

## FEATURES

### The Life and Work of Bulgarian SF Writer Lyuben Dilov



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In decay, a specimen's constituent parts are revealed, and, with close observation, we earn new knowledge. The twentieth century saw the birth and death of one of SF's most integral discourses, which can be very broadly grouped under the descriptor 'Soviet speculative fiction'. The determination to instill the socialist-realism ambitions of the communists' cultural architects manifested across the republics and its satellite states in degrees proportional to the strength of their respective ties to Moscow, and so it was with SF. Thus, we end up with an array of constituent parts, all of which add up to the whole corpus, and one of which is addressed herein.

In 1990 the modern Republic of Bulgaria directly succeeded the socialist People's Republic of Bulgaria, which itself had succeeded the Kingdom of Bulgaria after World War II only forty-four years prior. The Communist party, in less than half a century of control, the final thirty-three of which were under the totalitarian Todor Zhivkov regime, was able to boast many advancements in industry, infrastructure, and developing technologies, but the dividends were hardly equally distributed. By the 1980s, the computer components being produced in Pravets, the 'Silicon Valley of the Eastern Bloc', were helping Russia get their rockets into orbit, but if you were to leave Pravets and go five miles in any direction, you would leave not only the cybernetic age but the age of electricity and running water.

Amidst the clamor of processors, microscopes, hammers, and sickles, a uniquely Bulgarian speculative tradition arose. Just like the Americans, British, Russians, etc. they built on the foundation of their own national literary heritage and herded the twentieth century's technological stampede through the canyons of their own cultural morality in search of the greener pasture of whatever the future may hold for humanity. Forgive the already extensive backstory, but understanding the deep and complex works in this tradition requires some knowledge about the direction of the lives and works of its creators. Among the best are Agop Malkonyan, Dimitr Peev and Svetoslav Slavchev: remember those names for later.

Lyuben Dilov, the first name in Bulgarian SF, was born in the Kingdom and then raised for a time in Hitler's Germany before returning "home" to the People's Republic and becoming part of its first generation of intellectual elite. Compelled to speak his mind openly from at least his university years, the non-partisan Dilov relates that various obstacles to his free expression led him to expound his humanist philosophies under the thin guise of allegory as a SF writer. He might have been content to join the still developing national literature, a fusion of their own pastoral folk sensibilities with the rationalist, democratic values espoused by the Enlightenment, but in order for him to say what he wanted to say, he found it necessary to say something different. But it would be short-sighted to see only camouflage and aloof estrangement. Like Lem and the Strugatskys,

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the Soviet world was his frame of reference and his audience, and besides, his wouldn't be the first stories to have relevance in different places and times.



In Lyuben Dilov's speculative fiction, the mores of socialist realism are delivered without any art, often deployed on the first page and occasionally quoting directly from, or loosely translating, Bulgarian and Soviet state memorandi. The author fulfills what clearly reads as his professional duty, but only just. The rest of the pages are his alone, and whether they are used to rethink the given or to drape something completely unrelated over it, the rest of the pages serve the reader a candid philosophy that speaks, not to the ideal future citizen of any specific nation but to something even more collective, primordial, and difficult to deny. The reader, by the end, isn't turned towards or against any one set of myths or canons, and certainly not against myths and canons in general. Rather, the purpose of having myths and canons is discussed with deferential honesty alongside the very myths the books themselves contain. Dilov spoke often of modern SF as fitting into the crucial human developmental slot traditionally occupied by fairy tales. To borrow a term he wouldn't have been familiar with (although Polish researchers were already describing the concept with the word "stereotypes"), Dilov thought of good stories as the "memes" of a good future, references for doing and speaking good that can be understood as goodness, even among strangers; indeed, especially among strangers. And it is this binding power of commonality, rather than any ideological motifs, that his tech-magic fables invoke to inform all their morals.

