacceptable to the Preslav prince [Станев 1982b: 103–104].

The lovers are buried alive in a single grave (as the Bogomils fill the mouth of the cave), an analogy to Orpheus and Euridice since Stanev's novel presents a reworking of the mythological trope of the struggle to wrestle the life of a beloved woman from the forces of darkness. Sibir makes a desperate effort to lead the dying Kalomea out of the land of death, and jumps with her into the depths of the subterranean river, hoping to be carried to life by its swift currents. Those events, which draw on the Orphic paradigm, are complemented in the novel by a quasi-folk legend where the prince is portrayed as an immortal hero, a lone wanderer in Bulgarian lands in search of his god, and a protoplast of the Bulgarian hayduks. In this manner the last worshipper of Tangra and the first Bulgarian rebel become melded into a single figure. In this context, the heretic and the hero jointly mould the literary myth of the Bulgarian as a sceptic and the last fighter for dignity: a pilgrim in a world forsaken by God.

The Antichrist (the Mystic – the Agnostic – the Gnostic)

The Legend of Sibir, Prince of Preslav and *Tikhik and Nazarius* are novels about the birth of skepticism in a man who is obstinately searching for God but has lost his way in that search. Stanev's *The Antichrist* is a tragic account of

⁴⁰ See pp. 211–215.

the ultimate and conclusive failure of that search, a kind of postscript to his earlier novels. It narrates a story of a “wrestling match” between a medieval apostate monk and God in what is primarily an Aesopian allegorical narrative relating the spiritual biography of the modern man, specifically identified by Stanev as an autobiographical account written during the last days of the world. The title offers a clue to the book’s nature, since the antichrist is a figure that belongs to a time of awe and metaphysical terror.

Faced with the temptation of apocalyptic eschatology, Stanev presents good and evil in terms of current historical conflicts, a familiar phenomenon in medieval writing [McGinn 1994: 32] also known in the Bulgarian tradition. In search of a period marked by apocalyptic experience (similar to that of modernity), Stanev turns to the late years of the second Bulgarian state, when the looming prospect of an Ottoman Turk invasion on the Tarnovo state bred widespread pessimism and a sense that the world was coming to an end [see Костенечки 1986].

They are coming, he says, Gog and Magog, whom Alexander the Great once sent to Asia. They’re coming to help bring about the end of the world. They are unclean nations, and no one can withstand them [Станев 1982a: 220].

Gog and Magog (two figures in Revelations representing the pagan peoples misled by Satan at the end of days) were viewed in medieval Christendom as a symbol of the barbaric Asiatic tribes, associated with the Ottoman Turks, who would bring about a collapse of the sacred order of the universe [McGinn 1994: 92–97]. Faced with the approaching Muslim onslaught, Christian fears took the form of apocalyptic visions of the final days, with a prophesied period of Antichrist’s absolute power necessarily preceding the Last Judgement.

Stanev’s reconstruction of the evil of that period, which is capable of sinking an individual in the very depths of nihilistic despair, steers clear of allegory; his Antichrist is a many-faced creature, taking the form of a cruel Turk, a licentious Bogomil, or a devout hesychast to personify all the human powers of history that are hostile to God. Stanev’s characters not only operate in a degraded world, but also actively destabilise existing value systems, jointly shaping a world where the evil present in history and in human beings becomes intensified even further. Ultimately, this gradation of evil provokes the question of meaning, with an undisguised underlying desire to justify the ways of humanity.

Hesychia

Stanev’s hero, Enio/Teofil, has a meaningful Greek name meaning “Bogomil” in Bulgarian, a transparent allusion to the name of the Bulgarian here-siarch. Despite this reference to the Gnostic paradigm, Stanev’s Enio is not

a follower of Bogomilism, but rather a heretic by the will of God, a figure who is in a way providentially predestined⁴¹ to be a skeptic, keeping apart not just from orthodoxy, but also from any kind of discourse with God, which is always subject to manipulation at the hands of enlightened gurus. For Stanev, Enio’s inner turmoil, and his frantic search for a personal truth about God and the world, are a vehicle of symbolic reflection on Bulgarian spirituality, which he diagnoses as a chaotic thing holding the seeds of national nihilism as well as modern humanism. This turmoil, caused by a rivalry between colliding ideological systems competing for the hearts and minds of the people, is in Stanev’s opinion an enduring element of Bulgarian cultural heritage: a kind of famous last words of the fourteenth century: a last will and testament made moments before the coming of the five centuries of Ottoman occupation. To Stanev, the most important constitutive elements of that tradition (which is burgeoning at that time) include, validly, the high mysticism of Byzantine Christianity, folk neo-gnosis in its various sectarian variants (including Bogomilism) and the pragmatic rationality of reason freed from the fetters of dogma, underpinned by areligious humanism.

At various points in his life, Stanev’s hero becomes the mouthpiece for each of those ideological methods for imposing order on the universe, testifying to the illusions and deceptions of each. A well-educated and physically attractive scion of a noble boyar family, he is also proud with the pride of penetrating and unfeeling reason. After rejecting worldly temptation at the outset of his conscious life, he would appear to have chosen for himself that evangelical “good part,” the way of mystical contemplation of the Creator. In doing so, he was following a recently fashionable religious movement, namely the doctrine of *hesychasm*, which by the fourteenth century had reached Bulgaria coming from Byzantium. After being officially recognised as a legitimate form of religious practice, hesychasm took hold in most monasteries.⁴² With its belief in the deification of the body, which it regarded as a vessel of the Holy Spirit, it was on the one hand a kind of synthesis and sublimation of the ascetic-mystical tradition of early Christianity and Byzantine religious practice, and on the other hand it was the polar opposite of gnostic dualism. Gregory Palamas, a monk and spiritual father of fourteenth-century hesychasm, defended the value of mental focus in spiritual life, argued for the body’s

⁴¹ In the fictional world of the novel this takes the form of a grave illness suffered in his childhood; his miraculous recovery is regarded as a bad omen.

⁴² After a long period of theological debate hesychasm was approved by a synod in Constantinople in 1351.

involvement in prayer, and discussed the possibility of experiencing supernatural light, similar to the light the apostles saw in the face of Christ on Mount Tabor [Naumowicz 1998: 17].

How should he not illuminate those who commune worthily with the divine ray of His Body which is within us, lightening their souls, as He illumined the very bodies of the disciples on Mount Thabor? For, on the day of the Transfiguration, that Body, source of the light of grace, was not yet united with our bodies; it illuminated from outside those who worthily approached it, and sent the illumination into the soul by the intermediary of the physical eyes; but now, since it is mingled with us and exists in us, it illuminates the soul from within [Gregory Palamas 1983: 18].

The fourteenth century controversies between the adherents of hesychasm and its opponents, the Barlaamites, revolving around the fundamental question of the deification of man, not only produced divisions within Orthodox Christianity, but also deepened and solidified the schism between Rome and Eastern Christianity [Evdokimov 1964: 30].

By embracing a life of contemplation in a monastery, Stanev's character chooses a path that "others have taken before" – meaning the great saints and his contemporaries, masters of mystical spirituality recognised by the Orthodox Church. At least in the beginning it might seem that Enio represents a conservative attitude of respect for the sanctioned models, where "traditional wisdom imposes discipline on, and restricts free choice in, any aspect of the inner experience" [Bielik-Robson 2000: 23]. However, this path cannot be conducive to a monk's spiritual development unless combined with humility towards the authority of superiors, a quality that Enio lacks. His outlook on the institutional church is marked by mistrust, stemming from a fear (born out of a reaction experienced in childhood) that Satan might have seized control of the church [Станев 1982d: 185]. This longing for God, combined with a sense of mistrust towards his ministers on earth, make it impossible for Enio to reach spiritual composure. On the one hand, he feels admiration for the perfection of Theodosius and Euthymius, the greatest mystics known to him, who were regarded as saints in their lifetime:

And then I saw the Holy One, with hands raised up above his shoulders, staring at the wooden ceiling, all ablaze with light. The light was dispersed inside the hermitage like shining mist, and vanished from sight in an elusive manner. I found him scary, that old man in the small hermitage, as if he was locked in a cage of God. His graying hair fell on the robe that covered his shoulders, his face and hands glowed with radiance. [...] Then I felt like a force pulled me, and shook me, it swept my soul along and crushed, it as if under a lid. I shivered all over, and I fell to my knees. I know I'm sobbing,

but the ears cannot hear the sobs, fear and unearthly joy are struggling in my heart, and I felt as if I became immaterial [Станев 1982а: 210].

On the other hand, he disparages them, accusing them of hypocrisy and pride:

The secular man, the boyar in you, Your Reverence, insulted me, because you were not similar to the one I saw at night. [...] And I was amazed by the combination of the boyar and the saint, however later, when I lay naked in his cell, and the demons attacked me from the left and from the right, they helped me to find an explanation. So, one of the demons of the mind whispered to me about you: “In order to become a saint, you need great pride and contempt of yourself, of the people and of the world; and you have to hide this pride underneath a cloak of humility” [Станев 1982а: 213].

In descriptions of his protagonist’s mystical experiences, Emilian Stanev moves beyond the tradition of Orthodox Christianity, which tends to be quite muted in this respect, containing none of the autobiographical accounts of mystical experience so prevalent in the Latin culture [Trzcińska 1996: 11]. Orthodox Christianity’s closest counterpart to that tradition is *The Philokalia*, a collection of writings by the great mystics of the Christian East, that collectively form a kind of textbook of mystical life, immensely popular in the Slavic regions since the late eighteenth century, but also known in the West on account of its place of publication. The writers featured in that anthology include, among others, eminent thirteenth and fourteenth century practitioners of psychosomatic prayer methods and co-creators of hesychasm, such as Nikephoros the Hesychast, Gregory of Sinai or Gregory Palamas. In his novel, Stanev demonstrates an excellent understanding of hesychastic spiritual strategies explored by his hero, and of the dangerous pitfalls awaiting new practitioners. This makes the inner experiences of his characters not only plausible, but also typical of practices in that period which were motivated not by sincere intention (characteristic of *agape*) but rather by the Platonic idea of “heavenly love” (*eros ouranios*) [Bouyer 2013: 363], in which case a mystic’s love of God is nothing more than a sophisticated and subtle form of egoism, based on an unfulfilled desire to own God and God’s richness, and consequently to become like God, to achieve identification through an almost physical union.

There remains only one insuperable danger, against which the writers issue emphatic warnings: the desire to achieve spiritual solace without a genuine effort to live a spiritual life and engage in steadfast virtuous practice; this attitude can produce nothing but deviation from the norm, a kind of spiritual schizophrenia. “Prayer” – we read in the Dialogues on

the Jesus Prayer – “is the work of a lifetime.” Outward practice should also include purity of mind, because there are three conditions of perfect prayer: “the first is to care nothing whether the effect is good or bad (as this produces distraction in prayer); the second condition is a good conscience, so that we are beyond reproach; the third is a complete absence of passion so that the mind is not pulled by inclination to any things in this world” [Špidlík 1996: 247].

Despite the preventive upbringing he received in a monastery, which was intended to purify his heart through humility and service, Enio’s dealings with people and God are not free from selfishness or a sense of self-centred entitlement.⁴³ Although Teofil’s confessional autobiography contains multiple examples of self-criticism, intellectual clear-sightedness, and emotional and spiritual self-awareness, neither his intellectual understanding nor his gift of discernment of spirits (treated as the hypostasis of spiritual tensions) are sufficient to make the leap of trusting God. Ultimately, his prayers for the grace of faith remain unanswered. A series of minor events – an indisposed spiritual director, a dream exposing the falsehood of Christ’s resurrection, erotic temptation – turns out to amount to a strong argument against faith. Despite achieving the desired state of *hesychia* (spiritual rest, quiet or stillness), the direction of the sceptic’s inner revolution remains unchanged, since contemplation of God is to him primarily a form of knowing, a promise of personal deification. This is evident in the wording of the prayer he uses to achieve *hesychia*:

Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner, for I am sincerely contrite and heart-broken. Show me my God, who summoned me from my mother’s womb [Станев 1982a: 243].

This individual paraphrase of the Jesus prayer highlights Enio’s ulterior motivation, similar to that leading to the original sin: a desire to be equal to God. Nonetheless, this prayer strategy of seeking ecstasy through intellectual calculation rather than heartfelt impulse produces some effect. In a case like this, masters of spiritual life recommend caution and warn against delusion:

Sometimes this exercise may produce experiences which appear to be spiritual in nature: the psychophysical exercise may produce feelings of warmth, solace or joy. This is not evil in itself, however it may mislead people who lack discernment in those things to mistake a natural phenomenon for supernatural comfort [Špidlík 1996: 247].

⁴³ On the gnostic attitude towards God see Kołakowski 1995.

In his private psychological experience, Enio experiences a sense of religious rapture which he takes for *hesychia*:

There, I can see a glimpse of relief, joy and quiet happiness coming from the depths [of her soul – G.S.G.], a radiance from other worlds shines on her, and she begins to shake in bliss. And an angel with swan wings appeared to me. Ah, I have no words to tell you what I saw, my language and my reason are helpless where it comes to revealing the mystery of God. My heart leaps like new, it's beating cheerfully in my breast, meek joy flows through the body and glorifies God [...] And I understand why the seraphim around his throne sing praises to him, for now I am among them [Станев 1982a: 243].

At the polar opposite of this mystical experience with its sense of peace and comfort, Stanev's character places a different mystical experience which leads him to a spiritual breakthrough. Anyone who has seen God must die. Enio is tormented by a sense of spiritual death as he finds the light of Mount Tabor unbearably flat and lifeless, and as such incapable of serving as a life-giving wellspring of hope, universal order and meaning in life. From that moment on, his life is symbolised by a journey, a wandering of a homeless soul in the wilderness of an indifferent world ending in Nothingness:

[...] I earnestly called on God to reveal to me the secret of the two worlds, and I had forgotten that the devil lurks in secret, at the same time I heard a noise as if of a strong wind, and white, blinding light flooded the entire cell. I grew dumb, I was paralysed and I could neither move nor think. And I saw this world like a resurrected dead man might see it – incomprehensible to the mind in the time past, present and future, and myself – a roaming spirit, condemned to rove eternally from one delusion to another. And the meaning of everything that happened in the world was beyond me, unobtainable to my mind, hidden in times behind unknown, ever changing images that entangled the mind and enticed it from one lie to another. Inexpressible suffering oppressed my soul, drowned it in despair as in a bottomless sea. So, fearing that the white light would blind me, I wanted to close my eyes, but I could not. It was burning with a cold brightness, without quivering, and I felt that it would soon pass, and when it did I would never be the same again, because my spirit lay defeated, and my faith with it [Станев 1982a: 247–248].

The cold, indifferent God who reveals his power to Enio the way he once revealed it to Job can only produce awe and terror. This is not a strictly Manichaeian case: the unknown God of the Manichaeians remains an unquestioned reference point and destination for those souls who learn the way of salvation through gnosis. The God Enio encounters in his mystical experience is a Creator who has turned away from his Creation:

the God of the Deists and twentieth century existentialists who deplored the solitude of man thrown into being⁴⁴ and destined to live with a false consciousness (in the Nietzschean sense).

Following his “betrayal of transcendence,”⁴⁵ Stanev’s character finds an ideological alternative in a deliberate and systematic hostility to Christianity, a sense of contempt for his former beliefs which, paradoxically, continue to serve as ordering categories and stable reference points in his thinking.

Although the narrator’s comments imply that the demon of pride [Evagrius of Pontus, 2006: 83–86] was involved in his psychosomatic experiments, which according to spiritual masters influences the reception of a mystical experience, Euthymius, Patriarch of Tarnovo (who will years later hear Enio on the eve of a council against the heretics) does not rush to undermine the credibility of Enio’s *hesychia*. He declines to view the incident in terms of demonic illusion. Instead, his interpretation is conditioned by a great mystic’s sensitivity to the signs of the final days. Accordingly, he mostly perceives Enio’s experience in terms of the amicable relationship between God and the Creation. Euthymius’ commentary is permeated by the sadness of a prophet who reads the world like an open book containing a record of future events. Although he feels compassion for Enio, Euthymius sees a special place for him in this future scenario – in keeping with the mentality of the period, marked as it was by eschatological fears and anxieties, he perceives Enio as the original model of the Antichrist,⁴⁶ whose increased activity will precede the end of the world:

God, is it that day when your light will dazzle man, the day of the most terrible penance and disgrace? A man will then be like a wave, swelling or scattered by the wind? [...] If the manifestation of God’s energy could not humble your pride, then who will? [...] There is no other force other than God’s that could make you believe in what God has revealed even to children, and what Satan has obscured in adults. I know how dear those grievous torments of negation are to men, and how meagre the quiet joy of virtues seems in comparison. May Christ help you, Theophilus! Satan is in you, and he will not leave easily. And if he doesn’t come out, you will be the archetype of the future monster of the Apocalypse, a man of new, wild force, which the world has never seen – the Antichrist, who has come to its end [Станев 1982a: 287].

⁴⁴ For more on the affinities between Manichaeism and twentieth century existentialism, see Jonas 2001: 320–340; Shestov 1982.

⁴⁵ I borrow this term from Safranski 1999.

⁴⁶ For more information on the satanic aspects of Enio’s personality, see Нанчев 1997.

Euthymius's crushing critique of hard-hearted individualism is characteristic of a member of a conservative society, where human spiritual dynamism is perceived as a source of grave dangers, and any deviation from the beaten track is seen as a threat to the cosmic order. By contrast, Enio accepts the challenge of reason that rebels against the impositions of necessity; his is a gesture of self-exclusion from a community guided by hard and fast rules. In this sense, he becomes the novel's prototype of the modern man, engrossed in the task of self-creation. Freed from the constraints of a moral system predicated on transcendence, his self-creation also reveals the hero's anxieties and fears. Weighed down by the original sin of doubt, Enio suffers from a sense of inner emptiness, which makes him infinitely flexible, capable of an unending sequence of conversions. Though aimed at preserving his inner truth and authenticity, in reality they appear to serve the purpose of alleviating the fear experienced by any person who confronts the chaos of the "disenchanted" world. The only way to escape the abhorrence of vacuum is to act.

In a World of Chaos

Enio's transformation – a kind of anti-baptism or rite of passage into a life lived according to the rules of practical reason – is expressed in the novel by means of an aquatic metaphor which activates

a completely new system of associations, differing from the construction metaphors that predominate in western philosophy: metaphors of buildings, secure foundations, keystones and cornerstones [...]. This produces a different interpretation of certitude, based not so much on a sense of firm ground and secure foundations, but rather trusting sense of participation, a sense of harmony with universal nature without the need of articulating the "principle" of that harmony either to oneself or to others [Bielik-Robson 2000: 154].

The stream in which the character indulges in the "pagan" joy of fishing, ostensibly out of love for his brothers, becomes a place where he can experience his rebirth into life in its Dionysian form. The stream witnesses the birth of his love and desire; it is by the stream that Enio abandons his monk's habit – "putting off the old man with his deeds," to use biblical parlance – and puts on the pagan clothes and throws himself into a whirl of activity aimed purely at satisfying hedonic impulses. With that single gesture, the ascetic priest becomes transformed into a Dionysus whose Nietzschean will to life makes him resistant to all indoctrination. The first ideological offering that he has to face is a degenerate form of Bogomilism distorted by Messalian influences, professed by the *sabotnik* sect in the novel. And although he is willing to assist them with his writings

so that he can follow Arma, whom he desires, he remains consistently skeptical of their doctrines. Accustomed to intellectual sophistication, he is contemptuous of the primitive reasoning of the sectarians, even if he finds their “vulgar anthropology” partially convincing in that it frees people from responsibility for evil by positing a world based not so much on a lofty, cosmic struggle of Good and Evil, but rather the product of two vain deities competing for human souls:

God and Satan were brothers, but Satan, with his brother's consent, abandoned the highest heavens and created the corporeal world, so that each of them could reign in his world. Then he said to God, “Let us make our likenesses to see which of us will be revered more.” And they created Adam and Eve. However, neither Adam nor Eve could distinguish Satan from God. Having realised this, the devil planted the tree of wisdom and tempted them to eat from it. This is when memory and knowledge were born in people, so everyone began to live with two sides – one for God and the other for his brother... [...] We perceive Him [Christ – G.S.G.] as a messenger from the higher world to draw souls towards God. The two are fighting for our souls, so that each has more of us on his side; this is why our souls are in torment [Станев 1982а: 256–257].

