

<https://doi.org/10.53656/phil2025-02S-12>

MYTHOLOGIZING OF BOGOMILISM IN THE WORK OF BULGARIAN WRITER IVAN GROZEV

Yonko Bonov

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Abstract. The study focuses on Ivan Grozev’s work related to Bogomilism. In this regard, some of his plays, as well as several individual poems, have been studied. Attention is drawn to the peculiar syncretism between Bogomil dualism, theosophical esotericism, occultism and Nietzscheanism in the creation of the mythologized image of Boyan the Magician – aiming to place the topic on an Orthodox theological paradigm, implying a relatively new or little-known point of view.

Keywords: Boyan the Magician; Bogomilism; New Bulgarian Literature; Zarathustra; Theosophy; Christianity

In the very beginning of the 20th century, the Bulgarian literature gradually abandoned the pole of the Bulgarian Renaissance pathos – in terms of ideology, genre and aesthetics – in order to embark on its Europeanization. Historical literature plots from the Bulgarian Middle Ages and their interpretation in a patriotic style were a representative part of this process. One of the accents was the topic on Bogomilism, as a group of writers sought to raise the awareness and interest of the whole society. This interest coincided with the fascination and spread of theosophy, occultism, Dunevism, as well as Nietzscheanism, and more precisely the “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” philosophical poem. On the other hand, the topic of Bogomilism was associated with the historical-patriotic topics relevant at the time and the socio-political unrest during the Middle Ages. Some of these works are of not particularly high literature value, at the level of ambitious direct declarativeness, external journalistic pathos, superficial features of the characters, theatrically rebellious slogans. Amidst this emotional expressiveness, Bogomilism was presented more as a socio-political than as a religious counterpoint. The mythologizing of Bogomilism, along with the increasingly popular new ideas of occultism and esoteric knowledge in Bulgaria in the first decades after the Liberation, was brought up as a topic in the circle of a group of writers. Boyan the Magician – one of the most mysterious personalities of the Bulgarian Middle Ages – was effectively included in this topic

as a literary character. In this regard, literary researcher Svetlana Stoycheva noted: "After the Liberation, the myth of Boyan the Magician truly flourished in the mythopoetic consciousness of Bulgarian modernist writers, in mutual suggestion with historians and esotericists" (Stoycheva 2017, p. 7).

The mythologizing of Bogomilism entered the new Bulgarian literature along with the ideas of populism and atheistic socialism. These new ideological currents at that time were particularly popular among our young teaching intelligentsia, as entered schools en masse at the end of the 19th century. The influence of Western rationalism in Bulgaria is undeniable. In this regard, it is worth noting the growing popularity of Ernest Renan's book "The Life of Jesus", first translated from Russian into Bulgarian in 1895, since the end of the 19th century. The influence of Hinduism and Buddhism from the East, as well as of various occult movements, is noteworthy. Of course, the growing popularity of the religious-mystical teaching of theosophy, penetrating Bulgaria in the beginning of the XX century, of Helena Blavatsky and Rabindranath Tagore's ideas, Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, Petar Dunov's talks (the latter was an open supporter of Bogomilism, considered as its successor), etc. The theologian Daniil Laskov wrote the following about the spread of theosophical teaching in Bulgaria in 1918: "It has been spreading in our country for more than ten years now and, it seems, has already managed to create its larger or smaller nests in almost all the major cities of our fatherland. Disguised under the guise of a religious movement in the spirit of the old supposedly Christianity, it is actually a very dangerous religious sect seeking to undermine Christianity at its very foundations. Its goal is to return modern cultural humanity to the crudest pagan superstitions once cultivated in the East..." (Laskov 1998, p. 3). Interest in Bogomilism appeared in the Bulgarian new literature, when part of the national clergy still did not have the necessary training, when far from all clerics were at the level of preachers and apologists, required in the new conditions of economic and cultural development of Bulgaria in the beginning of the 20th century. The famous protopresbyter Prof. Dr. Stefan Tsankov wrote the following about the level of the Bulgarian clergy in the first decades after the Liberation (Tsankov 1939, p. 10).