The tools of the trades, SF and allegorical literature, are ably employed by the author in chiseling the evasive truth from our common bare stone, variously embracing and completely neglecting the “fourth wall,” reworking the oldest testaments and myths, laughing at our shared fear of the unknown. Motifs recur throughout the oeuvre (drinking, suicide, and pride in one’s craft are examples) and effectively nuance the sometimes challenging discursive passages by tethering each newly birthed narrative to a perennial philosophy. All these years later, we are left with a temporal, dialectic continuum which I will very broadly section up for the purpose of exposition.

But first, I’ll briefly mention a connection between Dilov’s early life and that of many seminal individual contributors to twentieth-century SF: WWII. Lem’s work was impacted by his experience as a blond Jew in Lviv, using fake papers to pass for a gentile during the brutal prison pogroms. Arkady Strugatsky was evacuated from the Nazi seige of Leningrad, not without tragedy. Arthur C. Clarke was billeted in a decimated London, Vonnegut took shelter in the number five slaughterhouse, and Gene Roddenbury flew eighty-nine combat missions. Heinlein, Asimov, and de Camp fixed equipment for the US Navy. Komatsu Sakyō, after Japan’s surrender, worked clearing charred bodies. The Berliner Günther Krupkat was active in resisting the Reich and later became the first chairman of the East German Writers Union’s Science Fiction Working Group. Lyuben Dilov spent six years of his childhood in Berlin. His father evacuated the family from Allied bombing, but upon returning to Bulgaria, he was politically imprisoned in notorious concentration camps like the one on Belene Island. Of course, no segment of society was left untouched by the global conflict, but the flames of burning cities did coincide with the ignition of a new wave of speculative literature.

Dilov’s early non-fiction works and non-fantastic narratives had been well received and earned the young author a reputation, and a dream for the better technology of the future. His first SF novel, *The Atomic Man* (1958), was initially held up at the state publisher, there being no hard-SF frame of reference in the country at that time. The book was unsuccessful, but nonetheless warranted a second printing; the new edition gives the protagonist a nationality transplant from American to Bulgarian. A lesser artist might have despaired at the imposition of obtuse moral coordinates, but Dilov seemingly accepted the challenge and embarked on a decades-long journey to reveal what is truly located at those coordinates.

His next novel, *The Many Names of Fear* (1967), was a detective fantasy lampoon of psychosurgery, but as the space age came to dominate the hearts and minds of many, Dilov’s attention turned towards the heavens. Dilov didn’t live to witness Starlink satellites repainting our night sky, but in *The Weight of the Spacesuit* (1969) we find that he was very much concerned with technology’s encroachments on our world’s sense of wilderness. Following nine cosmonauts’ journey to contact another civilization, the dense imagery is concise and laconic in describing primarily the inhabitants of the cabin, rather than what’s to be seen out the porthole. The spacesuit, and other manifestations of technology, are seen by the author as the vestments of a

death cult that thrusts humanity into the icy cold horror of space, but they also define the physical limitations of existence.

The characters assess important philosophical puzzles, and the human characteristics each of them revealed in discussion accurately inform their later reactions. The result is an unbreakable coupling of human virtue with humankind's eternal pursuit of the unknown and the unattainable. It is a testament to the triumph of human will under conditions of immense strain and a suggestion that such strain actually sharpens some human virtues while blurring the lines between



Covers by Tekla Alexieva for *Double Star* and *The Weight of the Spacesuit*

them: camaraderie, duty, responsibility and self-sacrifice. Frequent Dilov reviewer Ognyan Saparev called it “the tightest, most complete, cast as if in one breath” of all Dilov’s works.

*The Path of Icarus* (1974), which first earned Dilov international recognition, is a first-rate space opera and a significant literary achievement. Considered by Arkady Strugatsky to be one of a handful of socialist speculative novels that defined the genre, the story follows an intellectually elite space crew piloting a generation ship in search of other habitable worlds. The story follows the young Zenon, first born child of the Icarus society, who has never seen the Earth, but Dilov proves, almost mathematically, that the Earth won’t be so easily left behind. Following family discord and changing human expectations, the novel rests heavily on the saga of a forbidden cyborg/clone and its creator, who is eventually removed from the society for his Frankensteinian ambition. The “child” is destroyed in a hyper-emotional scene that casts doubt on the entire utopian genre. Meanwhile, the enclosed society’s stringent code of conformity is repeatedly battered and invalidated by the never conforming space they encounter, ultimately leading

Dilov to remind us that the “gaping abyss of contradictions between our new knowledge and old views” has always been bridged within the mind of a single person rather than a collective. It’s a masterwork of recasting scientific ideas which were then in their early stages into their potential future forms, not just as shock hypotheses but as a means of examining their socio-philosophical challenges.