Wishing to live outside of good and evil, Stanev's character wants to create and establish his own moral norms and values. Having to contend with an infinitely diverse world that calls for adaptation, Enio accepts the survival instinct as the only certitude, and chooses to follow nothing but his own reason, subordinated to the interests of practical intelligence, whose essence is nothing but “joining the endless rush of the universe, entering the river of being and remaining in it, free submission to the current” [Bielik-Robson 2000: 154]. In betraying transcendence, however, Enio becomes a slave of a world of chaos and savagery, an experience which in turn awakens his own savagery and explodes the limits of his “moral horizon.” After committing the original sin of desire for knowledge and hence for equality with God, Enio almost unthinkingly goes with the flow of life, sinking into a series of sins, including unbridled sexuality, crime and duplicity. In the context of a fragmented social reality, Stanev's subject is trying to survive in a world with no stable reference points. Condemned to live a life apart, the character survives in the biological sense, but he disintegrates as a *homo ethicus*. His betrayal of the metaphysical longing turns him into a one-dimensional thing, flailing among the ultimately pointless efforts at self-affirmation, where a moral nadir coincides with an idolatrous temptation of self-worship:

You are the God you are seeking. Did you not understand that there is no law to protect you from the evil inside you other than your will, other than

the law you alone can impose on yourself? The saint and the slayer, the upper world and hell are inside you. [...] Sit on your throne, crown yourself with your glory!... Halleluiah, believe and glorify only your god that has no name or church [Станев 1982а: 288].

At the same time, Enio is aware of the mechanisms that lead to self-deification, which came into play when search for God is guided by subjectivity unchecked by a higher spiritual authority. Still, he values individualism and contempt of dogma so highly that he is prepared to violate the rules of practical intelligence, and to devote himself to “missionary” work by propagating heretical ideas merely for the joy of destroying the Christian tradition.

The Ideologue

Following the anti-heresy council of Tarnovo (where Enio is tried for heresy and mutilated), Enio redoubles his efforts in the struggle against the Orthodox Church, motivated by a sense of injury and hurt pride; he praises individual rebellion and hatred against oppressive institutions, and defends human subjectivity, a fully autonomous and self-assured “inner spark” that demonstrates human greatness and originality. In the intellectual categories of the period he becomes a man of sin who, Antichrist-like, interacts with people only in order to corrupt them. But even he is startled by the ease with which crowds of believers submit to his influence:

And I was mulling over the Bulgarian mind that believes in no idols, respects no laws, plays tricks with good and evil, and is a slave to the cruel earthly truth. We have separated the sky from the earth, truth from justice; we treat God like a brat; everyone is self-willed and too clever by half, and abuses of freedom get more respect than holy icons [Станев 1982а: 305].

Paradoxically, however, by spending time with people Enio is able to move away from the gaping void of his own soul, and feels some stirrings of altruism that lead him to act in contrast to his egotistic impulses. This process of inner change is accelerated by the Ottoman invasion of Bulgaria. The suffering of the people at the hands of the invaders, and the total abandonment of the Bulgarians by the outside world, combine to produce a gradation of evil so acute as to be unbearable even to a determined atheist who is indifferent to the fate of others. This ability to sympathise with the pain of others comes from shared experience. To Enio, this has nothing to do with a return to the Christian system of values. Rather, we are dealing with an actualisation of Schopenhauer’s understanding of compassion as a sudden and sporadic realisation that

everything in the outside world is experiencing the same kind of pain and anguish [see Safranski 1999: 75]. This compassion cements an areligious understanding of community based on a supra-individual experience of the human condition, built on the foundation of a shared experience of historical fate.

However, Stanev eliminates the universal dimension of this category, and makes his character the mouthpiece of an ethnocentric projection, a mechanism known since the age of Enlightenment. In Enio's case, the mystical union of compassion is only limited to a solidarity with the inhabitants of the same culture and ethnos, symbolically illustrated by the image of a holiday procession formed by the inhabitants of Tarnovo during a Turkish siege:

In polyphonic praise, they raised sweet memories of peaceful days, Christian joys soared high to the heavens, as if very heavens had swung their gates open. [...] A solemn sound of ardent and mournful prayer echoed above Turnovgrad, as if all the power of the Christian God had been summoned to demonstrate its invincibility to the barbarians. [...] Processions weaved around the churches on Trapezitsa and Tsarevgrad, convicts walked with Easter candles in their hands [Станев 1982a: 315].

What lies at the heart of Enio's new identity is a sense of unity with the "community of victims" and the patriotism it produces, which "is or was a virtue founded on attachment primarily to a political and moral community" [MacIntyre 2007: 254]. Enio's patriotism will be a virtue based on overcoming this understanding of tradition in the name of revolt against the decrees of fate and its powers. In the novel, this problem becomes focalised on the conflict between Enio and Patriarch Euthymius, who imposes a medieval interpretation on history, based on categories of guilt and punishment, treating the misfortunes experienced by the Bulgarians as a God-given opportunity for spiritual renewal. By contrast, Enio regards Bulgaria's collapse as a consequence of the sterility of a society so burned out by religious conflict that it has lost the will to survive as a community. Feeling complicit, Enio is prepared to accept part of the responsibility, as long as Euthymius does the same:

"Here, Father," I said, "the tsars and the boyars have abandoned us. God wanted death, Satan has deceived us. You with your Heavenly Jerusalem, I with my rejection of it, we have played our part in the enslavement of the Bulgarian land. Who is it that will pass judgment on us?" [Станев 1982a: 326]

By placing the Christian and Gnostic traditions at the same end of the moral scales, Enio excludes both of them from the sphere of tradition understood as a positive value. At the same time, he makes a final attempt

to fight for the right of selective inheritance. This struggle takes the form of a debate with Euthymius, hoping to win the Patriarch’s blessing for Enio’s future actions as an avenger of wrongs. With that blessing, Enio could feel assurance that, even though he is acting in violation of Christian morality, he still remained “in the house of the Father,” his actions receiving sacred sanction:

I asked you to bless my future actions. You asked me what they would be, and I confessed that I would gather up the slaves in vengeance for a struggle against the oppressor; I will respond with to violence with violence, to might with might, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, since the sinful earth knows no other laws. [...] Do not refuse your blessing [Станев 1982a: 326].

Euthymius refuses: to him, blessing violence would amount to a betrayal of the idea of mercy and Christian universalism in the narrow, partisan interest of ethnic particularism [Станев 1982a: 326].

The novel’s struggle between Enio and Euthymius is reminiscent of Bloom’s *agon*, prefigured by the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with an angel [Bloom 1997]. However, Stanev’s character chooses a strategy of inheritance which essentially amounts to a resistance to ancestral influence, performing the “rapid, impatient labor of the Negative” that Harold Bloom associated with *gnosis* [Bloom 1982: 60]. He departs unblessed, because the blessing he seeks cannot be granted in conflict with the tradition. Euthymius’ refusal is a kind of alibi, which helps him to obscure the existence of a historical precursor, and affords him the satisfaction he derives from destroying inheritance, and from the sin of arbitrariness.

Farewell, Turnovian saint! With you, an unrealisable world is leaving, with you as its last high priest. The blessing was replaced with the Antichrist roaming the Bulgarian lands. [...] You were a light for the nation, blazing bright before it unhappily went out and, like any light, it was magnificently deceptive!... I ask myself: what would have happened on in Bulgarian lands after the demonic healing, if only the kin of Ismail had not come? Wouldn’t Satan walk freely, unopposed by God [Станев 1982a: 327]?

Enio’s strategy involves discarding the past is a moribund state of collapse and illusion, a “falling away from completeness.” His freedom of self-realisation is based on the self-assurance of a strong subject which sees himself as the sole source of agency, free from the pressures of accumulated tradition. Ultimately, Enio’s spiritual struggle degenerates into the pride of *gnosis* with its false concept of self-determination. At the end of the day, the freedom to reject tradition in favour of innovation

is an illusion, delimited by the double resentment of a hurt individual, a priest who has “fallen away from transcendence” and a warrior/avenger with no hope of victory. For those two reasons Stanev’s hero is doomed to terrifying alienation, worse than that experienced by Christ dying on the cross:

I see a flying bird. Whither are you flying, o bird? An animal is running through the forest. Whither are you hurrying, o animal? Who is calling you, who is leading you, and where to? And where are you going, o man?... It says in the Gospel, they shall see Him whom they pierced, but who will see me, a dishonoured Bulgarian [Станев 1982a: 330]?

Having lost the empirical basis for an attitude of trust in the world, the hero comes to regard himself in tragic terms, his fate a drama of liberty. The affirmation of vengeance on the mediators of history which motivates the Warrior cannot obscure the longing for transcendence in a man deprived of faith in either the redemptive power of Christ or the inherited forms of gnosis. Enio’s pessimism is heightened by the experience of inescapable evil, which is part of the world order, and which is likewise present in man. The Judaeo-Christian anthropology makes man responsible for the evil internalised in himself, but also provides people with a perspective of salvation – thanks to the law and the merciful Saviour. Gnosis (in all its forms) frees man from responsibility for evil, and provides people with the knowledge necessary to liberate the soul from the prison of matter. In Enio’s mind, both of those life-giving structures – the Adamic myth and the idea of the exiled soul – crumble and disintegrate [Ricoeur 1972: 232–305]. The only thing left is the melancholy experienced by a subject tormented by a sense of complete triumph of evil, with no hope of changing the world. To choose this option, representing the power of analogy and simplification, is an updated variant of the Manichaean outlook. This option negates the essence of the linear culture: the chance of producing a better world. In so doing, it openly undermines the Judaeo-Christian faith in history as an area of divine Providence. Stanev’s avenger, shown as a prototypical hayduk, appears to be a figure of despair dressed in the homespun costume of the national heroic myth [Dąbek-Wirgowa 1989].

Emilian Stanev has on numerous occasions dismissed the meta-physical reading of his text, preferring to point out to critics and general readers the pragmatic benefits of a deeper reflection on the vicissitudes of the country’s history. His last words, recorded in a diary entry dated 20 February 1979, show how seriously he treated the reception of his historical novels:

The many layers of my books, in particular in *Sibin* and in *The Antichrist*, are a polyphony of the Bulgarian mind and spirituality – a “philosophising” per se... The critics usually interpret this polyphony in the same way, as praise. Sibin: the proto-Bulgarian, the state-builder; Sylvester, Tikhik, Kalomela: Slavic intellectual decadence, tragedy. Teofil, who lost his faith – a tragedy, he had mutilated himself. There is only one spiritual peak in *The Antichrist*: Euthymius. I did not write this book to philosophise on the age-old questions, but to show some specific Bulgarian qualities as I see and understand them in the philosophy of our history. When are we finally going to learn to evaluate our spiritual values not from some remote philosophical and ideological perspective, but from the point of view of the interests of Bulgaria and of our state [Станева 1983: 133]?

As he castigates those of his readers who are willing to go too far in overinterpreting and mythologizing his texts, Stanev conceals his pessimistic message under a mask of a pragmatic patriot who has his nation's future at heart. By laying bare – with Petar Mutafchiyev⁴⁷ – the roots of Bulgarian nihilism, which he believed were embedded in religion and gnosis, Stanev formulates a negative appraisal of the role played by Byzantine Christianity, blaming the Orthodox Church for destroying the might of the first Bulgarian state:

The most momentous mistake of Boris I was his choice of Byzantine Orthodoxy, and along with it – of Byzantine heresies. [...] The first Bulgarian empire could not be wiped out on the battlefields, but it was destroyed by the Orthodox owls, the black Byzantine crows. [...] Whoever doesn't understand that, understands nothing about Bulgarian history and Bulgaria's destiny. I cannot read with composure about the defenders of Orthodoxy, I am astonished by their blindness... But wasn't our liberator Orthodox either, and didn't it try to fulfil its messianic role through Orthodoxy and Slavophilia [Станева 1983: 134].

In this interpretation, Bogomilism emerges as an expression of the social resentments of the period:

I'm surprised by your interpretation of my attitude toward Bogomilism and by your accusation that I show a personal preference for this doctrine. I have never regarded Bogomilism as anything constructive, but only as a natural and easily understandable rebellion against the Byzantine Orthodox Church, to which our nation has paid such an enormous tribute, greater than nation's tribute to Catholicism.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ See pp. 57–58.

⁴⁸ This is a passage from a letter of Emilian Stanev to Archbishop Nikolai Makariopolski dated 20 June 1971; cited in Станева 1983: 152.

This shows that Stanev's debate with Bogomilism in the historiographic layer of his texts is merely an element of a broader polemic with the tradition of Eastern Christianity, considered by Stanev to be the most notable destructive force in the history of the Bulgarian state. In this sense Stanev plays along with the expectations of the normative Bulgarian literary criticism of the Communist period, which was ideologically opposed to Christianity. At the same time, he comes across as a continuator of the ideas that came to the fore in Bulgarian interwar writings fascinated with paganism.

At the same time, Emilian Stanev argues that the disintegration of traditional religious norms caused by conflicts between rival ideological outlooks in the Middle Ages produced in Bulgaria a premature "disenchantment of the world." This experience of the Negative gave birth to an emancipated altruism based on subjective whim, which in Stanev's view bears the demonic mark of the Nietzschean Antichrist. To Stanev, the compassionate Antichrist who troubles the collective imagination during historical turning points becomes a prefiguration of the modern man who rejects all ideological systems, but ultimately – when faced with the slings and arrows dealt out to individuals by capricious fortune – accepts gnosis as a kind of emergency exit to alleviate the fear of chaos. God is dead, and the world of ideas and ideals died along with him. God's death means not only a devaluation of the highest values, but also a loss of the very possibility of universally valid values. Accordingly, Bulgarians opt for a strategy of alienation from the cultures and ideologies that have been imposed on them, favouring instead solidarity with the community of sufferers. In a world that objectifies people, this amounts to a dramatic defence of human subjectivity. The choice comes at the price of individualism and alienation, which are a fundamental part of the Bulgarian myth of isolation.

4

TRANSPOSITIONS OF BOGOMILISM IN NEW AGE AND POSTMODERNIST LITERATURE

Following the collapse of Communism in Bulgaria in 1989, the long-awaited removal of ideological constraints and censorship mechanisms did not immediately produce notable works of literature. The drawers of most writers endorsed by the Communist state were empty, and other writers were only just learning to speak openly without having to rely on carefully coded Aesopian language before they could put the historical record straight and hold the Communist regime to account. As a result, the fall of Zhivkov was followed by a massive surge of journalism, with memoirs and non-fiction dominating book sales. This interest in the country's past was accompanied by an openness to Western culture and to other, previously less familiar, cultures of other members of the former Eastern Bloc (mainly Russia, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic). The situation in the 1990s was in many ways similar to that of the 1890s, a period of unending debates on the preferred nature of the Bulgarian national spirit in the context of the country's opening up to Western influence.

Following the country's democratic transition, Bulgarian culture was marked by an increased need for self-reflection and for a reinvention of the nation's past based on a more complete version of its historical and cultural tradition, free from the truncations imposed by a restrictive political system. "Who are we as a nation?" "What are our goals after all those years of spiritual enslavement?" Those were the questions being

tackled by historians, literary critics, anthropologists and philosophers, some of whom looked to the past for inspiration.¹ But the most heated debates were taking place away from academia, unconstrained by principles of scholarly discourse: in the arenas of journalism and literature, where writers were free to shuffle various ready-made formulas of national mythology with all its associated emotional baggage. Freed from the rigours of academic debate, such exercises were naturally prone to intellectual abuse, but readers tended to favour their satisfying compensatory formulas, which alleviated the stress of the democratic transition and court the imagination by reviving familiar (though often fossilised) mythologems of collective Bulgarian mentality.

Again, those new recapitulations of Bogomilism reflect the ideologies of the writers. This time the point of reference in the Bulgarian intra-cultural discourse is the “global village” with its post-modern obsessions. Bulgarian culture was able to find its own dilemmas and frustrations in the tensions felt in modern Western culture marked by cultural relativism on the one hand, and attempts to resacralise the cosmos on the other.

The transformation first affected school textbooks, which were expected to present a vision of Bulgarian history that was ideologically compatible with a country in democratic transition. Although textbook writers revised their texts to update their portrayals of the past (some with more effort and care than others), their interpretations of Bogomilism remained largely unchanged. Despite a general toning down of former Marxist simplifications, the social dimension of the movement continues to be portrayed as an important element and a decisive aspect of the progressive nature of Bogomilism. In a 2000 Gyuzelev’s textbook the section on Bogomilism closes with an approving quotation from D. Angelov, an eminent Marxist expert on Bogomilism, arguing that Bulgarians should view the movement with pride since it inspired many ideological developments in medieval Europe [Гюзелев (ed.) 2000: 70–73]. At the same time, the view that the Bogomils could have been opposed to the state is emphatically dismissed on principle, and instead it is argued that the movement’s line on the state was not uniform, and changed depending on political circumstances. Delev’s or Lazarov’s textbooks portray Bogomilism in terms of a return to the traditions of early Christianity. Both authors highlight the movement’s contributions to European culture, notably to the Renaissance and the Reformation, but they are critical of its destructive impact on the country’s internal situation [Азаров et al. 1998: 99–102; Делев et al. 1996: 117–121].

¹ See the anthology *Защо сме такива?* [Еленков, Даскалов (eds.) 1994].

The textbooks explain that Bogomilism helped shape Bulgaria's image in the Catholic countries as a "homeland of heretics," an appellation they cite approvingly. Alexander Fol [Фол et al. 1996: 114–118], an eminent authority on Thracian studies already during the Zhivkov regime, has come up with similar interpretations.

Those textbook interpretations of Bogomilism are therefore still strikingly close to their pre-existing models. Presumably, this is largely to do with the fact that their authors were educated and received their ideological formation under the Communist regime. The remarkable flexibility of Bogomilism as a *lieu de memoire* within Bulgarian collective mentality probably plays an important role as well. Through its associations with the idea of progress, the movement again proves useful to the ideologues of Bulgaria's most recent modernisation project.

A New Turn Towards the Utopia of Progress

Published in 1997 by Sofia University Press, Boyan Obretenov's *Пред прага на Месията. Записки за разпънатата българска душа 1995–1996* (*Before the Messiah's Threshold. Notes on the Crucified Bulgarian Soul, 1995–1996*) is an example of a dramatic engagement with the Communist past. Tsveta Trifonova, who reviewed it at length in *Литературен форум* [Трифоновна 1997: 2], described it as a crucial settling of accounts in Bulgarian culture, whose impact consists in standing up for truth about the nation even at its most painful: truth which emerges through a synthesis of "spiritual experience of the whole nation," which is quite different from the "mystified, sanctified and beautified" vision of the nation's past. Trifonova believes that the tenor and significance of Obretenov's work are boosted by its prophetic accents, and its prophecies about Bulgaria's future (with their Messianic undertones) correspond with calls for a national moral revival.