Who were the writers who penned their pens to revive and favor the idea of Bogomilism during the period under review? In fact, the most famous of them were in a friendly circle and their mutual influence is understandable, as it led to similar concepts and ideological and topic-related directions in their Bogomil creativity. We are talking here about the writers Ivan Grozev, Kiril Hristov, Nikolay Raynov and Tsvetan Minkov. The former two mythologized the era of Bogomilism primarily as playwrights, while the latter two used the form of fiction genres. In all likelihood, they all drew ideas for their characters, plot lines, and dramatic actions mainly from two historical sources – the "History of the Bulgarian People" by Konstantin Ireček – his dissertation at the Charles University (Prague) he defended in 1875, published in Czech and German the following year, and in Russian in 1878 in

Odessa. In Bulgaria, this dissertation, known as the first Bulgarian comprehensive scientific history, was published in Tarnovo in 1886, translated by Nikolay Raynov and Boyadjiev. The historical figures described in it – Tsar (King) Peter, his younger brother Boyan, the boyar Georgi Sursuvul – among others, who later became literary characters in the works of Ivan Grozev, Kiril Hristov, Tsvetan Minkov, Petar Karapetrov, were presented by Konstantin Ireček, his quote: “Simeon’s successor (Tsar Peter – author’s note) was neither a soldier nor a politician, but a humble, meek and peace-loving man, incapable of continuing the work begun by his father... Under Simeon, the Bulgarians almost took Constantinople; under Petar, the subjugation of Bulgaria by the Byzantines began” (Ireček 1978, p. 198). Even Konstantin Ireček depicted the younger brother Boyan in a mythological perspective: “... the youngest son Boyan was considered a magician by the people; they thought he could instantly turn into a wolf or any other predatory beast” (Ireček 1978, pp. 197 – 198). The description of the Bogomils’ doctrine and beliefs on several pages in this story (Ireček 1978, pp. 203 – 210) was yet another descriptive model Bulgaria’s future writers followed. “History of the Bulgarian State in the Middle Ages” by Vasil Zlatarski was also an important source for writers in the period of 1900– 1920s who dedicated part of their work to Bogomil themes. Vasil Zlatarski drew attention to the fact the people made an easy connection with their pagan past in the dualistic teaching of priest Bogomil: “... the people clung to it: in its basic principle they saw a reflection of their pagan beliefs about good and evil deities...” (Zlatarski 2007, p. 558). Konstantin Ireček and Vasil Zlatarski’s historical texts on the state of the Bulgarian rulers and the Bulgarian clergy during the times of Tsar Peter and the reasons given for the emergence and spread of Bogomilism at that time undoubtedly influenced the interest and interpretation of this medieval era, deeply marked by the dualistic heresy, in the Bulgarian fiction in the early years of the 20th century.

One of the earliest attempts at writing on the subject of Bogomilism was made by Ivan Grozev. He might be forgotten by nowadays’ contemporaries, yet in the first four decades of the 20th century he was among the famous Bulgarian artists – well known even in the Western World. During his lifetime, Ivan Grozev was known for his dramas “The Golden Goblet”, “Semela” and “Job” – moreover, he was even nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1928 and 1929 by the literary historian Mikhail Arnaudov. In addition, Ivan Grozev was an experienced lecturer on a number of religious issues, where he revealed himself primarily as an activist of the Theosophical Society in Bulgaria. He began to develop the topic of Bogomilism as a writer in his dramatic poem “Boyan the Magician”. The work remained unfinished. Excerpts of it were published in four issues of the “Bulgarian Collection” magazine from 1900 to 1906. Even in these printed fragmentary parts from the drama, it is evident the artistic issue of Bogomilism was in convergence with some motifs from the field of theosophy, esotericism and occultism, and