Zenon, facing the incomprehensible alien “cloud” on the uninviting alien world, reflects on his part in the narrative of humanity as it will seem to the future colony:

These tales will surely seem like fantasy to them, but let’s hope they love them. And when, after centuries or millennia, their Neanderthals are civilized, they may recognize in their genes the memory of the Earth and follow the tales in search of it. And so it is with us, we will not stop looking to meet our own estranged children, to meet ourselves in space and close the circle of the great unity of the worlds.

In *The Path of Icarus*, we are also introduced to the Fourth Law of Robotics, ostensibly for comic effect. The claim to have produced the earliest known addition to Asimov’s sacred Three Laws is a matter of great pride for Bulgarian SF, but the passage where it is actually stated is somewhat condensed and unassuming. This new law obligates the robot to identify itself as a robot in all circumstances. The cynical justification mentions market forces and the embarrassment of accidentally flirting with an automated female voice on the phone, but the less obvious utility of including, and immediately augmenting, Asimov’s holy commandments is an uncondensed skeptical analysis of robotics, laws, humans, and the soothing nature of small numbers. Lest it be said that Lyuben Dilov was picking on Asimov as a foreign competitor, do note that he used equal diligence in his treatment of Bible stories, apocrypha, Plato, all historians, nationalistic traditions, the socialist-realism he was paid to promote, and his own narrative offerings, which were often as simple as an ordinary Bible story. And in this sense, you could call him irreverent, but, in most cases, you cannot fail to credit the exemplary modesty of his presentation.

In the wake of the resounding legitimacy brought by *The Path of Icarus*, and before his most biting satirical offerings, Dilov wrote a space novel for teenagers, *Niki & Numi* (1980, 1983), released in two parts. Still ever vigilant in his anti-establishment allegory (the school guard in the role of the state), Dilov addresses children with moderation, temperately, and accommodates without compromise, but avoids talking down to his audience, something the author often warned against with regard to children’s literature. Taken in the context of the oeuvre, the saga of the earthly Niki and the extraterrestrial Numi demonstrates Dilov’s consistent motivation to deliver a specific, vital message to a specific audience who needs it, not only to unload his imaginative excesses (a license he also fully utilizes, nonetheless). But perhaps good timely advice can also be universally valid by coincidence. Sometimes framed as familiar Aesopian diagramming, other times stated more directly, Dilov captures the child’s thin distinction between laughter and tears, and he educates the characters and us by having the heroes compare the two different worlds they come from. They discuss the pain of being unjust to others and whether each civilization

has its own truths with equal vigor. Adult readers can rediscover the great historical markers of human civilization through Numi's alien eyes and the various alien beings they meet paint a full image of the possible spectrum of the imaginary. In Bulgaria today, the two Niki & Numi books are probably the best remembered of Dilov's works, owing to the timing; they've already been introduced to the first generation of the twenty-first century.