Given the book's critical acclaim, further boosted by the stature of its publisher, Obretenov's book deserves a closer look. The preface states:

The book is an attempt to portray the spiritual and moral state of the Bulgarian nation in one of the most critical moments of its history - when it was torn between the thoughtless choice of the doomed past, made in December 1994,² and the realisation of the genuine path to its future in early 1997.³ Bulgaria

² A reference to the democratic parliamentary election won by the post-Communist left.

³ In 1997, a parliamentary election was held in Bulgaria, won by a coalition of parties called the Democratic Alternative, led by the Union of Democratic Forces, originally formed by political opponents of Bulgaria's Communist government.

paid with suffering for this understanding and its right to make a new choice. The book was written between the years of pessimism and the years of hope, between despair and a faith in some kind of enduring Bulgarian moral, spiritual, mental strengths and virtues that can redeem them. The book is not a collection of essays or articles; it is more like a poem than a research essay.

Each part of the book reads like a song or psalm of the raptures and misfortunes of Bulgarians in the long and continuing search for their true homeland [Обретенев 1997: 2].

This unambiguously places Obretenov’s book within a certain political context, suggesting that it should be interpreted as a reaction to the social ills of 1995–1996, a period when the author believes Bulgaria’s left-wing government led the country into a political and economic crisis, leading in turn to a crisis of spiritual values, an interpretation validated by the book’s subtitle. This turns the book into an exercise in settling political accounts, which in the world of binary political oppositions translates to an orientation towards Western values as the “the true path to the future.”

However, Obretenov’s book speaks only partially and obliquely to the demands of topical political propaganda. It revives the old myths in an attempt to find a “third way” for the Bulgarian nation, based not on the generally recognised universals (exploited in culture to within an inch of their life), but rather on a specially reinvented variant of Bulgarian cultural tradition – “folklore and heresy understood as a specifically Bulgarian principle of thinking.”

The book has four chapters, entitled *Верую (Credo)*, *Апокалунсис (Apocalypse)*, *Месия (Messiah)*, and *2013*. The titles convey a sense of connection with the sacred, but this biblical styling is merely a form of packaging for reflections on the nation’s future coming from a “heretic” unconstrained by intellectual dogma. The book was intended to be a kind of new Bulgarian apocrypha expressing rebellion against the religious and cultural tradition: a voice speaking out against all official visions of the world’s (or the nation’s) past and future, doctored and exploited by the state, which Bulgarians have detested since the times of Bogomilism. But in fact this card-carrying nonconformist merely manipulates popular Bulgarian opinion rather than move beyond its limits. Obretenov is trying to turn an assemblage of anachronistic and internally contradictory comments typical of popular opinion and common-sense thinking⁴ into a polished collective self-portrait, a vision of “us, Bulgarians” created as a myth-making exercise.

⁴ For more information on that category, see Hołówka 1986.

Boyan Obretenov's essay evokes the full set of complexes of the Bulgarian national culture – its inferiority and superiority complexes and its myths of the golden age and of isolation. It castigates and endorses in equal measure, always remaining faithful to the local Bulgarian tradition. One particularly notable element in that tradition is the myth of Bulgarian isolation, which engendered a series of derivative myths including its isolationism, conservatism, and a fascination with Bulgarian folk culture regarded as a treasure trove of national values. This myth of isolation is the first impulse triggering Obretenov's religious defiance: because they have no faith in divine providence, the Bulgarians must suffer even more than the Israelites in their wanderings in the wilderness, because Bulgarian anguish is heightened by the loneliness and isolation of a people ignored by an indifferent god. This deeply pessimistic vision of a people forgotten by its maker and abandoned by the family of the Christian nations is developed further in the chapter *Верую*:

When a Pole is born, the Catholic world sighs a happy sigh – another soul has joined its spiritual and cultural domain. When a Greek is born, the pleased Orthodox clergy light a candle – a new fighter has joined the thinning ranks. When a Turk is born, Mohammed claps his hands and Allah triumphs. When a Bulgarian is born, God and the saints, and their earthly deputies remain indifferent. We belong to no-one [Обретенков 1997: 9].

This image is an updated interpretation of the resentful mythologems from the period of national revival. Obretenov is invoking a triad that was created by Paisius and sanctioned by tradition, where the Latins, the Orthodox Greeks and the Muslim Turks are direct enemies of the Bulgarians, posing a threat to their physical survival (Turks) and spiritual life (the Greeks and Latins). As noted by Teresa Dąbek-Wirgowa [1986], the category of otherness during the period of Bulgarian revival encompassed all non-Bulgarians, including Orthodox Christian Greeks and Slavs (suffice it to mention Paisius's hostile comments about the Serbs). The cult of the patriarchal tradition, which is already present in the writings of Paisius, viewed that tradition as the only reliable defence of Bulgarian identity. The Bulgarians were presented as simple yet noble folk – unlearned perhaps, but highly moral and devout.

Two centuries after Paisius, and one hundred years after Bulgaria's independence, Obretenov turns to the *Slavo-Bulgarian History* for inspiration in reflection on the current state of Bulgarian culture and spirit. In his vision, the myth of Bulgarian isolation becomes intensified, and gets projected onto the eschatological plane.

According to Obretenov, the Bulgarians (in the sense of a tribal community) became tragically separated from the family of Christian nations. This makes Bulgaria an outsider in that community, cut off from its associated duties and privileges. A closer look at Obretenov’s triad, which defines Bulgarian identity in terms of negation (I – not a Turk – not a Greek – not a Catholic) reveals that the problem looming large at the centre of his argument is not so much national identity in the a sense of belonging to a broader, supranational cultural community. By foregrounding local specificity, Obretenov places the Bulgarians outside of the three cultural realms – Latin, Muslim and (particularly surprisingly) Orthodox Christian. If we were to accept for a minute Huntington’s controversial model [Huntington 1996] where the world is a stage for a rivalry between powerful civilisations, this would put Bulgaria (a kind of borderland between civilisations) in the position of an enclave of all that which is local, familiar and recognisable: a museum of peculiar memorabilia rather than an area of cultural syncretism.⁵

According to Obretenov, the willing and self-imposed Bulgarian isolation was accelerated by a series of adverse historical events coupled with the inherent Bulgarian pagan spirit and a general attitude of revolt against all dogma, which he argues is a characteristic element of Bulgarian mentality. The moral bankruptcy of the Orthodox Church and the emergence of the Bogomil heresy with its pessimistic Manichaean undertones in the Middle Ages produced attitudes of extreme disillusionment and scepticism which would become a feature of Bulgarian culture.

This idea is by no means new in Bulgarian culture; similar notions were floated in the literature, historiography and philosophy of the interwar period, most notably in Petar Mutafchiyev’s essay *Priest Bogomil and St. Ivan of Rila. The Spirit of Negation in Our History*, which I discussed in Chapter 1.⁶ Obretenov’s reaction to this text is inconsistent, and his

⁵ In the interwar period this was regarded as an opportunity for Bulgarian culture by Yanko Yanev, an enthusiastic promoter of Nietzsche in Bulgaria, who faced accusations of fascist sympathies after the war. Yanev emphasised the unique nature of the Bulgarian mission as a bridge between the East and the West:

“[...] standing between two worlds, we cannot expect help neither from the Slavic East nor from the societies of the tired Western nations. Only one path remains – the path leading to ourselves [...] In its essence, the Bulgarian spirit is pagan and in this sense it is a synthesis of the Western and Slavic principles, of law and anarchy, of knowledge and intuition. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to any category of historical and philosophical thinking – neither of the Germanic or the northern Gothic culture, nor of the culture of the Romans and the classical mentality. It is something more than those two, because it contains them in a bud that will sooner or later open and bear fruit. All the strength of our Revival is hidden in this great synthesis” [Янев 1994: 341].

⁶ See pp. 57–58.

evaluation of Bogomilism's impact on the Bulgarians is similarly ambivalent. Like Naiden Sheytanov, he thinks in terms of "tribal" identities: he emphasises the long-lasting positive influence of Bogomil "free thought" on the Bulgarian "tribe," including its principled rejection of all dogma. Thus, to Obretenov (who is apparently fascinated by Sheytanov's idea) the future holy scriptures of the Bulgarian nation should not include the Bible, but rather folklore (as the source of moral teachings) and *Български апокрифен летопис* (as the source of national mythology).⁷

This exercise in national myth-making is an attempt, as transparent as it is desperate, to find a way of unlocking not so much the nation's past as its future: an attempt to integrate the nation on the basis of the only certain value, namely "heretical thinking." For this purpose Obretenov undertakes to reappraise the Bulgarian tradition, and calls for a wholesale rejection of the nation's past. The fanatical determination which marks his stance on history and the nation is indented to illustrate the intellectual courage and ethical integrity of the freethinker.

And so, for instance, his attempt to debunk the idealised picture of his own nation involves a savage attack on the Bulgarian flaws and shortcomings in the chapter *Апокалипсис*. He castigates the Bulgarian "national nihilism" in all its disguises – the betrayal of the best sons of the nation, known as the Apostles since the revival period; the death of words; the servility and sycophancy of the eternal slaves, descendants of Abel; the betrayal of the agricultural tradition, the greedy pursuit of money, and the betrayal of spiritual values in favour of biological survival. In doing so, Obretenov's criticisms hark back to the revivalist tradition of Bulgarian self-flagellation.⁸

Although the disease of the Bulgarian soul is to some extent conditioned by the long centuries of foreign rule, to Obretenov the starting point of the "Apocalypse" coincided with the lost Balkan war of 1913. In common

⁷ This text, composed during the period of Byzantine rule (1018–1287) and having minimal documentary value, is a compilation of apocrypha, legends and chronicles to portray an idealised picture of a Bulgarian future as a land of peace and plenty; see *Български апокрифен летопис* 1981.

⁸ This chapter brings to mind the revivalist tradition of lamentations about the moral bankruptcy of the Bulgarian nation, which is indifferent to the fate of its country. However, when the Bulgarian priest Neofit Bozveli wrote his dialogues (modelled on Serbian examples), including his best known *Мати България*, his writings were securely anchored in the Christian moral code. Filled with pathos and ornate phrasing, the words of the suffering Mother(-land) in Bozveli's writings were intended to move Bulgarian hearts and to encourage them to work for the country with God, and not (as is the case with Obretenov) against God.

with Vazov (in his chauvinistic period),⁹ Obretenov regards this national catastrophe as the root cause of Bulgarian moral decay [Обретенков 1997: 17].

In the Communist period, this decay spread in a very dangerous manner. Obretenov illustrates this vanishing of the ethical instinct in the Bulgarian population in a tone informed by the apocalyptic fears of the late twentieth century:

Everything around us is screaming that the hour of truth is coming. The earth has dried up and killed the seed inside. The rivers are drowning in poison. The cities are breathing without lungs. The cattle are dying. The women have locked their wombs. Babies are crying in dustbins. Drugs are flowing in children's veins. The tribe's daughters have become a living export commodity. Life, love and death are money. Money is life, love and death. Foreigners take possession of the bodies, hearts and minds of Bulgarians. The language is becoming anaemic. The memory is getting lost. The poets are dying of alcohol and hunger, or they become traders. The priests are pulling out their beards. And a brother is again killing his brother for a bowl of lentil stew [Обретенков 1997: 16].

This period of chaos, described in terms tailored to the expectations of consumers of mass culture [Eco 2015], comes before an anticipated national revival. Obretenov's ideas have all the characteristics of compensatory myth-making. This is a scheme deeply rooted in the Bulgarian conservative tradition: forsaken by God and abandoned by the world, the nation must find revival by reanimating the patriarchal tradition. Waiting to be discovered deep within the treasure trove of the nation's ethical character are such hidden gems as tenacity and perseverance, a skeptical attitude towards ideology and religion, intellectual independence, industriousness, readiness to share, love of learning, and patriarchal family relationships. Given the isolation of the Bulgarians, the only hope for the future lies in a return to the sources – a revival of the Bulgarian golden age. By discarding the negative heritage of the past and the limitations of modernity, the Bulgarians can find rich deposits of highest moral values and discover their inner *homo ethicus*.

Similar ideas were developed by Toncho Zhechev;¹⁰ in the interwar period they gained great popularity in expressionist literature and among

⁹ Meaning Vazov's poetry written after Bulgaria's defeat in the Second Balkan War and after World War I.

¹⁰ “The Christian coating on our age-old pagan barbarism, which was thin to begin with, has suffered a terrible blow [...] The traditional structures that supported our society and nation got demolished, without any more efficient and better ones being constructed in their place. Everything from head to foot was nationalised. [...] The more features from our patriarchal tradition the model for our future gathers on a contemporary basis, the more attractive, vital, enduring, original it will be” [Жечев 1995: 64].

the so-called “September poets.”¹¹ Reflection on the national character and the philosophy of Bulgarian history in that period recognisably echoes elements of modernist thought [Dąbek-Wirgowa 1973: 61] and Vazov’s traditionalism. Regardless of artistic approach or ideological stripe, Bulgarian writers agreed on one thing: the strength of the patriarchal tradition was unquestioned and inviolable:

On the road of the widespread regression, against what firm support can we steady ourselves, from what point can our development start anew? We do not have a living historical tradition, nor enough scientific or technical means to quickly adapt to a new historical reality; [...] The only reliable mainstay to which our nation has always resorted whenever the living conditions have threatened its existence is our way of life. The way of life and then the land. We have no refuge that is more enduring, more conservative, and therefore more secure. [...] Of course, this return to the traditional way of life should not amount to any kind of barbarisation of the nation, or the loss of that level of national and historical awareness to which we have come, especially after the efforts and disasters of the wars [Казанджиев 1932: 36–37].

With the hindsight provided by the experience of Communism, today this voice of reason coming from the pre-war period sounds both refreshing and anachronistic. We have found ourselves at the receiving end of not just artistic fascinations with the barbarians [Sujecka 1996: 58–82], but an actual attempt to create a real-life communist utopia. The memory of the wrongs and grievances caused by Communist “culture-making” in the not so distant past clouds our memory of that system’s cultural activity, which was genuine despite the fact that it was parasitically feeding on the human desire for peace and prosperity. Illogical as this might appear, the utopian faith in a paradise on earth (seeded by Communism, but ultimately inspired by the Enlightenment) retains its hold on the imagination. This is apparent in the current revival of the mirages of harmonious, happy man-made worlds. This makes it easy to surrender to the temptation of *imitatio Dei* and claim the status of a chosen redeemer (self-appointed or made by others, as was the case with Robespierre and Napoleon).

Unable to do without myth, each new period deludes itself that history and myth can overlap, and returns to the archetypal image of Hero – God – Savior – Man who can change the world. In southern Slav cultures, the myth of the Slavic saviour of Europe (the Balkan Barbarogenius, a figure guided by primeval spontaneity, who can bring moral renewal to the degenerate, rationalistic Europe) attained a special position in Serbian culture

¹¹ This term referred to a generation of avant-garde writers involved in the political events of 1923. Those ideas in the interwar period were studied by Jolanta Sujecka [1996].

[Константиновић 1969]. In Bulgarian culture this myth never crystallised into a comparably distinct form, even though echoes of messianic thinking projected onto the Bulgarian past are discernible in the mythological constructs of Georgi S. Rakovski and Pencho Slaveikov, in the poetry of the inter-war left or – in later years – in the various interpretations of the Bulgarian medieval heritage and its place within European culture.¹² At bottom, this offer of self-redemption is ultimately magical: it is a vision where God, man and the creation are all treated as a beam of energies and forces obedient to our magic spells. Despite the comprehensive failure of Communism, we still see an idolatrous approach to politics predicated on the hope that a new Prometheus will emerge and provide mankind with instruments of redemption – even if done in defiance of the gods, at the cost of damaging the sphere of the sacred.

Obretenov implores:

Let’s slough off the skin of fear and reflex servility, betrayal, inferiority complexes, timidity and hunger instincts. Then we will see our only saviour – he has eight million faces and eight million names. [...] This ancient blood of ours has everything we need. We just have to learn to listen to its voice again. It will lead us to redemption. Christ can get some rest [Обретенев 1997: 41].

Obretenov inherits the eschatological outlook of Communism, however his vision is a *reductio ad absurdum*. Communism as a quasi-religious movement (i.e. an ideological expression of the need for genuine redemption) promised to redeem the world in a way that was not unlike the various forms of Slavic messianism discussed before. By way of contrast, Obretenov’s Bulgarian Messiah has no sense of a larger mission: he poses no threat to anyone, and nobody needs his suffering, he’s a Messiah who redeems no one but himself. His mission is merely to survive. This turns him into an empty rhetorical trope based on typological abuse. Denuded of its Promethean and Christological garb, Obretenov’s quasi-messianism boils down to a deification of the simple man, and a philosophy of biological survival characteristic of peasant culture, with the new barbarian as a future incarnation of the simple man.

In the chapter 2013 (a date that marks the centenary of the lost Second Balkan War), Obretenov outlines a prophetic vision of the future of the Bulgarian nation as it achieves maturity after a hundred years of spiritual purgatory:

Bulgaria would be saved only if the men of 2013 decide to give themselves to her, to give her their Selves – different, unknown, unattainable to us. They will be wild and strong as the first humans, and out of themselves they will

¹² Among other things, this found expression in the famous speech by Georgi Dimitrov during the trial that followed the Reichstag fire (1933).

be able to create a Bulgaria in their likeness: without roots, without a god, but with strong legs and strong arms, a straight spine and a rebellious head. Without dreams, but with a real way of life. Without a sense of grandeur, but with a barn that is filling up little by little. Without flights of imagination, but with the freedom to act. Without friends and enemies, but equally respected by both, friends and enemies.

This country will belong to those who have won, cultivated, and worked out their right and dignity to say: "I am" – alone, naked, fierce and strong. [...] Nobody will bother the Bulgarian god [Обретенев 1997: 78–79].

Obretenov's vision of a happy future is based on the assumption that the historical man must be destroyed in order for the Bulgarian paradise to come true. The idea of a return to the sources is not a reference to actual roots, but rather a jettisoning of any religious outlook:

Neither the baptised, nor the circumcised will be master of the one hundred and eleven thousand square kilometres, only bread. Bread will be the Spirit, the Religion, the Language [Обретенев 1997: 83].

Freed from the burdens of history and culture, reconciled to the commands of reason, loyal to the tribal ties of blood, and living in harmony with nature, the future man will embrace a great heresy – a religion of prosperity portrayed by Obretenov as a utopian future. At bottom, this attempt to get away from nihilism by fashioning it into a positive program of renewal is an imitative, epigone attempt at reembracing the grand narrative, with the nation positioned as its axiological centre. Like its predecessors, this post-Enlightenment vision of a better world draws on the Christian tradition, but it also inverts it. By making man and human needs the measure of all things, it robs mankind of the element of the sacred, leaving mankind just as exposed to the existential terror of the ineffable world as it ever was.

A New Age Version of the Peregrinations of *The Secret Book* in Europe

It appears that *Странният рицар на свещената книга* (*The Strange Knight of the Holy Book*), a historical novel by Anton Donchev [Дончев 2000],¹³ is one attempt to ease and remove this existential tension. It communicates a pacified vision of the world which, though often incomprehensible to the human mind, is nonetheless governed by a transcendental order.

¹³ In 2001, the novel won the Balkanica, an international book award. By the end of 2004, it had been translated and published in eleven countries, see Трендафилов 2004.

Although Donchev is famously adventurous as an explorer of new ground in his historical fiction, a thread of ideological continuity appears to be running through his books, and certain aspects of his earlier work provide insight into the meaning of *The Strange Knight*. As mentioned above, Donchev had written a biography of Nikolai Roerich, *Николай Ръорих. Ярило слънчицето и бога Агни* (*Nikolai Roerich. Yarilo the Sun and God Agni* [Дончев 1979])¹⁴ during the tenure of Lyudmila Zhivkova as the minister of culture, possibly on commission. The biography was popularised at the time of Zhivkova’s attempts to incorporate the Living Ethics into the fabric of Bulgarian society.