the authenticity of Bogomil dualism is lost under such a modernist concept. The characters in the drama are from the time of Saint Tsar Peter and his mythical brother Boyan the Magician, yet the ideas put forward actually explained the theosophical views of Ivan Grozev himself. In fact, the work was distinguished by religious syncretism between Bogomilism, theosophy, occultism, and mysticism. Elena Azmanova-Rudarska, in her book dedicated to Ivan Grozev's life and work, noted the writer's first dramaturgical initiative: "In it, he introduced the feeling of mystery, dedication, and rituals together with the mythical image of Boyan, on the one hand, and on the other, he enriched Bulgarian literature with characters from medieval Bulgaria and especially the Bogomil doctrine. These two directions became the main plot-generating models in Grozev's work" (Azmanova-Rudarska 2018, p. 227). Moreover, the main character in this dramatic poem would emerge as a typical main character in subsequent works on Bogomil topics during the period under consideration, yet even here, in Grozev's remaining unfinished work, Boyan the Magician would be presented as a god-fighter, as a mythologized strong person, expressing the idea of the superman in a direct statement at the very beginning of the drama:

Like a god
swimming amidst magnificent visions...
I want to be a god, not a pitiful worm,
condemned to crawl insignificant, small... (Grozev 1900, p. 286).

The mythical Boyan the Magician – people's charismatic favorite, portrayed as such by Ivan Grozev, turned out to be more of an expression of Satan's desires to be equal in power and capabilities to God. The protagonist of Grozev's drama Boyan the Magician rose on the vertical axis – from the bottom up, reaching the top – to equality and an even fight with God Himself. The acting of the biblical Satan was radically opposite to that of the superman Boyan the Magician. Through this modality, Ivan Grozev built the mythical image of Boyan the Magician as an analogue of the Bogomil Satan, that is, evil was not a fallen angel, part of the angelic world created by God, but its opposite – coming from another world, whose nature was independent and diametrically opposed to God. Boyan the Magician in the unfinished play of the same name by Ivan Grozev, conceived as a positive mythical character for the wronged, was a projection of the God-fighting principle, thus approaching the understanding of Bogomil dualism, and the Bogomils were his natural followers. In another excerpt of the dramatic poem printed the following year in the "Bulgarian Collection" magazine, Ivan Grozev created a mass episode where city servants and soldiers pursued Bogomils. Here the boyar and royal advisor Georgi Sursuvul was introduced – a character who, along with Boyan the Magician, would prevail in the works dedicated to Bogomilism and those by other writers, and with an extremely negative implication. The historical character of Georgi Sursuvul was the senior commander in chief of

the Bulgarian army, one of the first state diplomats, guardian and co-ruler of the young Peter, his uncle, as well as of Benjamin – Boyan the Magician, in other words: a statesman historians today would hardly give an unambiguous assessment of. However, as a character in Ivan Grozev's dramas, as well as in the "Boyan the Magician" drama by Kiril Hristov or in the novelized essay of the same name by Tsvetan Minkov, Georgi Sursuvul, a representative of the highest state circles, was of an explicitly negative image, the embodiment of cunning and treachery, who persecuted the national heroes – i.e. the Bogomils – he defended the status quo of the official Church and consistently affirmed the aggressive policy of Byzantium (the Eastern Roman Empire).

The Bulgarian king in the dramatic poem, whose prototype was the holy faithful Tsar Peter, was depicted in an extremely negative image, as a "weak-hearted" ruler who ruled by defending the interests of the boyar oppressors (Grozev 1901, p. 95). Even in these fragments, Boyan the Magician was a fan, like-minded person and leader of the bearers of the just rebellion – the Bogomils. He communicated directly with their head leader, priest Bogomil. Two mythical figures who seemed to complement each other in this dramatic poem – Boyan the Magician freed priest Bogomil, and the Bogomil leader introduced the courtier to the moral principles of the Bogomil doctrine. This connection would be strengthened later in the Bogomil fiction of Bulgarian modernism. These unfinished fragmented parts from the "Boyan the Magician" dramatic poem were important as they flagrantly indicated the direction taken later in works on Bogomil topics by the writing circle of Ivan Grozev, Nikolay Raynov, Tsvetan Minkov, as well as the later author of popular historical readings Petar Karapetrov. Ivan Grozev again dressed the topic of Bogomilism in a dramatic form. Confirmation of this was his second play, as it has incomparably higher artistic merits. This was the drama "The Golden Cup", published in parts from 1909, to be included, fully completed, in his collection of plays, published in 1942. This drama was once again an Ivan Grozev's attempt at literary eclecticism, as it combined elements of Bogomil dualism and superstition with features of theosophical esotericism, striving to prove their religious mutuality and logical connection, giving priority to the ideas of dualism. Elena Azmanova-Rudarska drew our attention further to the following: "In order to lay dualism on a historical and religious ground, Grozev used the knowledge of the Gnostics about good and evil... He brought out the idea of the intertwining and struggle, of the eternal antagonism between good and evil: "The two worlds, creations or emanations of these eternal principles, one day penetrated each other. From their mixing arose all living creatures, and man above all, combined from matter – dark, inert and evil – from spirit" (Azmanova-Rudarska 2018, p. 230).