His historical novel *Странният рицар на свещената книга* came out at a time marked by a postmodern weariness with ideology; though written in a different historical context, it reaffirms the effectiveness of Donchev’s earlier techniques of persuasion. In this case, he uses historical fiction to communicate modern ideological dilemmas using the conventions of a popular historical novel with fantasy elements. In the specific Bulgarian cultural context, the problems tackled in the book (the connections between medieval Bogomils and Cathars as a pretext for, and vehicle of, veiled neo-gnostic discourse) are well-established in Bulgarian historical memory. Neo-Manichean gnosis continues to function as a cultural *lieu de memoire*, but it also becomes a new form of myth-making in Donchev’s fiction.

In the novel, Donchev sticks to known historical facts about the Bogomil movement, which serve as a background for a story of adventure in which *The Secret Book* of the Bogomils is removed from Veliko Tarnovo to Provence. This is a thesis novel told from a first-person perspective, a narrative device Donchev used with success in his 1960s historical novel *Време разделно* (*Time to Choose* [Дончев 1964]), where he used subjective narrative to create an apparently objective portrayal of the world.¹⁵

In his most recent novel Donchev uses a similar formal device. His narrator is a fictional character. A French knight and former crusader

¹⁴ The book was published by “Народна младеж,” the publishing house of the Central Committee of the Dimitrov Komsomol Union of Youth. It had a second edition in 2002, published by “Zachari Stoianov.” In 1989, it was also published in the volume *Девет лица на човека* [Дончев 1989] as *Хуманиста. Николай Ръорих, 1874–1947 година*.

¹⁵ In that book, the account of Bulgarian martyrdom in a wave of forcible conversions to Islam at Turkish hands is offered by an impartial man of the West, and therefore attains the status of objective historical truth; even though the novel (excellent as it was) in the event served the interests of the anti-Turkish phobias of the Zhivkov period, possibly against the author’s wishes.

involved in the Albigensian Crusade, he is by definition an enemy of heretics. Sent by the pope on a mission to bring *The Secret Book* of the Bogomils to Rome, he experiences a sudden and surprising change of heart. He defects to the Cathars, doomed to be the losing side. This is an updated variant of the classic trope in a thesis novel, where an enemy joins the cause he used to persecute, going all the way back to the conversion of St. Paul.

The next fifteen chapters contain the hero's death row confession, composed over a fifteen-day wait for his execution in Montségur, the last Cathar fortress, as we witness the protagonist's transformation as he willingly embraces martyrdom. This process is illustrated through symbols and narrative events. Those two levels of the novel (one retaining the relationships of causality typical of pragmatic, common sense motivations; the other relating to the non-rational laws of the transcendental world) complement and illustrate each other. The reader is free to choose between those possible modes of interpretation [Głowiński 1977] as the multi-layered message of the novel admits various interpretive norms.

As entertainment, the novel is a cracking, action-packed adventure story that can be read for pure enjoyment. We get swept along its rapid turning points and reversals of fortune as we admire the superman hero who sides with the weak and the oppressed, and we root for him in the romance subplot. In the mimetic mode, we pay attention to historical accuracy and real-world facts and their reflection in popular thinking. In this respect, too, the novel offers a satisfying reading experience, with meticulous descriptions of historical detail and close attention to historical sources.

At the same time, the dichotomies portrayed in the novel reveal the book's anti-Catholic and (to a lesser extent) anti-Orthodox tenor. No positive characters side with the papacy, and the chief persecutor of the Bogomils, a pathologically driven Dominican friar obsessed by sinful passion, comes across as a figure of pure evil. The actions of the Dominican friar and his henchmen illustrate the fundamental tenet of the dualist Bogomil doctrine, which regards the institutional church as a domain of evil. Confronted with the gruesome tortures inflicted on suspected heretics, and the treacheries and cruelties of the authorities, the hero comes to acknowledge the validity of the Manichaean notion of the demonic nature of the world. However, he does not simply embrace any pre-packaged interpretive formula. Although his worldview changes under the obvious influence of the Bogomils, he remains an outsider almost until the end of his life. The knight's delight with the world's physical beauty and his appreciation for the spiritual beauty of the "true Christians" (highlighted in the text through props and attributes that

accompany the Bogomil characters, such as crystals, white doves or the colour white – all symbols of spiritual perfection and divinity) initially make it impossible for the knight to accept the Bogomil teachings as a rational proposition. Almost right until the end he preserves his autonomous status of an outsider, which brings to mind the ambiguous and fluid identity of the post-modern man.

In this sense we are touching on an essential aspect of Donchev’s message – the motivation of Henri vel Boyan of Zemen. Some of his motives are commonsensical and understandable: the hurt ambition of a knight, who wants to get the better of the devious Dominican in their rivalry to accomplish the mission given by the pope; his erotic fascination with a woman; his fascination with the rivalry itself as a kind of game. However, the snatches of the hero’s self-reflection presented in the narrative give us with a glimpse of his realisation that he is becoming a mystery to himself, unable to understand what he regards as alien desires increasingly flooding his mind. The paradigm of a split personality fails to provide a common-sense resolution. Henri is not insane: in the novel, his process of change begins after meeting a condemned man, an Albigenian named Boyan of Zemen.¹⁶

Boyan of Zemen looked at me and saw me.

His face changed. It looked harassed, but there were no wounds or blood on it, and the red glow of the embers gave it a strange strength and vitality. He saw me and recognised me. Or he was astonished, as if he saw himself? I don’t know. The expression on his face and in those eyes, I have’t been able to decipher it for thirty years. [...] God, sometimes I think he found the strength for his self-sacrifice, because he saw me, and he realised that I looked like a brother of his – even a twin. Didn’t he decide that he could go, because I stayed on – the same as him? And with me, he – or a part of him – will live on. If this is so... I really do not know [Дончев 2000: 39–40].

The story expresses the protagonist’s inner gestation, consisting in self-improvement and a growing identification with Bogomilism, through spatial symbolism. The hero is moving along the vertical and horizontal planes, traveling from the West to the East, all the way to Veliko Tarnovo, before going back to Provence. He is accompanied by white messenger pigeons symbolising spiritual purity and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The birds choose the French knight as the guard of *The Secret Book* in a special ritual held in a Bogomil cave built of salt (!) crystals. This descent into the bowels of the earth (and into oneself), related to the ideas of spiritual election and predestination, provides another trigger to his

¹⁶ An allusion to the figure of Boyan the Magus.

change. However, his journey to spiritual perfection will involve suffering and obedience to an inner compulsion to save *The Secret Book*, a compulsion which the protagonist himself finds difficult to understand. Henri's solitary trek across snow-capped mountains is a time of purification (comparable to the forty days of fasting in the desert), its different stages marked by ice caves and bridges leading to "fairy-tale worlds," until at last he attains ultimate enlightenment:

I realised that we were standing in that temple which was not made by human hands, the cave suffused by an unearthly glow, I remembered that light born in crystals of ice. This is our human existence - shaking in a circle of twilight, while all around us there are limitless spaces filled with light that is invisible to us. Yes, indeed the body was a dungeon for the soul. Horrified, I felt the urge and desire for death [ДОНЧЕВ 2000: 195].

The experience of enlightenment brings order into Henri's worldview and reconciles him to Manichaeism, which rejects the worthless earthly life. He also embraces his role as a slave to *The Secret Book*. The key problem of Henri's identity does not get resolved immediately. Until his death he remains torn between two the paradigms: the agnostic (Henri) and the gnostic (Boyan), with Boyan of Zemen increasingly taking over from Henri. The individual struggle of transformation appears to be accompanied by change coming from without, outside of the hero's control:

Boyan of Zemen... I was beginning to doubt whether I had heard the name correctly. [...] Maybe the man had said "warrior" or even "fighter." It seemed that he had called himself "the warrior from earth." Doesn't Adam mean created from earth? Wasn't that name a secret sign the Bogomils used to recognise that they belong to the same doctrine? [...] No, I will never learn the real name of the man who threw himself onto the pyre. But that man had existed! And now he only lived in me. [...] They asked me:

"Are you Boyan of Zemen?"

I thought for a moment and affirmed:

"Yes, it's me" [ДОНЧЕВ 2000: 202-204].

The endpoint in this process of conversion, which culminates with his embrace of martyrdom at the foot of an Albigensian fortress in Provence, is preceded by an incident in which Henri finds a twin brother in a crowd of knights. This brother is predestinated to be the next Boyan – a warrior and guardian of the books entrusted to him, who will pass the light on to his successors. History comes full circle, and gets revealed as a chain of incarnations experienced by elect beings, preordained to carry out tasks assigned by the supernatural world:

I am Boyan. [...]

I am finishing. I can give these pages to any of the Perfect Ones. They will all climb the pyre. And the memories of Yasen, Vlad and Lada will fly away with the smoke. If I go on the pyre, I will give them to my brother. I can see him.

If you read these lines, know that I have climbed up the pyre at Montségur [ДОНЧЕВ 2000: 222].

In other words, the hero regains his true identity the moment he is ready for martyrdom. Henri’s physical journey as the Book’s guardian is identical to the journey of inner purification and self-discovery whereby an individual can discover the inner divine spark, here personified by Boyan of Zemen. This implies that the historical defeat suffered by the Albigensians and the Bogomils is not tantamount to the end of their struggle. The struggle continues, carried on by brothers – spiritual twins capable of accepting “baptism in the spirit” (symbolically portrayed in the novel by the dove that chooses Henri as the guardian of *The Secret Book*), who are key figures in the occultist vision of history. Thus, human existence appears to be a form of “perpetual backsliding” [Ricoeur 1972: 284], whose point – the same as in the Orphic and Bogomil schools – is to release the soul from the carapace of matter, and to recognise the divine spark in oneself. To those who have seen the light of knowledge (like the novel’s hero, or Roerich in Donchev’s earlier writings) – this is work of sacrifice, always culminating in the sacrificial pyre as a way of resacralising the cosmos.

We infected our executioners. St. Dominic and St. Francis said the same things we did. Our example, our lives according to the Gospel made them become like us. [...] The seed has been thrown into the furrows, brother Henri-Boyan. [...] We will die, but after us the world will not be as before. I believe it will be better [ДОНЧЕВ 2000: 216].

In Donchev’s interpretation, the sacrifices embraced by Christ, Henri, Roerich, or the Bogomil “perfect ones” are all typologically identical. Each serves to expand the imaginary empire of good; each carries the promise of the great reform in the world, a dream that goes all the way back to Prometheus. Who are the pioneers of that change, described in the novel as the Light of Occitan, the best of the Bogomils, Cathars and Albigensians, people prepared to die for their doctrine? They are healers, astrologers, seers, fortune-tellers from the mountain of Orpheus and singers united by a longing for good and a conviction that they have found knowledge (gnosis) which reveals the principles of self-redemption.

Brought to life in Donchev’s novel, the Bogomil tradition refers the reader to a kind of syncretic spirituality where the teachings of priest

Bogomil, Orpheus or Christ can in some way be regarded as identical. The differences between those paradigms in Bulgarian culture were convincingly documented by Anani Stoinev in *Свети Иван Рилски, официалното християнство и богомилството* (*St. Ivan of Rila, Official Christianity and Bogomilism* [Стойнев 1991]). Nonetheless, the mechanisms of commonsense popular thinking, based as they are on the principle of bricolage, inevitably lead to false tautologies, and reader interpretations are structurally preconditioned by the period's cultural mentality, ambiguous premises and the historical setting, all of which combine to open up a range of possible textual decodings. Donchev's biography of Roerich and his novel *Странният рицар на свещената книга* are clearly targeted at readers who are especially qualified to decipher the author's cultural codes. It appears that this kind of consolidation of an alternative portrayal of the Bogomils in the Bulgarian tradition – not as a heresy, but as a pure and reformed Christianity (a portrayal which Donchev updates for the modern times) may still play a key role today, in the context of the syncretic spirituality of the New Age era. The tradition of the Bulgarian national culture provides plenty of local arguments in favour of an easy identification with the ideological positions of the New Age.

As a kind of neo-ideology with unprecedented means of persuasion – but also an amorphous body of views that refuses to obey the rules of rational discourse – New Age thinking has provoked a series of ideological debates. One thing appears to be beyond doubt – New Age ideas satisfy several different kinds of human needs, including existential, cultural, and ideological ones (the latter in particular becoming increasingly pronounced in the post-modern period). Combining astro-history with pantheism and a holistic concept of the universe characteristic of the esoteric tradition, New Age thinking is a consistent but flexible ideological system. This syncretism, which makes it easy to assimilate new content (often sanitising it of all local cultural meaning in the process) define New Age ideology as special tools in the processes of globalisation and its corollary, i.e. cultural unification.

In his critique of the New Age, the French philosopher and historian of ideas Michel Lacroix detects hidden totalitarian ambitions lurking in the movement's philosophy. It is a holistic concept where people are treated as elements of a transpersonal organism, leaving no room for individuals. In this sense, the New Age movement does not recognise free thought, but rather favours thinking exploited as a tool for practical ends, or even “non-thought,” an attitude practiced by docile followers of enlightened gurus [Lacroix 1999: 93]. In this sense, by negating the ideal of the freethinker and replacing it with the concept of man as a predetermined being governed

primarily by mechanisms of astro-history, the New Age outlook clashes with the traditional Western worldview that is marked by individualism and a sense of the tragic dimension of individual existence. The anti-Cartesian and veiled anti-Christian characteristics of the New Age movement match the pseudo-orientalisation of Western culture, which assimilates Eastern spiritual practices in a deracinated form, tailored to the demands of the consumerist West. Paradoxically, even though the New Age movement was originally a countercultural product [Jawłowska 1999: 51] engendered by a sense of rebellion against the consumerist society, it has turned into a mass provider of spiritual goods, such as wellbeing techniques that offer self-redemption in the here and now [Dorosz 1989b: 203].

Donchev, who tends to keep his distance from the strident tones of modern debate, invariably pays homage to his understanding of what he calls “humanist spirituality,” serving as a disguise for his neo-gnostic explorations, hidden from the eyes of the uninitiated beneath a series of rapidly fossilising symbols. The text under discussion here, which superficially appears to be a straightforward apology of liberty, kindness, and beauty, is actually close to the New Age spirituality that depersonalises the individual even as it demonstrates the desperate longing for meaning in modern life.

Post-Modern Doubt About the Axiological Centre?

Positioned at the antipodes of Donchev’s educational and ludic vision of the world is *Пон Богомил и съвършенството на страха* (*Priest Bogomil and the Perfection of Fear*), a book by Vladimir Zarev [Зарев 1998],¹⁷ one of the most vocal literary reinventions of the gnostic Bogomil tradition in that decade. The book seeks to explore the nature of the forgotten Bogomil paradigm, which is in its turn related to the question of the *conditio bulgarica*, the system of values that shaped its moral horizon [Taylor 1989: 27–29]: the precondition of individual integrity and a defining element in collective identity. Although this is a question that for obvious reasons can never be fully answered to everyone’s satisfaction, this kind of exercise nonetheless invites a range of speculations. It also dovetails with a popular trend in French scholarly reflection on the Cathar movement taking place over the recent decades, where attempts have been made to reinterpret the gnostic tradition and its place in the history of European mentality

¹⁷ In 1998, the book won a special prize in the nationwide literary competition “Пазвитие”; see Трендафилов 2004.

[see, e.g., Duvernoy 1976]. In this context it appears that Vladimir Zarev's idea was to add his voice to a broader international debate, and in doing so to move beyond the narrow confines of a small local culture that at one point in its history happened to succumb to the lure of Manichaeism.

The hero in Zarev's novel is Priest Bogomil, the founder of the gnostic movement and one of the most enigmatic figures in Bulgarian history. As mentioned before, historical evidence about Bogomil is scant: we know his name, his place of origin, and the area where he was active; if we give credence to some of the folk legends, we also know his place of burial. In this case, the historian's dearth of material is the writer's *carte blanche*: this lack of historical evidence has proved liberating to romancers, who have found virtually limitless possibilities, encouraged by the popular opinion that the heresiarch was one of those eminent Bulgarians whose impact on the course of history simply cannot be overstated.¹⁸ Faced with the mystery of a myth created by a whim of collective imagination, Zarev engages in a painstaking attempt to deconstruct the roots of the myth, and reveals a series of pseudo-myths of his own to illustrate the hypothetical mechanisms that may have shaped those fictions in the past.

The book has four parts, each called a "Life" of Priest Bogomil (*Житие на поп Богомил, записано от... – The Life of Priest Bogomil, Written Down by...*). The different *Lives* are narrated at different periods and by different authors (прокаженият Стан / Stan the Leper, безпаметния Матей / Matey With No Memory, монах Григорий, възвърнал светското си име Емилиян / Grigori the Monk, who went back to his secular name of Emilian, Никола с Конкорезо / Nikola of Concorezzo¹⁹). Although the book's format alludes to the genre of lives of saints, it does not follow the medieval hagiographic model. There is nothing medieval about this series of first-person narratives coming from full-blooded characters who were eyewitnesses to, and participants in, the events of the novel. Nor does Bogomil conform to the constraints of the Christological model: his characterisation can be interpreted more productively in terms of the gnostic archetype, with Simon the Magus as its most representative hypostasis [Quispel 1951: 51–70].²⁰

Zarev takes the familiar myth of a magus accompanied by a prostitute, a notable trope in literary history (including Bulgarian literature), and

¹⁸ A dictionary of the 100 most influential figures in Bulgarian history published in 1997 in Sofia ranks Bogomil highly at no. 17; see Пантев, Гаврилов 1997: 65–67.

¹⁹ Studies of medieval heresies identify Concorezzo as the place of activity of the Bulgarian Bogomil bishop Nazarius, who removed the *Secret Book* to the West.

²⁰ See also pp. 85–97.

uses it as the basis for his myth-making exercises, creating his characters according to the rules of the gnostic paradigm. As interpreted by the writer, Priest Bogomil and his companion, the mute virgin/prostitute Maria appear to be new incarnations of Simon the Magus and Helen.

The book’s first three narratives are confessional accounts of events in 957, claimed to be the year of Bogomil’s death (the actual date is unknown to historians). The story includes fictional events that have some basis in folk legend, connecting the activities of Priest Bogomil with the area of Lovech and the village of Gorno Pavlikeni [see Ангелов 1969: 151]. According to those legends, Priest Bogomil was murdered by his opponents and buried in Kamenishte. In constructing an updated variant of this folk tradition, Zarev follows Umberto Eco’s successful example of using the crime novel genre for a series of stand-alone units, each of which works independently within the rules of the genre. Each narrative identifies Bogomil’s murderer as a different person, and the narrative chains of causality are continually rewritten as the psychological profiles of the victim and his murderer slowly emerge. In each story the narrative of Bogomil’s life and death illustrates the myth-making dynamics that apply to charismatic individuals, often unintentionally. The closing narrative, claimed to be the work of a monk named Nikola of Concorezzo written in 1327,²¹ stands apart from the other three. It tells the story of the monk’s search for three “ancient lives” of Priest Bogomil in the forbidding maze of a monastic library in the southern Alps. As the young monk risks death to learn the monastery’s secrets, he gradually discovers his own spiritual identity as a descendant of the Cathars. This final “life,” an ironic paraphrase of Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, plays a special role in the text as it updates the discourse by introducing a post-modern context.

The first three mini-novels (one is almost tempted to describe them as “small narratives”) form a series of portrayals of Priest Bogomil’s life and provide insights into gnostic system. Each of the narrators is a first-hand witness of the events and a close associate of the heresiarch. They are all united in their ambition to make a testimony by writing the one reliable account of the life of Priest Bogomil, who claimed to be an incarnation of Christ. All of the stories relate a roughly similar interpretation of the Master’s teachings. Believing that the material world is the work of Satan, and the human body a prison of the soul, Bogomil teaches a doctrine of contempt for the world, regarding death as a liberation in which the soul can return to its original source, the true transcendent Good.

²¹ The date is significant as an intertextual reference to the events in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* [Eco 1983].

People need to reject fear of death and all attachment to earthly life, including procreation and sexuality. Instead, they need to remain passive and observe strict ascetic practices – the only way to create an effective barrier to the temptations of Satan, who rules over human instincts. The road to self-salvation consists in choosing not to resist the evil that comes from without. In Bogomil's interpretation, any form of activity in life (including good deeds) ultimately serves Satan's interests:

Whatever we do in this world, even if it is good, we only multiply the majesty of Evil, we allow evil to adjust and improve. [...] Satan tempts us with the kindness of beauty in the same way that he tempts us with the glitter of gold and riches. Beauty and kindness are lies, because they can never be truly eternal. Since they are related to matter and come from it, they are no different from the ugliness and hatred towards the soul. Beauty contains the refugence of Satan, his ability to enslave us. But power over beauty is also of the devil, and leads us to the Gehenna of fire [Зарев 1998: 44].

Any effort to repair the sinful world, to make it more reasonable and just, is also an effort and an idea of Satan [...] Therefore, do not oppose evil, merely understand it. If you fight against evil, you only increase and improve it. [...] Satan is power, God is meaning. He gives meaning to Evil, it is only with the help of Evil that He moves the universe, transforms it and makes it exist... thus He achieves Good, order, harmony and the thoroughness of His truth [Зарев 1998: 65].

This categorical reversal of Christ's rule that one should not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, which amounts to questioning the very difference between good and evil in this world, introduces a peculiar modification to the moral horizon of Bogomil gnostics. By removing the Judaeo-Christian sense of guilt and responsibility for one's decisions (since those are preordained in Satan's scheme to rule the world), this worldview relieves the Bogomils from any obligation of moral perfection. In a world engulfed by a cosmic struggle between "the inert Good" and the "creative Evil," all values become relative and the humans (enmeshed as they are in the material world) are fated to do evil since their obsessive fear of death pushes them to embrace various forms of individual activity, which are tantamount to sin.

Satan is your past and the ultimate future, he makes you dependent on your difference and your desires, he is complexity [Зарев 1998: 177].

In Zarev's interpretation, Priest Bogomil's anthropology defines people as being determined by the satanic instinct of survival, which produces the desire of individual success. Although he praises death, Bogomil does not recommend suicide as a form of liberation from the shackles of

matter. Instead, his doctrine recommends giving up one’s life through extreme passivity, a kind of shrinking existence. This is diametrically opposed to the attitude valued in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which treats existential anxiety as an ontological quality that cannot be eliminated, but “must be taken into the courage to be” [Tillich 2000: 77]. Zarev’s interpretation of the Bogomil concept of spiritual life appears to highlight the therapeutic functions of gnosis, which come across as a failed attempt to tame existential terror, producing a neurotic contempt for life and persons.

The fictional writers of Bogomil’s lives in the novel are well aware of satanic taint that marks them. Zarev gives them a symbolic meaning. Stan the Leper, marked by a physical stigma of shameful knowledge, personifies death and sin. Matey with No Memory is a man without qualities, disintegrating inside, his moral choices flexibly adapting themselves to other people’s expectations. Finally, Grigori, the monk who went back to his secular name of Emilian, is a lustful satyr wearing a monk’s habit: living his life in denial, blind to truth about himself. The narrators share a common past: each is an apostate who once served the Church; each got lured by Bogomil neo-Manichaeism, and each is now filled with doubt and betrayal, prepared to convert again. This attitude in Zarev’s novel takes the peculiar form of creative betrayal: each of the three writers regards his work as an act of betrayal of the reality he is attempting to commemorate. This has to do with the way the creative process itself is treated as a sinful imitation of God, tainted by the demonic stigma of individualism:

I know already that the written word was given to us in order to overcome the fear of death, and to live on here on earth. My teacher’s insight is true. While I was well [...] I strove for somebody else’s words, the whisper of knowledge confused me and attracted me. As soon as I felt the plague [...], the satanic desire to write swelled up in me [...], to merge into a stream of words [...], in order to attain immortality [...]. This temptation fills me with happiness every day, with an almost physical pleasure and, and when I rule over death and the past, I compare myself to my teacher, I turn myself into his fate and continuation [...]. I am also asking myself whether I will save or betray my Benefactor, whether I will exalt him with words, or kill him; are my words light, or are they stones cast at His cross? [Зарев 1998: 68].

What is the word? When I was reflecting on the life of my Teacher, I believed that I was retaining His teaching in my memory, that if one cannot injure or kill with words, they are light. Now I know that written word is primarily power. By storing things forever, it organises life, thus ruling over what is accomplished, and what is forgotten, and what has not begun [...]. I already know – life cannot survive without words. And words contain the power

of God and the power of Satan, because they are always written down by both [Зарев 1998: 148–149].

The written word is Reason. It is more than a sin; being filled of deceit, it is a sin within a sin, because in it I create and record a life [...]. Comparing in my origination with God, I get closer to Satan and serve him. I painfully realised that since I began writing this I have been possessed by evil, because the written word is our fear of death [...]. Didn't my memory deprive the Teacher of freedom and cloaked him with a prison [Зарев 1998: 228]?

The realisation of one's individuality and the burden of sin and guilt, cumulatively produce "self-questioning" stories: texts that make no claim to objectivity. In each case, the subjective truth is a conscious and deliberate betrayal of truth.

Zarev's novel presents a world of misleading appearances, where everything is fictional and it is difficult to distinguish between fraud and a genuine experience of immersion in supernatural reality – between actual miracles and bogus claims or magic tricks. In this fictional world there are recurrent and invariant sequences of events which, no matter how unrelated to the real world or historical truth, take on the quality of a certain inter-textual, or perhaps super-textual, truth.

Although those invented "commonplaces" are of varying cultural provenance, in combination they tie sequences of meanings into a knot that is quite impossible to unravel. The world of the novel is woven together out of archetypes and symbols variously appearing in centuries-old gnostic writings (the eternal tree, a woman as an embodiment of Sophia, the philosopher's stone, the elixir of life, metempsychosis), mythologems of Bulgarian national culture (the rivalry between Bogomil and St. Ivan of Rila²² competing for the hearts and souls of the people), biblical tropes, apocrypha (St. George leading a woman out of the world of the dead, like Orpheus), folk legend (Bogomil's unnatural death, the stone grave), literary tropes (monastic library as a maze – some of the story lines and characters are taken from Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, the trope of the Odyssey is influenced by Joyce). Each of those elements appears in various configurations, depending on the outlook of the given narrator, and cumulatively form alternative psychological profiles for the teacher of the new gnosis, leaving a distinctive, individual mark on every story. Each of those accounts is simultaneously an apology for Bogomil, his deification and his debunking. The unflinching focus on ugliness and almost pornographically explicit descriptions of

²² Known as St. John of Rila in the Roman Catholic countries, where his feast is celebrated on 31 August; see Zaleski 1989: 511–512.

the heresiarch’s excesses form a composite image of the Master – portraying him as a voluntarist, a hypocrite immersed in the Dionysian element (in Stan the Leper’s account); as a completely uninhibited player and a madman driven by a murderous frenzy compelling him to kill in the name of cosmic order (in the account of Matey, the man with no memory); or as an altruistic sage who disowns his own doctrine when he realises its negative impact on people (the account of Grigori the Monk). Despite those contradictory judgments drowning in a flood of symbols and multiple parallel references, the three accounts agree on one thing – Bogomil was a multi-dimensional and ambiguous figure: a noble-minded *raisonneur* irresistibly drawn to debate and rhetoric, a ruthless manipulator who despises the people he exploits, a credible intermediary between people and the supernatural world, but also an unscrupulous liar and fraud. Bogomil is completely uninhibited; an actor in his self-directed show, he does not hesitate to claim to be an emanation of Christ, whom he parodies instead of imitating. His Last Supper is a half-formed thing: there is no wine to serve, his entry to Preslav/Jerusalem draws no applauding crowds. He leaves his meeting with Tsar Peter/Pontius Pilate unscathed because Satan hears his prayer, a paraphrase of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Oh, Satan, who rules the visible world, you are master of our fate here, just as God is the master of our soul in eternity, you, almighty and deceitful, a monster in the darkness of our mind, you, who causes everything in everything so that you can take it through death, accept me, fiend, grasp me with your ravaging love, strain your repulsiveness and listen to my plea..., if possible, take this Cup away from me! [Зарев 1998: 33].

All those accumulated qualities identify Zarev’s Bogomil as the archetypal trickster [Eliade 1978: 275; Davis 1991], a figure typologically related to the alchemical figure of Mercury/Hermes, the mythical father of gnosis often identified with the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, representing a syncretic combination of esoteric knowledge [see, among others, Jonas 2001: 41]. He appears in multiple disguises: as an emissary of gods and men, artist, magus, merchant or thief; as a guide of souls in the mysteries, or as a fraud.²³ However, as E. Davis notes, “Hermes’ banditry should not be confused with appropriations based on raw power. The information trickster works through cleverness and stealth; he is not the mugger or the thug, but the hacker, the spy, the mastermind”

²³ Hermes was initially venerated in the form of a roadside cairn, once used as a signpost. Zarev, who aims for a certain literalness of his message, conflates the mythical tropes to connect the figure of Bogomil with the appearance of a cairn of stones, an object venerated in the novel, which turns out to be the narrator’s destination in the last *Life*.

[Davis 1998: 15]. We might also add that he is an expert on people and their Shadow (to use a Jungian term), their hidden intentions and ulterior motives. Hence Bogomil's remarkable dexterity in his verbal duels against Tsar Peter and the Christian anachorite, St. Ivan of Rila. Although the debates are fictional, Zarev constructs a literary interpretation of familiar motifs in Bulgarian philosophy of history, notably highlighted in P. Mutafchiyev's essay *Priest Bogomil and St. Ivan of Rila* as a struggle for the hearts and souls fought by two figures who the historian believes were equally responsible for the nihilism of the Bulgarians. By presenting the world from the gnostic viewpoint, Zarev engages in a polemic with the Christian version of sainthood, and daringly debunks a figure revered by Bulgarian Orthodox Christians. In the debates, Bogomil turns out to be a ruthless and unscrupulous debater who ignores all moral barriers as he unrelentingly questions his opponent's sainthood, dismissing it as a delusion planted in Ivan's mind by Satanael. Bogomil's derision of St. Ivan's thinking is powerfully persuasive; to him, the efficient debunking power of the language of gnosis is the best proof of the superiority of the Manichaean paradigm over the Christian one. This is parallel with the experience of reality as documented by Zarev's narrators, who claim to have sensory experiences confirming Ivan's "demonic" nature, seeing him as a figure marked by a physical stigma of inner corruption, looking like an ill-formed homunculus:

He resembled an embryo, shapeless and wise, filled with eternal non-completion, eternal beginning. He had no face, or his face was time. The saint was being born before my eyes [...] he was crawling out of the womb of the day [Зарев 1998: 58].

Elsewhere Ivan is compared to a revolting old man who gets killed, basilisk-like, by the sight of his own mirror reflection, a victim of self-knowledge:

The wonder worker was so old as to be practically ageless, half of his hair had fallen from the scab. [...] But his eyes were the most interesting thing, cross-eyed, set wide apart and devoid of colour, they came over the whole world, enveloped it and brought it together in an unknown way. [...] He saw order and chaos at the same time [Зарев 1998: 128].

Finally, he is portrayed as a warrior with demonic attributes:

A man in a darned cassock was standing in front of the cave; he was barefoot, his feet and his fingers had grown callused. His black eyes pierced us, his lustrous black hair looked matted, a tarry beard shadowed his face with an expression of patience and war. His forehead bore the memory of a severe wound, but his

eyes were the most interesting thing; from their darkness there sprang light and the light of the sky was transformed into darkness [Запов 1998: 204].

In spite of this symmetry between the Manichaeic interpretation of the world and the way the world is experienced by the characters in the novel, Bogomil's sociotechnical skills are not enough to ensure the ultimate triumph of his doctrine. The last of those pseudo-*Lives* shows him capitulating before Satan, personified in the novel by Ivan of Rila. Bogomil yields to the blackmail: swayed by Ivan's persuasion and a prophetic dream, and moved by compassion for mankind, he disowns his doctrine. He does that in order to save the Bulgarians from the consequences of his passivist teachings, which produce submission to evil and passivity in the face of the Turkish invasion, which the seer foresees. This is the price he has to pay to change the course of history:

That saint of Rila was right, the word I sowed eats away and weakens the Bulgarian flesh. Before you, o faithful, and before God, I renounce the Word I spoke, I take back all the words into myself. [...] Submit to evil and to the visible world, remain in the power of Satan and the emperor. Lastly, I put you on oath, do not give birth to the word, but instead give birth to strength and to healthy children [Запов 1998: 224].

This reference to a catastrophe centuries away, which the readers know to be a historical fact, makes it immediately clear that Bogomil's sacrifice is futile. Because Satan is all-powerful, Bogomil's attempt will not be sufficient to avert the Turkish invasion. Bogomil's executioners, who succeed him, will ignore the Master's testament, and continue to proclaim his doctrine. Paradoxically, their actions add weight to Bogomil's claim that every activity in this world ultimately serves the purposes of evil. Once planted, words take on a life of their own, contributing to the emergence of a world of chaos and ruined values.

This inconsistency between the doctrine and the images of Priest Bogomil as recorded in the different *Lives* is them noted by Nikola of Concorezzo, the narrator of the last part of the book:

The saint was the same, that Bogomil unrecognisable from his words; the events recurred, but [...] they were contradictory, blurred and odd – they destroyed each other. [...] Suddenly I realised that this incomparable and ineffable saint falling apart in words had never existed, that when he existed he left behind faith, the word and the void. Then, in sweet delight I realised that I was Bogomil, that I have merely slept for a few centuries, and I had to burn time to ashes to wake up [Запов 1998: 332].

Nikola acknowledges the capitulation of reason in the face of the paradoxes produced by historical inheritance, and turns towards gnosis

instead. Influenced by his mystical experiences, he comes to regard his life to date as a kind of sleep. The newly discovered manuscripts are physical proof that his choice was right: for him, they become a kind of manual for a soul stirring from its slumber. In Zarev's novel, Nikola exemplifies the classic personal paradigm of the gnostic [Jonas 2001: 48–91], but even this is thrown into doubt. When he recognises himself as an incarnation of Bogomil, Nicola comes face to face with the true mystery of being. His journey to the Balkans, which is compared to the wanderings of Odysseus, is portrayed as a journey towards a newly discovered identity and authentic existence. When he reaches his destination, his choice is endorsed by Stan the leper, who is expecting the arrival of Bogomil. However, his fear of attaining full knowledge (symbolised by the leper) makes Nikola/Bogomil shrink from further initiation; instead, he chooses the pre-existence of the dormant soul as an agnostic. Paradoxically, this is also a return to his original identity as a sceptic, doomed to roam a world of an axiological void:

My name was Nikola, Nikola from Concorezzo; I was a Benedictine monk [Зарев 1998: 340].

In this instance the myth of Bogomil's metempsychosis is exploded by the ironic undertones in Zarev's novel. However, the irony is inconsistent. It gets corrected by a recurrent trope appearing in each of the *Lives*, an apparently secondary motif: the mute Maria, who accompanies Bogomil in each of his incarnations as the eternal Feminine: the Idea, prostitute and saint, lover and mother.

Like Bogomil, the mute Maria is seen and portrayed differently in each of the *Lives*, but the differences are mainly a matter of minor details. She is stylised as a folk heroine, and what connects those portrayals is the fact that the mute Maria's disability is in each case explained as a product of a major trauma that took away her speech and her shadow. In Bulgarian folk mythology, both attributes are regarded as necessary components of humanity. A person without a shadow belongs to the subterranean world, and a person without language is unknowable, alien and therefore guided by strange forces.

According to Stan the Leper, the mute Maria was seduced by a mythical monster, a winged dragon (called a *змеѝ*, or *змея*, in the Bulgarian folk tradition²⁴), who took away his lover's ability to speak upon leaving so she could not reveal their secret. As a token of their union, the dragon left a peculiar mark on her body – one of his scales stuck to the girl's breast,

²⁴ The *змеѝ* is a chthonic, ambivalent creature of Bulgarian mythology.

endowing her with the mysterious, disquieting aura of an elect person [Зарев 1998: 50]. This election is highly ambiguous, partly demonic (in Bulgarian folk culture, the *zmey* belongs to the underworld, associated with death and the afterlife), and partly sacred (the *zmey* controls the waters and can be a giver of life and bountiful harvests). For this reason his appearances are usually accompanied by light, thunder, fire, and high wind: powerful and unbridled elements which he controls, and which also connect him with the prophet Elijah.

In the folk tradition, to which Zarev makes references in his novel, a sexual union between a woman and this kind of powerful chthonic being is regarded as a violation of cosmic order [Беновска-Събкова 1995: 123]. Although the union usually takes place against the woman’s wishes, it is nonetheless often punished with insanity, a frequent motif in folk literature. The *zmey*’s demonic passion pushes the woman into depression and melancholy, which is often incurable [Беновска-Събкова 1995: 96–126; Л. Богданова, А. Богданова 1972]. In this sense, Zarev’s Maria is styled as a folk heroine: a victim of the lust of the *zmey*, an archaic deity who is a mythical protector and a first father. However, the problem of Maria in the novel goes even deeper.

Zarev constructs the union between Maria and Bogomil by analogy to her union with the *zmey*. This is an analogy that goes beyond the fact the superficial correspondence of a heresiarch to a monster of folk legend. Both figures are similarly predetermined by their status as intermediaries between the supernatural world and the human world, a fact which is reflected in their demonic/human physical appearance. Bogomil, whose body is beginning to show symptoms of leprosy, has a half-human, half-animal appearance; his facial features are setting into a grimace described by the narrator as “leonine.” In semiotic terms, this transformation makes him similar to the *zmey*, who can take on a human form, but can also combine human and animal characteristics. They also share high levels of sexual desire: Bogomil is the only man who can satisfy Maria’s longing for her first demonic lover. The heresiarch is the only worthy rival of the *zmey*, capable of meeting the erotic needs of a beautiful girl who, like the gnostic Helena, is lustful and possessed by demons. In common with gnostic myths, the meaning of Maria’s life and her purpose in Zarev’s novel is to carry the light of knowledge and save it from destruction. In each of the variant *Lives*, the mute Maria is portrayed as an immortal being wandering through the ages: Bogomil’s eternal lover and mother, who keeps returning to the earth in new incarnations. In this context, the mute Maria is a vessel of light, the gnostic *matrix* that carries the precious spiritual element through the degrading world of matter.

In the *Life* that follows, the mute Maria is portrayed as a victim of a building ritual involving the bricking-up of a living woman's shadow in the foundations of a new building, a folk practice believed to lend stability and permanence to a structure. Although the ritual seems to be a mere symbolic substitution for the woman's actual life, it has very real consequences. By losing her shadow in the magical ritual, a woman would forfeit her right to remain in the world of the living, and she would die within forty days [Стойнев (ed.) 1994: 351]. Zarev's novel transforms that folk myth, prevalent in the Balkans and frequently adapted in literature. The trauma sustained by Maria at the loss of her shadow causes further disability – the loss of her speech. This sacrifice, however, is precious to the supernatural forces, and it becomes a source of living water:

A year ago, they told me in confidence, a spring²⁵ in the village had run dry, the water in the wells became undrinkable, the cattle died in their hundreds. They brought a master who built a new spring with his own hands, not even a drop was spilled... With his soul he built a second one, and finally [...] he built a third spring in which he unscrupulously immured the shadow of Maria. Only then clean, deep water flowed from the springs. Maria cried and became mysteriously dumb, as if water flowed directly from her voice. She became more beautiful, filled with allurements, but her heart languished for words [Запев 1998: 87].