In the "Boyan the Magician" and "The Golden Cup", and later in "Doomsday" dramas, there is a convergence between Bogomil dualism, theosophical

spiritualism, occultism, and Nietzschean striving for theocratism – in fiction, they overlap in order to obtain a mixture of fabricated mysticism and subjective fantasy, further tending to distance themselves from the revealed teaching of Christianity. At the bottom of this entire eclectic production, atheism shone through. The opening part in the “The Golden Goblet” tragedy brought in the Shadow, tempting the Bogomil Vasily with the golden goblet, saying: “A royal feast has been prepared for you – the golden goblet overflows: reach out, take and drink everything from it – glory, passion, life and death – oblivion... This world was created only for the strong and the manly: let the cup boil in the mighty hand of the victor...” (Grozev 1942, p. 21). Vasily drove away the Shadow, clang of a broken cup was heard. This part undoubtedly reminds us of Christ’s temptation by the devil in the desert. (Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). The tempting Shadow and the Bogomil Vasily appeared as a mythologeme representing the perfect man, called to be high above earthly temptations, passions and vices. The pyre he was condemned to had become his death-conquering resurrection. The golden goblet, filled out with the sweetness of life, was fragile and breakable before the will of the Bogomil Vasily, who possessed the powers of a true superman and victor. In the dispute taking place in the third act between the patriarch and Vasily, the famous Bogomil, a Bulgarian by origin, declared with theatrical elation: “I am destroying the unmade tomb of your dead god!” (Grozev 1942, p. 36). Words referring to the philosophical poem by Friedrich Nietzsche, where the essay in “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”, entitled “The Shadow”, directs us to the shadow of Zarathustra himself, and the Shadow in the “The Golden Goblet” tragedy was Bogomil Vasily’s – that is, Ivan Grozev recreated a typical Nietzschean myth. The expression “Your dead god” reminds us of the Superman from “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”, where we find the verses: “The Superman is the meaning of the earth... Once a greatest sacrilege was to blaspheme God, but God died...” (Nietzsche 1990, p. 7). The “Your god is dead” expression was the impulse of atheistic modernism. To Ivan Grozev, the exponent of this impulse was the mythologized Bogomil leader Vasily: his strength and determination were reminiscent of Zarathustra. Literary researcher Elena Azmanova-Rudarska tells us “Grozev was the first in dramaturgy and fiction to introduce the image of Vasily – the legendary Vasily the Physician, one of the Bogomils leaders” (Azmanova-Rudarska 2018, p. 231). Yet, to what extent did Ivan Grozev present to us the actual image of this heresiarch in this tragedy? How real was the authentic Bogomilism in Ivan Grozev’s dramatic work? The author himself, as a Freemason, theosophist, esotericist, and a Friedrich Nietzsche’s follower, composed a kind of syncretic doctrine, a mythologized pseudo-Bogomilism: being the product of the author’s imagination, it was never applied, and its application was completely impossible. The superman Vasily in “The Golden Goblet” triumphed, enveloped in flames and in the extraordinary power of the pyre – instead of consuming

him irrevocably, unexpectedly turned into a means he was resurrected back to life by, having conquered death. A miracle occurred. The Tsar was struck in the heart and died, the New Tsar was Vasily himself, lightning flashes from his eyes. He triumphed as a winner: “Here he comes – the whole earth is trembling – churches, temples, icons, idols fall...” (Grozev 1942, p. 74). The Bogomil Vasily, filled with the mystical pathos of Bogomil-Nietzschean syncretism, was closer to Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of Zarathustra. At the same time, the heresiarch as an actor in the play was a collective character, an attempt at a mythical collective image of various esoteric ideas, too distant from his prototype with his heretical dualistic teaching. After the “The Golden Goblet” drama comes “Explanatory Notes on Bogomilism” (Grozev 1942, pp. 75 – 90), whose purpose seems to be to familiarize readers with the essence of Bogomilism, since the eclecticism of Bogomilism, Nietzscheanism, theosophy, and occultism in the play were quite divergent from the authentic Bogomil dualism.