In this context, the soul of the mute Maria is sacrificed to water, and becomes the spirit of water. There is an ambivalence in the Bulgarian folk tradition about supernatural forces connected with water (including the *zmey*, but also demonic *samodivas* and *rusalkas*) [Манкова 1989]. On the one hand, such spirits are considered malicious, on the other hand they may be approached for assistance. In any case, strong caution is always recommended in dealings with those beings. Because water is susceptible to magical influence, its life-giving force can easily become lethal. In the world portrayed in Zarev's novel, water plays a special role. On the one hand, the motif of water is connected with Maria as the source of living water. On the other hand, water is connected with an alchemist, a character with the meaningful name of Epitaphius, who obtains the secret "living water" – an elixir of immortality – and inadvertently becomes responsible for priest Bogomil's death: when given to a living being, "living water" becomes "dead water," causing instant death. However, Maria has the last word in this *Life*: as the "mother of the living," her womb is carrying Bogomil's unborn child, or, in the occult sense, his next incarnation.

²⁵ In Bulgarian – *чешма*, a kind of small structure built around a wellspring, a fountain.

In the third *Life*, the mute Maria personifies to some extent the motif of Demeter/Persephone. Buried alive, she roams the underworld, unable to reach either the world of the living or the world of the shadows. She seeks the help of St. George, a hero of folk songs particularly revered in folk Orthodox Christianity in the Balkans,²⁶ where he is venerated as a deity of vegetation and a protector of fields and flocks. In folklore, he is described as a valiant hero with the power to control the waters (hence he is portrayed as the vanquisher of the *zmey* or *lamia* – variants of the cruel chthonic being abducting virgins). The story in which Maria is led out of the world of the dead conflates the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice with a medieval legend in which St. George saves a virgin, left to be devoured by a dragon. This latter motif, frequently represented in Christian iconography, appears in *The Life of St. George*, recognised as canonical by the Orthodox Church:

Not far from the place where George was buried, [...] a terrible dragon came out of the nearby lake. [...] The local people did not know how to deal with this disaster, and since they were pagans, they asked the idol priests for advice. They told them that each family had to give in turn one of their children to be devoured by the terrible monster. Having no other option, people accepted this advice and each day a new victim was brought to the shore of the lake. Then there came the turn of the only daughter of the king. The girl was brought to the lake and awaited death trembling. Suddenly, a bright young man on a white horse appeared. [...] But the brave soldier of Christ, crossing himself, calling the Holy Trinity for help, threw himself on the monster and struck him with his spear. He then told the girl to take off her belt, tie the dragon and drag it to the city. And so she did. In the presence of many people the dragon was burned. After that all the inhabitants of the town and the surroundings embraced the Christian faith [*Свету Великомъченик* 1991: 208–209].

In the version sanctioned by the Orthodox Church, the liberated people accept Christianity – the God-fearing, brave young man receives no other reward for defeating the evil power.

In Zarev’s story about a virgin led out of the underworld, the idea of reward is woven into Maria’s seductive promises. Although St. George does not ignore her pleas, he rejects her advances. He expects from her a different kind of sacrifice – she must abandon her desire of becoming the saint’s bride, i.e. she must renounce the sins of lust and pride. St. George descends into

²⁶ In terms of religious veneration, St. George has no equal in the Balkans. In folklore, the figure also combines characteristics of Perun (the Slavic god of thunder), Dionysus, and Thracian hero. His victory over the dragon (Lamia) makes him the vanquisher of the evil forces of death and chaos; see Стойнев (ed.) 1994: 79–83.

the underworld like Orpheus, the father of the pre-gnostics, but unlike his mythological predecessor he is free from the constraints Orpheus faced. He easily brings the girl back to the world of the living, but her lips are sealed as the knowledge she gained in the underworld is only available to the elect:

“Save me, Saint George, [...] if you restore the light for me, I will elope and become your wife”, she wept, and weeping she lost track of time. There was neither day nor night on the Lower Earth; the shadows on the other side were not terrible, but rather washed out and patient. Then suddenly the air began to see with a wondrous radiant light. Saint George galloped on his raven black steed, leaned over her, and from his spear the blood of the dragon was dripping. He grabbed her in his mighty hand, sat her on the saddle in front of him and said in a stentorian voice: I will have pity on thee, unfortunate, if you renounce your folly. I am Saint George the Victorious and I am married to my Victory. I do not need neither a beautiful nor an untouched wife, but a dragon for a men’s struggle and heroism. I will save you at the Upper Earth with your grieving brothers, but because you saw the afterlife and touched the secret of the Lower Earth, you will become dumb forever. Remember this from me, who knows everything, he must remain silent!” And he moved her as in a dream. The virgin Maria woke up, and her grave was dug up and cleaned up; she sighed at the sight of the sun and smiled [Зарев 1998: 170].

Back among the living, the mute Maria continues to experience lust. She misses St. George (a parallel to her longing after the *zmey* in the earlier *Life*), and finds gratification in the arms of Bogomil, whom she ultimately comes to regard as a new incarnation of the saint. In this variant, *The Life of Priest Bogomil Recorded by Grigori the Monk Who Went Back to His Secular Name of Emilian, in the Year 957*, Maria is styled as a prostitute. Her magically incited lust plays an ambivalent role – it leaves her degraded and sullied, but it also turns out to be her way of accomplishing her eternal historical mission of becoming the *matrix* for Bogomil’s new incarnations: a vessel for the element of light.

The mute Maria’s final incarnation is described in the account by Nikola of Concorezzo. In this variant, she evinces unmistakable analogies with the peasant girl who seduces Adso in Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* [see Eco 1983: 261–267]:

At his feet there lay a young girl, grubby and dressed in sackcloth. She looked dirty, covered in coal dust and wonderfully beautiful. Her face was lit up by her blue eyes, filled with such innocence that it hurt. Her thin hands were clutching an enormous heart of an ox, as if Remigio had plucked it from the beast’s entrails. I recognised her, she was the Dumb Maria from the village near the monastery. She covered her knees, made a kind of lowing sound, and grew quiet [Зарев 1998: 283].

Let us take a closer look at the semantic content of the images Zarev is constructing by analogy to Manichaean myths. In accordance with the principle of association characteristic of mythological thinking, Zarev is unafraid to equate things in ways that make little logical sense. The events in each story appear to be confirming Maria’s unique position in the structure of the novel’s fictional world. Although some details may differ, each variant portrays Maria as an ambiguous and multi-faceted identity that can be interpreted in terms of the theosophy of female messianism. In Zarev’s world, however, each of the stories turns out to be yet another fictional form – not unlike religion and gnosis, treated as a kind of game with rules that make no sense outside of it.

Zarev goes beyond the diagnosis, commonplace by now, that Bulgarian culture has split into two incoherent ideological paradigms, leading to nothing but fruitless wandering in a world filled with empty signifiers – he actually tries to fill that void. The postscript to the *Lives*, narrated by a seventeenth century inquisitor, discusses the fates of the “medieval manuscripts” in the intervening years. In the eyes of a Catholic priest, the texts are a vector of moral corruption which infects human minds. Giordano Bruno – portrayed as an attentive reader of the *Lives* of Bogomil (perhaps even as one of his incarnations), who carries on the heresiarch’s intellectual inheritance centuries later – is a good case in point:

[...] the superior of the monastery of St. Dominic sent me these obscene and sacrilegious Four Lives of some eastern heresiarch. This thrice-cursed Bogomil has the audacity to claim that the Earth revolves around the Sun, and undermines the divine and intact harmony of the motion of celestial bodies, described so exquisitely in the Ptolemaic system. When I looked through these pathetic life stories, I realised that they had not been forgotten in the library of the monastery of St. Dominic, that the unfortunate Giordano had dug them up and read in his youth, hence he became soured and frenetic in his soul [Zapev 1998: 341].

By portraying Bogomil as the inventor of the heliocentric system, Zarev invokes the mythologised portrayals of the heresiarch (commonplace in Bulgarian tradition) that credit him as a precursor of modern science. This pseudo-reconstruction of Giordano Bruno’s intellectual pedigree serves to bolster the myth of modern Europe’s supposedly Bulgarian roots [Szwat-Gyłybowa 2002: 12–13]. The Bogomil tradition is portrayed as a vehicle of enduring ideas, a stimulus behind centuries’ worth of European intellectual activity. At the same time the tradition is brought into question as an element of the “satanic” strategy of world rule, where individuals are merely pawns in a game of chess. Human life is unending repetition, with souls aimlessly roaming a world where

mutually exclusive ideological systems have obliterated all sense of the sacred or any faith of absolute values.

The way Zarev's novel foregrounds the absurd (with its underpinnings of tragedy, nonsense and paradox), expresses the civilisational confusion and loss of moral horizons. Essential formative components of human identity prove unavailable, producing inner conflict in people who must choose between ideological worldviews but are not equipped to do so. In the process of socialisation, the moral horizon is defined for each individual by reference to absolute values, which are more relevant to questions of identity than nationality, and

the only measure of that relationship is not the individual identity of that which is finite, but rather the compatibility to the absolute, meaning truth. [...] [T]he problem of identity basically applies only to accidentals, but not to absolutes like truth or good where, if it arises at all, it is a symptom of skeptical relativism [Spaemann 1995: 68–69].

Where an inherited cultural tradition lacks an internal structure and consistent hierarchy, self-definition in reference to lasting values becomes impossible. This lack of a consistent overriding truth leads to the vicissitudes experienced by Zarev's characters, similar to the torments experienced by the demon-possessed man in the country of the Gerasenes. The demons who have dominated his soul withhold their real names. When Christ tells them to identify themselves, their answer is evasive, "My name is Legion, for we are many" (Mark 5: 9, KJV). The figure of the possessed man in that the New Testament story is symbolic of a civilisation whose people have lost their own identity, and instead they collect masks and create successions of self-portraits, none of them authentic [Jawłowska 2001: 54; Życiński 2002]. In the world portrayed in Zarev's novel, dominated as it is by relativism and gnostic fatalism, the stake in this game is the continually reinvented identity of a skeptic who longs for a world of fixed values.

In the Gnostic Hell

Stefan Tsanev's *Мравки и Богове* (*Ants and Gods* [Цанев 2002]), another novel associated with the "Bogomil" discourse, is subtitled *Хроника на XX век* (*A Chronicle of the Twentieth Century*), unambiguously revealing the author's intention to join in the international reckoning with the previous century, which saw the collapse of the two largest post-Enlightenment utopias – the nation-state and Communism as a panaceum for all social ills [see Baczko 1997; Kołakowski 1982, 2012b].

In this major project to reappraise Bulgarian history, Tsanev reaches for the literary techniques of magical realism to offer a telescoped vision of Bulgarian fate in history, perceived as a history of domination and subjection. The novel’s portrayal of the “one hundred years of Bulgarian solitude,” tormented by a series of changing twentieth-century regimes, is a quintessence of the local population’s experience of thirteen centuries of subjection to oppressive state regimes, always perceived as alien and hostile to people. Similar to Yordan Radchikov’s fictional village of Cherkaski, the novel’s town of “Smallville” (*Малък градец*) is an allegory of Bulgaria. The town is not merely a lapidary of national memorabilia as they feature in the popular imagination. “Smallville” is primarily a mythologised picture of living history, a collective memory of the past that continues to shape individual attitudes. Its Thracian graves, its Roman-Byzantine fortress (once Ovid’s prison), the traces of habitation from the times of Khan Asparukh, diaries of European travellers from the period of Turkish rule, accounts of the violent repression that followed the retreat of Kutuzov’s army from Bulgaria, and finally the oral tradition – all of those *lieux de memoire* define the identity of the town’s inhabitants, who remember their proto-Bulgarian and aristocratic roots, but also realise their current lowly status:

And so the descendants of this “royal blood” settled in our Smallville, and mingled with the descendants of Karan or Kardam. However, the 500 years of slavery, generation after generation, diluted our royal blood, oppressed the royal pride in our souls, little by little it blurred in our minds the memory of our royal past and now, as I look at it, nothing royal has remained in us, we have become simple peasants [Цанев 2002: 116].

In a manner similar to Radchikov’s, Tsanev’s narrator playfully teases the reader in a series of long tongue-in-cheek topical comments about the Bulgarian complex of inferiority, which he argues comes from the treating the nation’s past in a way that is indifferent at best, and downright embarrassed at worst [Цанев 2002: 112]. In Tsanev’s book this sense of urgency about “restoring Bulgarian dignity” by reaching back into the country’s past (a sentiment that would not look out of place in the writings of Paisius of Hilendar) turns into bitter sarcasm as he castigates the bad faith with which history gets officially packaged for mass consumption. Tsanev’s multi-directional, intra-cultural discourse tries to pin down the relationship between Bulgaria’s cultural tradition and the Bulgarian understanding of historical reality. In doing so, the book rethinks and reappraises a set of concepts which had become heavily mythologized in twentieth-century reflection on Bulgarian cultural and

historical inheritance heritage, including proto-Bulgarianness, paganism and Bogomilism [see, among others, Даскалов 1998a].

The novel problematises the proto-Bulgarian inheritance and the Bogomil tradition by focalising them through the lives of some of its characters, namely the Kardamov family, descended from Khan Kardam.²⁷ This ancient pedigree, which the narrator treats with a grain of salt, directs the reader's attention to the beginnings of Bulgarian collective life in the context of a Bulgarian state. Two currents are present in Tsanev's interpretation of history: the history of the powers that be, and a parallel history of the community subject to that power. The former is a history of tsars, famous figures, victories and historical dates; the latter is a history of the *homo patiens*. Unlike the former, which is diachronic, the former is synchronic, with a non-linear understanding of time and a concept of space that goes beyond the three dimensions; in it, the present, the past and the future are all inseparably linked. By giving due attention to the irrational factors in history, Tsanev shows how the living identity of the characters shapes our interpretations of the meaning of history. In the novel, he counters the vision of history as rational speculation with a vision of history that is shaped by the mystical imagination, formed by a syncretic pagan-Christian worldview, which Tsanev believes to be representative of Bulgarian mentality:

[...] this is the secret of our entire nation, which remained pagan through and through, to the backbone, and only taught its lips to cry: "Lord Jesus Christ!" [Цанев 2002: 22].

In Tsanev's novel, the values of a spirituality rooted in folk culture and unconstrained by orthodoxy are represented by the meaningfully named character of Sekula [see Стойкова 1985]. This very rare name invokes the tradition of Bulgarian *yunak* songs, some of which feature a character named *Sekula detentse*, a paradoxical name given his manliness, maturity and valour. The historical prototype for this character was, Janoš Šekel, *ban* of Slovenia and a combatant in the conflicts with Turkey, stylised as a mythical cultural hero in the folk imagination.

In Tsanev's novel, Sekula is a woman, only faintly related to her folkloric male prototype (both know a certain amount of magical lore). In the novel, Sekula reveals not only Tsanev's folkloristic inspirations, but also his esoteric ones. With her granddaughter (the little Sekula),

²⁷ There is little historical evidence about the proto-Bulgarian Khan Kardam (777–802). He appears to have been a skilful politician and strategist who successfully re-launched the proto-Bulgarian southward expansion, forcing Byzantium to renew a previously ignored peace treaty; see Андреев, Лалков 1996: 43–44.

she is the only character in Tsanov’s world who is actually “perfect” in the gnostic sense as a person predestined for spiritual life. The portrayal of her spiritual development, essentially a road to wisdom and light, follows the paradigm of most gnostic systems [see, among others, Rudolph 1983: 133–144; Prokopiuk 1998; Jonas 2001: 48–91]. Before her spiritual awakening she is a “sleeping soul” – unaware of her true calling and living the pre-existence of a “psychic” trapped in the world of matter. The moment of illumination comes with the personal intervention of an emissary coming from another world, who brings her a secret book that Sekula will accept as her new Bible to fashion a new worldview for herself. This conventional esoteric trope of “a letter from another world” is somewhat modified in the novel.²⁸ The very title of the mystical work – *Дяволско евангелие* (*The Devil’s Gospel*) – suggests that this might be a message from the Antichrist. Sekula is similarly unsure about the emissary’s identity: it could have been God or one of his angels, or it could have been Satan (who was God’s brother according to Bogomil apocrypha):

[...] the night before Transfiguration of Jesus, the gate of heaven gate opens, and the Lord descends from heaven disguised as an old man or a beggar, it depends, and he walks on earth to see how people live; but he has to be very careful, because that night the devil also goes out from hell and transforms, pretending to be God, so a man may confuse those two, aren’t they brothers? They are alike, but woe betide you if you mistake the Devil for God, or even much worse, if you mistake God for the Devil! [Цанев 2002: 41].

Ultimately, the emissary is identified: during her astral travels in time, Sekula recognises him as Priest Bogomil, the heresiarch:

So, this is who that old man is, who pretended to be God and who said to her: “Give everything away, Sekula!”, said Sekula to herself [...] and, hiding her face with a kerchief, she asked the woman next to her: “Who is this?”
 “Priest Bogomil,” the woman answered [Цанев 2002: 276].

This identification removes demonic stigma from the letter from another world as we return to the binary opposition of Christianity and Bogomilism, a familiar element in Bulgarian culture.

²⁸ *The Letter from Heaven*, often called also the *Legend of Sunday*, featured in the apocryphal tradition of Eastern and Western Christianity. Functionally, it played a role similar to the gnostic “letter from another world” in that its goal was to turn sinners away from sin and back to grace. However, “a letter from another world” was always aimed at a specific individual, whereas the heavily apocalyptic *The Letter from Heaven* was an open message addressed to broad groups of the faithful; see Wrocławski 1991; Петканова (ed.) 1981: 396–398.

Set in motion by the mysterious emissary, Sekula's pilgrimage towards transcendence is connected with a symbolic severing of ties with the world of earthly values, an important gesture in the gnostic tradition. On impulse, Sekula gives away all of her money and denudes her house of all material possessions. From that moment on, she will have the gift of clairvoyance, which she will use in other people's service. As a holder of secret knowledge, she looks at her life at the hour of her death, and in a mystical trance she sees the future of her whole family/nation. This vision of the future, filtered through the lens of a *pneumatic's* sensitivity, provides insight for understanding the concept of man and history embedded in the novel.

One particularly striking element of Sekula's visions includes three sequences in which she features not as a passive observer of events taking place in distant times and places, but as an active witness who offers running commentary, looks for hidden motivations of human actions and engages important historical figures in conversation. In Tsanev's novel, the vision of the past offered in Sekula's account is regarded as a testimony capable of bringing into doubt the credibility of the canonical accounts of the life of Jesus, the Christianisation of Bulgaria or the Bogomil movement. In doing so, Tsanev cleverly invokes the three main pillars of the Bulgarian heterogeneous vision of the world (Christianity, paganism, gnosticism) to try and define the meaning of that inheritance.

In those passages of the text which are *de facto* verifications of gospel truths, Tsanev indirectly references the 1965 novel *Vreme čuda* by the Serbian writer Borislav Pekić [Пекић 1965] and *Лазар у Исус* (*Lazarus and Jesus*, 1979), a later short story by Emilian Stanev [Станев 1981], which builds on a debunking strategy that involves questioning the causal relationships proposed by the evangelists. Like Pekić or Stanev before him, Tsanev primarily questions the motives of Christ. In her visions of private scenes from the life of Jesus and his companions, Sekula sees Jesus not as a Messiah free from human failings, but rather as a fearful and submissive man, his every step controlled by the apostles who are the real moderators of history, acting to ensure that the visions of the prophets are fulfilled.²⁹ This role is clearly too much for Christ, an idea metaphorically expressed by the growing hump of human sins growing on his back and pushing him down to earth. In effect, the vision of a willing sacrifice by the son of God is replaced by a vision of Jesus' martyrdom as a preplanned spectacle orchestrated by the apostles, in which Judas has an equally honourable mission [Цанев 2002: 78–93,

²⁹ Pekić gives this role to Judas, who stages a series of miracles.