The action in the “Doomsday” drama Ivan Grozev wrote from the end of 1939 to the beginning of 1940, took place in an underground shelter during the war. In this episode, resembling an apocalyptic picture, the accusatory prophecy of the main character Israel-Ahasver echoed about “the end of this world injustice rages in!” (Grozev 2023, p. 213). The play is a polemic between him and the Church representatives (we are talking about the Roman Catholic Church) as the main culprit for the killed faith in the world and for the widespread crimes blessed by the church elite. In his polemic with Bartholomew, the Cardinal Papal Legate Ahasver is an open and loudly bold accuser: “I know you, oh you, princes of the church, you have used the hand of the assassin and blessed this criminal hand more than once. You have killed the faith and tied it to the victorious chariot of tyrants, you have sown hatred and incited the nations against each other...” (Grozev 2023, pp. 213 – 214). In the sublime moment of his accusations against this world, filled with crimes, Ahasver declares: “... I am Israel – the God-fighter! (Grozev 2023, p. 216). This was probably a hint at Jacob’s struggle with the Angel, described in the Holy Scriptures (Gen. 32:24-30) as a sign of his divine call. At the same time, Israel-Ahasver is obviously identical to the Bogomil Vasily from “The Golden Goble” who cried out pathetically: “I destroy the tomb of your dead god, not made by hands...” (Grozev 1942, p. 36). This was a moment leading us to the image of the Superman from the philosophical poem “Thus Spake Zarathustra” by Friedrich Nietzsche. Ivan Grozev’s character is a syncretic image filled with drama, a consequence of Bogomil dualism, Nietzschean Zoroastrianism, and theosophical mysticism. This consequence was characterized by theatrical solemnity, unshakable and triumphant, convinced of his rightness. Before it, the Cardinal Papal Legate was completely powerless. Like the heresiarch Basil from “The Golden Goblet”, Israel-Ahasver was also put on trial and sentenced to death. As a heretic, he was brought before the medieval court of the Inquisition.

Doomed to an auto-da-fe, Ahasver uttered accusations seemingly accompanied by piercing lightning, thus emphasizing the atmosphere of pathetic theatricality, saturated with mysticism: "In the name of the God of Love, you kill God in man – you continue the work of Calvary." (Grozev 1942, p. 243). Both Basil and Ahasfer overcame death and descended unharmed from the pyre. Repetitive poetic mythologizing – routine and unideological, where the exaggerated pathos is taking away any possibility of a heartfelt religious experience.

With his poetic work, Ivan Grozev fitted into the then current direction of symbolism. The specificity of his poetry was again the topics of Bogomilism, the mystical knowledge of the initiated, where the darkness of ignorance, along with images of temples enveloped in pillars of fire and the sparkles of pyres, shaping the mystical drama of his representative symbolism. In 1919, Ivan Grozev's collection of poems entitled "Visions and Contemplations" was published. In the same year, Nikolay Raynov's translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical poem entitled "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" was published. For his poetic experiences, Ivan Grozev also drew inspiration from the mythical image of the Superman from Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical poem. His collection of poems ended with the poem "The Testament of Zarathustra" – and he interpreted the motto consisting Christ's words from the Gospel: "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled? (Luke 12:49). The title of the poem is: "I have come into the world to kindle a great fire – and how I wish it were already burning!" In Ivan Grozev's work, God was replaced by Zarathustra, and he did not only light a fire, he was an "ungodly arsonist":

A godless arsonist is Zarathustra,
for his steps are fires
and a flame – his word (Grozev 1919, p. 76).