246–252, 355–362]. In this world, where fossilised figures come to life to reveal their “true” identity different from that recorded in the scriptures, only one group – the oppressors and torturers – remains the same regardless of changing contexts. As she travels in time, Sekula notes that the people who crucified Christ would later crucify his enemies with equal enthusiasm. Executioners travelling in time or getting reincarnated in later generations are a recurrent motif in Sekula’s visions. They appear in the flesh in twentieth-century Smallville, as distant history and modernity form an inextricable knot.

In this context, the lasting trauma of compulsory Christianisation, an experience associated with cruelty and bloodshed, plays an equally important role. Sekula’s vision confirms a bloody massacre ordered by Prince Boris against the aristocratic proto-Bulgarian families in response to their rebellion against a religion imposed on them by force:

Sekula’s soul had grown dark, as if flooded by clotted blood; behind her back she could hear the screams of women and the sobs of children. [...] The people came in ranks and one after the other they filed past the Greek bishop, who raised the Cross to each man’s lips and asked in Greek [...]: “Do you renounce Tangra and accept Christ?” The man would turn his head, spitting into the marble baptismal font filled of holy water [...], place his head voluntarily on the rock, one of the executioners would take a swing, and the head would fly off directly into a well dug two steps from the place of execution, the blood streamed down [...] the women were screaming, they were pressed down to the rock by force, [...] the fourth executioner was cutting the heads of children and infants in the air, as they stood there astonished. [...] And so, it was 52 boyar clans, they said [Цанев 2002: 270–271].

Sekula’s account questions the value of Christianity (introduced by force in the ninth century) and the legitimacy of the authorities (who betrayed their people). This is not a new idea: in the interwar period it was already a familiar element of Bulgarian reflections on the national tradition, promoted particularly by writers who were hostile to Christianity and regarded the pagan tradition as a hope for Bulgarian revival after the trauma of the lost wars [see, among others, Н. Димитрова 1996a]. In their interpretation, the original atrocity visited on the tribal aristocracy became the prototype for the violent relationship between the state and the subjects. In the journalistic sections of the novel, this picture of Bulgarian history is ironically presented through the lofty, pathos-filled elocutions of one of the novel’s *raisonneurs*, a Bulgarian history professor. His megalomaniacal vision of Bulgarian history as it were complements Sekula’s mystical visions, but also alludes to the achievements of

Géza Fehér,³⁰ a real-life Hungarian scholar in the interwar period and an authority on the proto-Bulgarians. In the novel, this praise of proto-Bulgarian greatness (and dismissal of Bulgaria's Slavic heritage) gets ever more extravagant with every shot of *rakiya* the professor downs. Ultimately, the pseudo-scholar's drunken disquisitions congeal into the familiar Bulgarian theory of "the forty fathers of the nation," a version of a multi-ethnic history where the heritage of blood and culture determines the perceptions of the world order, with the proto-Bulgarian substrate playing the main role:

In vain, he says, do you renounce the proto-Bulgarians; if there is anything good left in you, you inherited it from them, because they were not wild barbarians, but a highly civilised nation that possessed secret knowledge of the cosmos. Unlike the uneducated Italians, as the Hungarian used to call them after he'd had his third brandy, who, fifteen centuries after Christ, burned Giordano Bruno at the stake for claiming that the Earth revolves around the Sun – 48 centuries before Christ the proto-Bulgarians already knew about it; the Sun carved on their gravestones with the six planets circulating around it was to them something like a coat of arms, which the Bogomils – their followers, later used as their sacred sign [Цанев 2002: 118].

In the novel, the professor is preoccupied less with the ancient political history of the proto-Bulgarians, and more with the far more important matter of the tribe's secret knowledge, which it passed on to the Bogomils, portrayed as inheritors of the libertarian ideas of the believers in Tangra. In Tsanev's novel, this *gnosis* is another utopia promising individual and collective redemption, except it refers to the mystical reality rather than to real life on earth. In this case, the world is ordered according to the rules of Bogomil Manichaeism.

The second sequence of Sekula's visions which plays an important role in the novel is the vision of a mystical meeting of the disciples of Priest Bogomil in Madara, the holy place of past religions professed in that locality. Sekula watches a procession of gods filing past: Dionysus, Perun, Tangra, and Jesus validate that sacred plot of land, which comes to be treated as a symbol of the syncretic Bulgarian spirituality

³⁰ In the interwar period, Geza Fehér (1890–1955) conducted painstaking archaeological research into the proto-Bulgarian tradition. Fehér's scholarly achievements included a monograph on the Magyar Rider published in German and Hungarian (1928) and a series of studies on the proto-Bulgarian cultural heritage. In 1934 he was decorated by Tsar Boris III for his contributions to scholarship; in 1943 he became a member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Little is known about his involvement with the Hungarian intelligence service. His scholarship was informed by the ideological intention to discover distant cultural affinity between the proto-Bulgarians and the old Magyars. See Aparó 1997.

[Цанев 2002: 272]. In Sekula’s vision, Madara also becomes a sign of a space denuded of sanctity and abandoned by the gods, illustrated by the exodus of the perfect ones, who begin a mystical journey to the Sun in Madara. In this case Tsanev turns away from the Bogomil anti-cosmic dualism and pessimism, replacing it with a portrayal of the Bogomils as forerunners of Copernicanism and pioneers of knowledge about the stars and the cosmos, a mythologised interpretation present in Bulgarian culture [Szwat-Gyłybowa 2002].

The Earth is dancing around the Sun along with the other five planets like children dancing around one mother. You also dance with joy, inhabitants of the heavens, and sing, when the sky light appears on the horizon, because the sun is the eye of God [Цанев 2002: 275].

This is pantheistic knowledge, referencing the Apollonian religion, but also to the modern holistic Theosophic systems, notably the teachings of Peter Deunov [Митев 1995: 46–49]. Tsanev’s symbolic portrayal of winged people leaving the earthly realm of the evil demiurge for their true country relies on the topos of pilgrimage to the house of the Father as the true calling of every *pneumatic*, a conventional trope in esoteric literature:

And everyone turned around to face the East, and when the sun appeared over the plain on the distant horizon, they started singing quietly and monotonously, and, having flung out their hands, they were waving them lightly, as if those were stork wings; all were dressed in long white robes that covered their legs, and in the morning twilight they really looked like big, white birds who, bouncing lightly, were preparing to take flight. [...] Sekula rubbed her eyes and looked again: over the fields and the mountains, from one end of the earth to the other, smoothly beating their wings, thousands of white birds were flying [...] [Цанев 2002: 276].

Given that oneiric visions are interspersed in Tsanev’s novel with ironic commentary from the narrator, this image of mass flight of Bogomil “perfect ones” ultimately invites the pragmatic question: who are the Bulgarians who stayed behind and got stuck in history? Tsanev perceives the original traumatic conflict between the *hylics* and the *pneumatics* as the source of lasting social divisions, which remain essentially unchanged even as they get repackaged in different historical periods. The succession of new “religions” embraced by the state, from Christianity to nationalism, communism and liberalism, are nothing but ideological costumes obscuring the same motivation of the authorities, namely the will to power. What, then, defines the moral horizons of the actors of Bulgarian history?

One answer to that question is provided in some way by the executioner and his victim, i.e. Tsar Boris and Priest Bogomil. In one of Sekula’s

visions, the tsar tries to come across as a repentant sinner, mindful of the way he wronged the nation by introducing Christianity, which eroded the Bulgarian soul. In fact, he gives Sekula the mission of bringing the Bulgarians back to the old faith, which is the only thing that can safeguard their inner freedom [Цанев 2002: 54–55]. In a way similar to Emilian Stanev's, Tsanev updates Petar Mutafchiyev's idea that the medieval Byzantine influence had terrible consequences for Bulgarian culture, and takes further the discussion of the long-term repercussions of that process. He holds Christianity, a religion of the weak, responsible for instilling a slave mentality in the Bulgarians, and portrays spiritual oppression as a threat to human ethos; once forced to abandon the faith of the ancestors, people lose their moral fibre: they become spineless and receptive to new conversions in the interest of individual survival:

[...] nobody gave them [the participants in the struggle for the nation's liberation – G.S.G.] even a penny to buy a piece of bread, nor even a shirt so they could change from their rags; those who lived quietly and peacefully during the times of slavery, their heads bowed, featureless as ants – the same voiceless and submissive heroes, when they smelled freedom, leapt like lions, seized power and property – the same people abandoned Deacon Levski's mother to throw herself into a well from hunger, and to kill herself out of shame for being lice-ridden from her poverty and loneliness [Цанев 2002: 61].

Priest Bogomil is likewise held responsible for the nation's moral degradation in Tsanev's account of social ills. His doctrine is portrayed in the novel as an expression of pragmatic moral relativism, where any rule of social ethics in this world can be trampled underfoot. In Sekula's vision, Bogomil preaches a duty of spiritual independence from any authority (which he portrays as inherently demonic, prepared to kill the living religions and to enforce religious beliefs on the population wherever convenient) [Цанев 2002: 275], but on the other hand he praises conformism, hypocrisy and betrayal as morally indifferent means of preserving intact the "vessel of the soul," called to live beyond the confines of this world:

All the material and visible things in this world are the work of the Devil. Our heavenly Father does nothing in this world [...] God does nothing whatsoever in this earthly world [...] Only thought and word come from God, and whoever is satisfied with that, he is dear to God and is an inhabitant of heaven, thrown by the Devil into this here hell on earth [Цанев 2002: 273].

[...] Dissemble in everything, do not cast your pearls before swine! [...] If necessary, renounce me, even curse me, do and speak everything against me, but come back to me again – and I will accept you again with joy [Цанев 2002: 275].

In the *hylics*, this message must necessarily reinforce the belief that biological survival is the only sensible life philosophy. Tsanev fills the pages of his novel with a parade of traitors spanning centuries of Bulgarian history, all of whom are prepared to betray friends and kin at the drop of a hat. This is a world where victim turns executioner, the executioner becomes a victim, and henchmen get away scot free by serving a succession of regimes feeding on human blood and suffering. The novel’s images of twentieth-century Bulgaria are dominated by a journalistic diagnosis of the moral decay of a nation aching for revenge [see Цанев 2002: 221 et passim].

In this demonised reality, the alternative to real life is collective sleep, a trance-like state of vegetation (incidentally, a familiar experience under Communism), which envelops the *hylics* as they worriedly go about their daily concerns:

Other than that life went on quietly and peacefully. We got used to it. Everybody kept their head down. We had no land, no worries, no thoughts, there was somebody to think for us about everything: when to plough, what to sow, when, what, how; we did what we were told, we ate, we drank. That was quite cool, actually [Цанев 2002: 288].

In this respect, Tsanev is something of a traditionalist, invoking the motif of insanity reminiscent of the reflection on Bulgarian society offered by Ivan Vazov in the Bulgarian national epic *Under the Yoke*. To Tsanev and Vazov alike, given the inner enslavement of the Bulgarians, spiritual independence can only be retained by a child or else by a deviant who rejects social norms. In *Мравки и богове*, this role is given to the only righteous characters, the idiot Stefcho and Sekula’s granddaughter and namesake who, like her grandmother, can communicate with the spirits:

And so, in Smallville it was again peaceful and quiet. Nobody dared to look up. The fool Stefcho – he may have been a fool but he also guessed what was up, and he began to approach people around corners and, shooting furtive glances all around him, would whisper, quieter than ever before, his puzzling phrase, “Long live the Pacific Ocean!” [Цанев 2002: 302].

Democracy, Aristotle told me [...] set out from Athens twenty-five centuries ago, roamed the entire world, he said it even came to Albania, and it’s only here that can’t show up; isn’t there, says democracy, anyone here to greet me, could it be that this nation has died, or perhaps is asleep; run, says Aristotle, together with your grandmother to the bell tower, where there you can see the entire Balkan peninsula, and if you see democracy anywhere, wandering in the ditches close to the barbed wire, ring the bells, let people wake up, let them break up the barbed wire [Цанев 2002: 342].

Sleep as an allegory of the nation's passivity in the face of fate, a conventional trope in Bulgarian literature, forms a parallel to the novel's recurring question: who are we, gods or ants? What are the limits of a nation's moral horizon? What is our highest value? Is it merely survival, justifying any acts of evil and conversion? Is conformism so important to the nation's social life as to become a defining characteristic of Bulgarian identity?

Where all those three hundred thousand convinced Communists were hiding all that time will remain a mystery in our history, but it is difficult not to ask ourselves: is our nation that corrupt, seeing as it quickly turned to where the wind blows, is that mercantilism, or hypocrisy, or fear and submission to the strong [Цанев 2002: 222–223]?

In Tsanev's world, original events behind the collective myths form a matrix which gets endlessly copied over the centuries. In this context, world history is an eternal cycle of repetitions, a recurrent apocalypse that leaves no hope for the coming of a New Jerusalem. This rule of destruction is spectacularly illustrated in the novel by the sinking of the ancestral seat of the Kardamovs, which collapses into a Thracian tomb buried underneath. The chaos is everywhere, and disintegration and decay penetrate human souls. In the world of the novel, the personality of the family's best son, Varadin, disintegrates to illustrate the pessimistic thesis that the world cannot be repaired: there can be no collective redemption, and individual redemption is only available for the elect.

Having gained, through illumination, the secret of the universe that remains inaccessible to science, Varadin thus inherited the secret knowledge of the proto-Bulgarians and the Bogomils, opening his eyes to the hidden relationships between the microcosm and the macrocosm:

[...] having gathered together in his mind the dormant energy from the brain cells, asleep for centuries, of several thousand generations of the dark proto-Bulgarians, the sentimental Slavs and the mysterious Thracians, he penetrated the dark womb of the Cosmic Mother, and saw there the human-shaped embryo of our nascent universe [Цанев 2002: 409].

Varadin saw that the universe resembled a huge human embryo, curled up in the dark womb of something even greater, immense and impermeable, the Cosmic Mother giving birth to the universes. [...] The embryo was still sunk in lethargic sleep, but it breathed and grew, and in the middle, where its head probably was, supercompressed galaxies flashed and throbbed [...] – this was the brain of the Universe's embryo. "And God created man in His own image and likeness" – doesn't this mean that man was actually created in the image and likeness of the Universe? [...] that means that

other bodies can pass through us, people from other parallel worlds, dead or alive, can pass through us [...] Sekula, his mother, had the gift penetrate such space, she could enter a person and could see and hear – both the living and the dead [Цанев 2002: 375].

In Tsanev’s novel, this triumph of the human intellect over the overpowering force of reality proves short-lived and illusory. In the *Epilogue*, we see the character degraded to the status of a beast kept in a grotesque cage placed in his room. This ironic postscript to the story of the Kardamovs emphasises the pessimistic view that an awakening need not always lead to the conscious existence of a *pneumatic*. Enlightenment can become an unbearable burden, leading to regression and loss of salvation. The hope offered by gnosis and generous utopias is illusory: in this prison of a world there can be no road to redemption.

Modelled on Bogomil myths, Tranev’s vision of the earth as the realm of Satan is the antithesis to the Enlightenment vision of history and progress. The promise of a paradise on earth is replaced by the sense that the last illusions of meaning are fading fast. In place of history as a linear sequence of events, ordered by commonsensical relationships of causality, Tsanev proposes vision of history as circular movement, an unending chain of repetitions. The current question about the meaning of history is in this context essentially a question about the meaning of human life and the life of nations, a question that must remain essentially unanswerable.

This pessimistic understanding of history accompanied by a sense of utter bankruptcy of all utopias is inspired by the Manichaean paradigm: the most anxiety-filled form of spiritual life, a manifestation of an ahistorical state of spirit, a perennial eternal symptom of the original terror. This is the attitude that appears to underlie Tsanev’s vision of Bulgarian melancholy as a reaction to historical experience. In the modern times, this kind of melancholy arises in a world that offers no guarantee of meaning. As noted by Marek Bieńczyk, a Polish scholar and writer, melancholy

made it clear, in its own non-philosophical way, that in its world, which has no beginning or end, a world where everything has happened before, everything has been recorded before, and everything is spinning in a circle of repetitions [...], there can be no names of one’s own. The only thing that exists is a theatrical proliferation of masks and disguises [...] [Bieńczyk 2000: 35].

Expressed in an allegorical manner (in this case through the idea of a circle of repetitions), history manifests itself not as a process of perennial life and progress, but rather a process of fading and extinction. It is marked by a disillusionment with sainthood, fulfilment, or the historical

ethos. The resulting vacuum is filled with fear provoked by a horrific world that offers no sense of support or belonging. Tsanev's *homo bulgaricus melancholicus*, an anti-Cartesian melancholy subject, feeds on an abhorrence of the state as a Satanic moderator of history, but entertains no hope of ever finding release from the evil world and returning to the Father: an inner exile living in a world abandoned by God, looking back at not just one, but thirteen centuries of solitude in a world where all meaning has imploded.

CONCLUSIONS

This book is an attempt to identify the ways in which modern and post-modern Bulgarian culture has made use of the fact that a dualist heresy of the Bogomils was present in Bulgarian lands in the medieval period. The inspiration for this project came from personal experience. During the several years I spent living in Bulgaria I could not help but notice how repeatedly the Bogomil heritage was brought up in conversation, in a variety of contexts and with varying degrees of earnestness, as a symptom of Bulgarian cultural specificity. Ambiguous, open-ended and unconstrained by the rules of intellectual precision or coherent value systems, the concept appeared to be part of popular knowledge; regardless of personal opinion, Bogomilism was consistently regarded as an important formation which has supposedly left an enduring mark on Bulgarian mentality and tradition.

Unfamiliar and unintelligible to me, this living proof of cultural memory piqued my curiosity as a researcher, and encouraged me to investigate the sources of the enduring popularity of that *lieu de memoire*. It seemed to me that the effects of school education combined with the few literary and scholarly texts on Bogomilism present in Bulgarian high culture could not by themselves account for that cultural phenomenon. I decided to examine how Bogomilism had been portrayed in Bulgarian popular literature, educational texts, journalism, and a variety of religious, occultist, political and ideological writings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I was facing the classic “hermeneutic problem” where “one is aware of confronting an alien tradition to which he has never belonged or one he no longer unquestioningly accepts” [Gadamer 1977: 46]. I was looking at texts which at that time I believed occupied a peripheral position in Bulgarian culture, a culture which had itself developed in its modern form on the peripheries of European culture and under the weight

of a long-standing complex of “cultural retardation.” However, I found myself unable to shake off the feeling, inspired by Gadamer, that it was precisely those kinds of peripheral cultural texts that were communicating particularly salient messages.

The sheer amount and diversity of the historical material quickly surpassed my expectations,¹ and new texts kept appearing, posing fresh challenges. This is best illustrated by Chapter 4 of this book: all of the books I discuss in that chapter came out as I was already working on the project. Those dynamic developments where contemporary writings were being inspired by the Bogomil inheritance reinforced my belief that my work was touching a nerve: that I was dealing with a phenomenon of considerable significance in Bulgarian culture. On the other hand, there were those literary critics who distanced themselves from such texts. Trendafilov, for instance, appreciated the literary merit of the novels by Zarev and Donchev, but criticised the way they invoked an anachronistic value system that harked back to the era of “grand narratives,” and dismissed them as being of marginal importance:

I wish to emphasise one thing – those books by Donchev and Zarev are masterfully written. That is not the problem here. However, those are books for writers rather than for readers [...]. In some way they have failed to move beyond our traditional historical fiction that lauds the glorious history of Bulgaria, and uses characters as puppets in grand patriotic narratives. Motifs such as the united nation, the spiritual leader, or the Holy Book seem particularly dated [...]. Whether they like it or not, the axiological orientations of the present day have taken a different course [Треднафилов 2004: 14].

Trendafilov, who had previously gone on record as an opponent of esoteric speculation,² did not choose to make it clear what kind of values were supposedly preferred instead in Bulgarian society. In an intuitive judgment call, he chose to appraise the two novels from the perspective of rationalist disgust provoked by new attempts to reconcile mystical initiation with the defrauded patriotic narrative. By openly opposing a teleological vision of the world, Trendafilov was siding with those who regarded the earlier cultural uses of Bogomilism as defunct, and questioned the practice of legitimising new ideas by dressing them up in the familiar trappings of local culture.

¹ Several texts from the early nineteenth century proved impossible to locate in Bulgarian libraries or Sofia’s rare books dealers. Surviving indirect references to such texts (or lack thereof) suggest that their impact was marginal, and would not substantially change the picture presented here.

² See his comments on the writings of Nikolai Rainov in Chapter 2.

I believe that Trendafilov's comments bear out my decision, made early on, to steer clear of the term "myth" in my book (even though I often discuss "myth-making" as a cultural activity). Myths must be embraced by the community; myth-making, by contrast, involves a manipulation of collective thinking, and may well remain ineffective. Viewed from the perspective of its adherents, a myth is an element of *autopoiesis*; a myth served up by "engineers of human souls" may or may not get embraced by society as intended. An externally imposed interpretive pattern – which undergoes major simplifications within society at individual level – may become present in the popular thinking of the users of a given culture as a kind of hybrid, the product of a compromise between heterogeneous worldviews. Bogomilism, which is no longer a living religion and therefore suffers from none of the idealising or denigrating distortions of one, continues to be a significant meeting ground for overlapping interpretations, each of which treats it as a constitutive element of Bulgarian cultural identity, and makes it part of its own historiosophic narrative.

The recurring question, "Why are we the way we are?", which in the 1990s appeared in the title of a scholarly anthology on Bulgarian national identity, suggests that the Bulgarian intelligentsia continues to feel the need to structure its knowledge of the Bulgarian nation in terms of a clear-cut, transparent model. This invites questions about the provenance of those cultural models which are now being taken for granted in popular Bulgarian thinking. What was it that came first in this case – collective memory based on texts of folklore, or the "grand narrative" shaped by historians and journalists as part of a deliberate project? The cultural self-awareness of a traditional society, or the ideologised texts of modern culture?

As we navigate the dense undergrowth of historical questions and conundrums related to Bogomilism we must bear in mind that there are no surviving original texts or accounts produced by actual historical Bulgarian Bogomils in the Church Slavonic language. Given the enormous scale of anti-heretical narratives produced in reaction to the movement, this lack of credible historical material means that any kinds of generalisations, or indeed of research questions, can only be valid with regard to the given set of ideas or conjectures which currently happens to be regarded as "historical fact" or "scientific truth."

As mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter 1, there are no reasons to believe that nineteenth century Bulgarians situated at the cusp of modernity had retained any memory of Bogomilism as a social movement or ideological formation, even if some relics of dualism (of unclear provenance) could be found in contemporary Bulgarian folk culture and

apocryphal writings. The complex relationship between folk religion and Church teachings and practices is a separate problem, which increasingly attracts scholarly attention to so-called “folk Christianity,” understood as

that sphere of spiritual life in medieval society where, owing to the interaction of written texts (ritual, canonical, pseudocanonical), rites, ritual practices and other cultural texts (e.g. iconography), there emerges a monolithic vision of the world and man, consistent with the Christian view of life, modified through the prism of beliefs of traditional communities [Minczew 2003: 18].

However, the extent of such interplay between Bogomilism and official religious practice remains an open question. Be that as it may, given the eventual disappearance of the *haeresis bulgarica* as a distinctive movement it appears that the impact of Bogomil dualism in the period of Ottoman rule was already limited. At the same time, the activities of monastic scribes who continued to painstakingly copy the anti-heretical works³ attacking the movement may have paradoxically preserved the memory of the heresy with its attendant conflicts and divisions within the population, the Ottoman period undoubtedly providing a fresh supply of traumatic experiences.⁴

It should be borne in mind in this context that participants in a given culture inherit an interpretation of the world which may have been forming for millennia, and may not always be fully aware of its underlying assumptions [Dybel 1991: 74]. The complex history of Bulgarian culture suggests that the inherited cultural patterns must have been shaped by a number of diverse influences (some embraced willingly, some provoking resistance). Perhaps as a result of the centuries-long coexistence of various worldviews including paganism, Christianity, gnostic dualism, Islam, Judaism, enlightened rationalism and various competing ideologies, which were forced to remain in a situation of continuous dialogue, an attitude had emerged in Bulgarian culture, variously referred to as religious indifference, religious tolerance, intellectual independence

³ *The Sermon Against the Heretics* by Presbyter Cosmas survives in 25 copies, only four of which date back to the late fifteenth century, and the rest were made in the sixteenth-nineteenth centuries; see Грашова (ed.) 1982: 309.

⁴ Primarily meaning the various forms of voluntary or involuntary conversions to Islam. One source of trauma was the Ottoman practice of kidnapping Christian children and pressing them into the janissary corps. No less problematic were the individual and collective conversions, occurring on a particularly large scale in the south-western portion of the country, today inhabited by so-called “Pomaks” or Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. Incidentally, this area had a particularly strong Bogomil presence before the Ottoman invasion.

or healthy skepticism. Perhaps this attitude would not have been as pronounced in a different set of historical circumstances, or perhaps it would have been regarded in a different light, since inheriting ready-made traditional patterns of thought, emotion and action always involves social and individual endorsement of any judgements that the users of a given culture may treat as valuable without realising their provenance [Szacki 1991]. As a result, reconstruction of a complete genealogy of Bulgarian attitudes and its connections with Bogomilism as a historical phenomenon seems no longer possible.

Bogomilism as a *lieu de memoire* occupies a central position in this book, but this is not tantamount to regarding it as centrally important to Bulgarian cultural tradition in general. Beginning in the nineteenth century, however, modern Bulgarian elites arguably engaged in a project of careful semantic grooming, trying to portray Bogomilism as a living element of national heritage, which occupied a prominent place in the written tradition. The number and popularity of writings containing references to Bogomilism suggests a corresponding level of reader interest, a certain correlation between collective mentality and the values explicated by the writers. Perhaps, as a result of that sense on the part of the elites that the Bulgarian cultural self-awareness was a fluid and heterogeneous thing sensitive to matters of religious identity, the forgotten Bogomil tradition came to be deemed as a useful instrument in the process of “reconciling” those heterogeneous worldviews. Ultimately, the aspirations of the intelligentsia to reconcile those diverging interpretations of the world failed to produce a single, coherent and monolithic vision of the *haeresis bulgarica* or of its importance in Bulgarian history. This apparent heterogeneity of approaches (guided as they were by the semiotic needs of national ideology) confirms that the primary function of those historical, pseudo-historical and literary narratives about Bogomilism, for all the obvious differences between them, has remained unchanged since the nineteenth century. At the same time, the “invented tradition” of Bogomilism gradually became a kind of litmus test for the Bulgarian elites, revealing the nuances of worldview and ideology: a more reliable touchstone of attitudes than Orthodox Christianity, which was often regarded as little more than a formalised emblem of national identity⁵ or indeed (in the Communist period) an element of false consciousness rejected wholesale as opium for the masses.

⁵ To a not inconsiderable degree this is a consequence of the enduring historical impact of the Ottoman Empire, where religious identity influenced one’s position in social hierarchies.

The source material indicates that the “progressive” option has been dominant in this ideological conflict, which used the memory of Bogomilism for purposes of modernisation by making the movement a symbol of the idea of triumphant, perennial progress and Bulgarian spiritual freedom. In this sense, Bogomilism as a *lieu de memoire* was an instrument for adapting Bulgarian culture to European civilisation and its values, which were identified with the inheritance of the Age of Reason. In this difficult process, the narrative of Bogomilism was intended to play a compensatory role for the community, alleviating the stress of cultural change. New and alien developments were portrayed as being familiar and ancient: supposed long-standing elements of the old, gnostic Bulgarian identity. This produced a double educational effect, which Bulgarian writers perhaps did not realise fully. Firstly, this anchoring of the ideas of Western civilisation in local history made them appear respectably old and comfortably familiar. Secondly, this fabricated Bogomil tradition (alongside the traditions of Cyril and Methodius and of the proto-Bulgarians) gave the Bulgarian national tradition a sense of much-needed self-assurance as tangible evidence of Bulgarian farsightedness, intellectual courage, pragmatism and practical wisdom. With its roots in the popular experience of the people, Bogomilism was being portrayed as an insightful and original attempt to solve the problem of evil.

In the context of a permanent crisis of values (partially stimulated by external events and pressures) which provided the backdrop to the ongoing debates on Bogomilism, history and pseudo-history highlighted those elements of the past that stemmed from a sense that moral experiences had a profound significance to the experience of history as a meaningful process.⁶ Reflection on Bogomilism became enduringly linked to a kind of anamnesis of the sources of Bulgarian ethics and, consequently, the sources of Bulgarian collective identity. On the part of the elites, this feat was either a product of cultural misunderstanding or a deliberate deformation of Bogomil axiology, since Bogomilism inherently abhorred the created world, and was consequently indifferent about matters of ethics.⁷ In this airbrushed portrayal, the gnostic pessimism of the Bogomils was replaced by an optimism about the possibility that

⁶ For more information on the connections between ethics and concepts of history, see Grzegorzczyk 1990: 48.

⁷ Quispel noted that this is a fundamental property of gnosis, which he interpreted as the product of the gnostic abhorrence for the cosmic and moral law imposed by the Demiurge, a “highly sensitive gap in the gnosis which cannot be filled up either with an abhorrence of the world or with libertinism” [Quispel 1951: 22].

the world might be repaired; asceticism was replaced by vitalism and hedonistic values; and the Bogomil abhorrence of the *hylics* was replaced by their supposed concern for human well-being. The movement's gnostic tradition was fabricated and mapped onto the conceptual network of the new world; thus destroyed yet again, it also became endowed with attributes intended to firmly anchor Bulgarian identity to a stable point of reference in the form of its own (invented) tradition. This exercise also deferred to the problem of religious identity. By placing the heretical mentality in the pre-Ottoman period, it provided the raw material for the construction of a mythologised historical and philosophical foundation to those who wanted to create an image of Bulgarians that would provide an alternative to that constituted in the period of national revival. The stereotype of the Orthodox Christian patriot (which they believed was a false portrayal of Bulgarian spirituality) was now countered with an anti-stereotype of Bulgarians as perennial heretics, the first fathers of European religious reform movements, European rationalism, enlightened humanism and, more recently, syncretic New Age spirituality.

Presumably for tactical reasons, texts praising Bogomilism involved the tropes of silence and omission. They reversed the centre and the peripheries: those areas where the heresy had taken hold were now being portrayed as the centre, its influence radiating not only to the territories of the *Slavia Orthodoxa* (as was the case with the writings produced in the first and second Bulgarian states), but to Western Europe and, even more broadly, throughout the world. The project of defeating the provincialism complex took the form of various concepts of Bulgarian cultural missionism in several variants, "Enlightened," political or esoteric. A second type of omission, calculated to eliminate the practical consequences of the mystical dualism of the Bogomils, served a different purpose. Perhaps Bulgarian culture, as it was looking for a place of its own in the modern world, was defending itself in this way from gnostic nihilism, blamed by conservative writers for the Bulgarian passivity and nihilism.

Such binary oppositions recurrently appearing in Bulgarian attitudes towards Bogomilism did not always involve a clear choice one way or the other. Some of the narratives invoked the repertoire of concepts that relativized "hard" values, and, for lack of uniform, rigid norms, adopted Bulgarian culture as the norm. In particular, this applies to those concepts, popular since the interwar period, which treated Bulgarian culture as a bridge between the East and the West, and Bulgarians as "people of the crossroads," as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 [see Sujecka 2001]. Those concepts were further absorbed in the Communist period, albeit

in a suitably modified ideological form, and they resurfaced in the programme of cultural renewal based on the Living Ethics of the Roerichs, implemented by Zhivkova’s faction.

In modern times, this kind of reflection was reintroduced in a different context by Anani Stoinev. In his article, tellingly entitled *Генезис на кръстопътния човек – културата на траки, прабългари и славяни* (*The Origins of the Man at the Crossroads – The Culture of the Thracians, Proto-Bulgarians and Slavs* [Стойнев 1996]), Stoinev affirmed the validity of the metaphor of the crossroads with regards to Bulgarian culture, which he viewed as a product of a creolisation process. Despite his general agreement with the earlier generations of writers, Stoinev reappraised the metaphorical associations evoked by the idea of crossroads, revealing the ideological differences between himself and earlier writers. Again, Bogomilism turned out to be a kind of litmus test, bringing out the nature of those differences. Implicit in Stoinev’s argument, the reflection on Bogomilism as a quintessence of the “spirituality of crossroads” spoke volumes about his ideological preferences:

We might say that Bogomilism is an essential quality of mankind at a crossroads, viewed from a historical point of view. It is a manifestation of otherness, alienation from one’s own community, a form of alienation which, because of the unity not only of blood, but of language as well, is most hostile to the thing it resembles – the events in today’s Bosnia show this in the most unambiguous manner. In this sense Bogomilism and its variously named modifications in the [Balkan – G.S.G.] peninsula – is the presence of a janissary quality in the man of the crossroads; a janissary quality which does not always result from violence, but more often from, as it were, voluntary change of faith, which comes across almost as an admonition of the imprudence of fellow-tribesmen [Стойнев 1996: 118].

Symptomatically, the passage communicates a palpable fear of conversion and of susceptibility to labile worldviews on the part of “the man of the crossroads,” instances of which can be found in many cultural texts. Similar ideas appear in the controversial but popular studies on the character and psychology of the Bulgarian nation. In his book *Душевност и оцеляване* (*Spirituality and Salvation* [Семов 1982]), Marko Semov highlighted the negative impact on Bulgarian ethics of the philosophy of survival which he believed had dominated popular mentality in Bulgaria under Ottoman rule. In a later book entitled *Българската народопсихология. Размисли върху това какви сме били и какви сме днес* (*The Psychology of the Bulgarian Nation: Reflections on What We Used to Be and What We Are Today* [Семов 1999]) Semov described this as a “janissary attitude,” which he associated with national nihilism. Yet

again, Bogomilism complemented this negative portrayal of Bulgarian identity. He acknowledged that the movement had been invoked to explain disparate Bulgarian qualities ranging from noble minded rebellion against all constraints to “a demonic force of destruction” [Семов 1999: 545], but his own interpretations of the ills that mark Bulgarian social attitudes invoked the latter rather than the former.

Similar ideas mostly appear in those texts that seek to settle social scores and engage in a polemic with Bulgaria’s social reality. Equally, they have been treated with ridicule in Bulgarian literature as fossilised formations of collective mentality that merely generate Bulgarian complexes. This group of texts would include, among others, the satires by Stanislav Stratiev appearing in *Българския модел* (*The Bulgarian Model*, 1991):

We can blame everything on slavery,
And on those who enslaved us.
We were so out of luck in terms of the sort of enslavers we got.

(...)

Elsewhere in the world, all those liberated nations
They end up all civilised, and speaking English.
Their enslavers even left them actual underground train lines.
But our enslavers were even more savage than ourselves.

(...)

We were out of luck in terms of our liberators as well.
We could have waited another three or four centuries for some other ones,
There would have been no harm in that.
We were out of luck in terms of our geographical situation, too.
What kind of sane people would willingly choose to settle in the Balkans.
People say that you shouldn’t even pee at the crossroads,
But we actually went and founded our state there [Стратиев 1991: 53–54].

Using ridicule and sarcastic humour as a defence against the overwhelming power of intellectual simplification, Stratiev satirised the anachronistic character of conceptual categories sanctioned in the Bulgarian identity discourse. And yet, this revitalised antiquity (which bears all the characteristics of an artificial construct) paradoxically makes itself felt even in such debunking exercises, which amount to an expression of the tension between the experience of the chaos of history and its conventional and simplified interpretation – between individual identity and the identity of an “imagined community” treated as a symbol. The novels of Emilian Stanev and the play by Blaga Dimitrova discussed in this book are a good case in point. By referring the reader to Bogomilism as an imagined original source of the mutilated and torn Bulgarian collective identity, those writers at the same time interpret the “heretical” charac-

ter as a positive value, indeed the most valuable element in the identity of a free individual. In doing so, they lay bare the destructive character of neo-Manichaeism at the egalitarian level in order to contrast it with the religion of the elites, which is a synthesis of neo-pagan hedonism, Christian love and pragmatism. After 1989, the essayist Boyan Obretenov gave this model of Bulgarian personality a quasi-sacred quality by placing it at the centre of his neo-pagan ethical utopia.

Post-1989 novels are only partially free from the paradigm described in this book. The fantasy books of Anton Donchev, Vladimir Zarev’s pseudo-religious treatise dressed up as a novel, and Stefan Tsanev’s neo-Manichaean story of Bulgarian national history are a testament of the undisguised turn on the part of the authors towards a mystical experience of the world which is typical of gnosis. In all those cases, Bogomilism offers a pretext to engage in philosophical reflection on a variety of matters including the state and the nation. Other than this single common denominator, the writers are quite different. Donchev, who is always sensitive to current ideological fashions, goes for a characteristic New Age take, Zarev engages in satanist speculation, and Tsanev is alone in undertaking a consistent interpretation of Bulgarian history in dualist terms (an attempt which he ultimately comes to question himself). Regardless of individual differences, each of the writers obsessively returns to the familiar set of questions: “Who are we?”, “Where did we come from?”, “Where are we heading?”. Although they try to answer those questions in the spirit of post-modernism, paradoxically looking for the roots of modern relativism in the gnostic paradigm, they essentially remain loyal to the injunctions of their own culture in its modern form. In the texts, Bulgarians continue to be portrayed as undaunted heretics and seekers of transcendent values.

The enduring survival of this model cannot be explained away by invoking the effective forms of persuasion used by the elites for more than a hundred years. Modern cultural studies based on Freudian psychoanalysis arguably throw extra light on the problem of the pregnant connections between collective identity and memory. According to Ankersmit, civilisational change involves a process where “civilizations will sometimes commit suicide and kill a former identity in order to acquire a new one,” resulting in a kind of historical void or absence:

[a] former identity is discarded ruthlessly, although with the greatest pain, and transformed into the cold heart of a new identity. [...] In a civilization’s later life these discarded identities will remain present only as an absence. [...] In the history of a civilization such dissociated pasts will ordinarily manifest themselves in what a civilization will tend to mythologize [Ankersmit 2005: 367–368].

The enduring survival of Bogomilism in Bulgarian cultural memory notwithstanding the centuries of the original movement's absence from Bulgarian social life may be a case in question. With a symbolic potential capable of modifying meanings depending on historical and cultural contingency, Bogomilism understood as an ahistorical phenomenon, a collective *lieu de memoire* with a fluid meaning, remains the product of negotiations between voluntary amnesia and anamnesis, which reveal more about the values of modernity than they do about Bogomilism itself. The map of those silences and reminiscences suggests that the deep drama of alienation from the world of traditional values engenders a need for explication of the incertitude of one's worldview. This need finds its legitimacy and nobility in the familiar Bogomilism.

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