Zarathustra is a god-fighter whose nature was to burn down the established order and the temples of the Christian faith:

... and old temples are crumbling with a crash... (Grozev 1919, p. 77).

The future belonged to the Superman, who came with all-consuming flames, as he was called to impose some mystical and unclear new teaching.

The portrait image of Superman, in its lyrical state and in the dramatism it incorporated, it resembled another of his poems – the "Fallen Angels", where the dark vicious kingdom burned down in images of flames and blazing fires so that the will of the fallen angels may triumph (Grozev, Iv., 1919, p. 36). A little later, Ivan Grozev published the "Bogomils" poem. In it, the poet theosophist and esotericist gave free rein to his apology for the Bogomils in the style of specific pathos and elevated theatrical solemnity in order to highlight the idea of martyrdom and eternal glory (Grozev 1920, pp. 233 – 234). Grozev strove to deduce an identity between Zarathustra and the Bogomils, to a self-concept where Zarathustra and the Bogomils were accomplices in modeling an unclear

new world order, based on the ruins of the God-revealed teaching of Christianity. In his poetic symbolism, Ivan Grozev reached a complete extreme by eliminating the idea of the creative divine principle, trying to mythologize the destructive will of Satanism as an absolute incinerating force. The idea of the Bogomils appeared as part of this destructive element – it turns out to be stronger than the Divine Principle Itself. Both in his dramaturgy and in his poetry, Ivan Grozev was directly influenced by the image of Zarathustra by Friedrich Nietzsche, but in his poetic symbolism one can feel the pasty layers of theosophical esotericism. To his god-fighter Superman, he also included the Bogomils, exponents of martyrdom and glory, and accordingly explicated as god-fighters. Ultimately, all these mysterious flames and dramatically rebellious fires led only to atheism.

Probably the plays by Ivan Grozev and Kiril Hristov, where Boyan the Magician was openly mythologized as the leader of social discontent against the still young foundations of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the 10th century, gave rise to the article entitled “Theater and Religion” by the famous church historian, archaeologist and liturgist Ivan Goshev, where he wrote: “A theater can fulfill its purpose if it is useful to its people, when it respects the folk traditions, folk covenants and ideals, and especially when it respects and serves the people’s faith... and also not to come up with a play whose plot distorts the evangelical and historical truth and thereby creating conflicts in the people’s soul... The theater can be useful to the church and the state, and it can also be their greatest enemy...” (Goshev 1914, p. 612). These words unambiguously contain the position and principled criticism of the Bulgarian Church against attempts to mythologize and oppose Bogomilism and any hero-like characters to the true and God-revealed teaching of Christ.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported and funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund, Project № КП-06-Н80/8 (08.12.2023) “Bogomilism in History and in the Present Day”. The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the view of the National Science Fund.

REFERENCES

- GOSHEV, Iv., 1914. Teatar i religia. *Tsarkoven vestnik*, no. 51 – 52. [in Bulgarian]
GROZEV, Iv., 1900. Boyan magesnika. *Balgarska sbirka*, vol. VII, no. 5. [in Bulgarian]
GROZEV, Iv., 1901. Stseni iz „Boyan Magyosnika“. *Balgarska sbirka*, vol. VIII, no. 2. [in Bulgarian]
GROZEV, Iv., 1906. Iz „Boyan Magersnika“, tragedia v pet deystvia. *Balgarska sbirka*, vol. XIII, no. 3. [in Bulgarian]

- GROZEV, Iv., 1919. *Zavetat na Zaratustra. Videnia i sazercania*. Sofia: Izdanie i pechat na Voennoto knigoizdatelstvo Guzhgulov i Kotev. [in Bulgarian]
- GROZEV, Iv., 1920. *Bogomili. Slance*, vol. II. [in Bulgarian]
- GROZEV, Iv., 1942. *Obyasnitelni belezhi varhu bogomilstvoto*. In: IVAN GROZEV. *Sachinenia*, vol. I. Drami. Sofia: T. F. Chihev. [in Bulgarian]

✉ **PostDoc Yonko Bonov, Dr.**
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
Bulgaria
E-mail: bonov@uni-sofia.bg