The best anecdote from Bulgarian SF lore involves the founding of the Biblioteka Galaktika publishing series. In 1979, author and translator Milan Asadurov launched the book series to introduce Bulgarian readers to the top SF and detective-fiction being produced around the world. The imprint went on to release over one hundred books, translated classics alongside the best domestic offerings, all with unique, story-specific original paintings by Tekla Alexieva. It can't be overstated how seminal Galaktika's editions and Alexieva's eye-catching images were in bringing valuable ideas into legitimate competition for the Bulgarian workers' meager beer money. So, as legend has it, Asadurov had tried to bring five-hundred books of American origin into the country. Naturally, they were stopped by State Security, but after negotiating their release for some months, Asadurov eventually managed to prove that the books had actually been translated and published in Moscow. Presenting readily available domestic and Soviet-sphere authors alongside hitherto unread Western giants such as Ursula Le Guin and Ray Bradbury, Biblioteka Galaktika's books would go on to become a cherished commodity, not a small feat for a poor socialist country. But what the State Security didn't know is that these books had gotten the entire editorial board of the Moscow publishing house "Molodaya Gvardiya" fired in the autumn of 1968 for the publication of "ideological diversion." Lyuben Dilov was on the small editorial board at Galaktika, alongside Melkonyan, Peev, and Slavchev, and the "commodities" they produced for a little over a decade are iconic artifacts of the Cold War's more artificial borders and SF's rebellious attempts to thaw them.

Bulgarian SF also got a second boost in those years. Arkady Strugatsky left Russia for Bulgaria on his first ever visit abroad, on Melkonyan's invitation. Strugatsky was an admirer of Dilov's work, especially *The Path of Icarus*, and they became friends. Dilov would fictionalize their meeting in *The Missed Chance* (1981), which with *Unfinished Novel of a Student* (1982), and *The Cruel Experiment* (1985) are grouped not only chronologically but existentially. The ease of the author's narrative direction and, paradoxically, the uneasiness it could lead to had been well exercised in his earlier work. But Dilov had bigger things in mind than Moscow's perfect man and caricatures of despots. Besides, his 1979 story "Even If They Leave", a seething berating of gasping totalitarianism in a small country, hadn't even earned him a proper censor, perhaps because he already had some international awards to his name. But the extent of state censorship in Communist Bulgaria is by no means a settled issue. There were tragedies, state agencies approved publications, and despite widespread destruction of records, ample physical evidence of State Security's political profiling has survived, but prominent voices from the Bulgarian literary community have, in more recent times, characterized the situation as one more driven by the artists' own self-censorship. Dilov certainly writes candidly about one of his former colleague-

informers, “one of those aspiring writers who didn’t ever become a writer, perhaps because he failed to get past the retelling stage.”

So, on the geographic and ideological fringes of the Soviet hemisphere, potentially emboldened by cultural exchange and an increasingly receptive audience, Dilov revisited his own literary path, and that of his nation (and all humanity), through its various forms and genres in *The Missed Chance*. Like Stanislaw Lem’s *A Perfect Vacuum* (1971), this composite work is first and foremost, structured as a literary experiment. *A Perfect Vacuum* is a playful metafictional “anthology” of fictional reviews, that is, reviews for books that don’t exist (unless you count the opening review for *A Perfect Vacuum* by S. Lem). But while Lem’s arguably genius lampoon of postmodern literary self-indulgence efficiently mobilizes the structure against his target, and though the sequence is not inconsequential, it is non-narrative, a fundamental impossibility for Dilov.

In *The Missed Chance*, a true composite novel, the reader gets their metafictional lesson, the value of story and the storyteller’s responsibility to humankind, between interludes detailing a few frustrating work days in the life of SF writer Lyuben Dilov. He has been compelled by the Writers’ Union to switch to the newest model of writing computer, which knows all world literature, recorded history, and data and can produce original works in the style of the author it serves. Dilov need only submit his spoken commands according to the manual. The eager computer effortlessly produces page after page, but the author is offended at the perceived diminution of his craft. Dilov hates all the stories, and as he vainly attempts to vocalize his specific complaints with this “highly-evolved” reflection of himself, the computer’s tales turn more and more bitterly satirical against their human patron and his arrogant self-denial. The effect is so immersive and complete and entertaining that it’s easy to forget what you definitely know: that you’re reading the words of Lyuben Dilov.

But even though *The Missed Chance* is seemingly fully occupied with Dilov’s experimental techno-puppet show format, the author stays true to his penchant for layering multiple textures and softly demanding the reader pay heed to the overlapping connections. Opening with an already solved murder case, Dilov’s facetiously challenging parameters elicit facetious responses from the computer-storyteller: a dragon tale without an end, a “secular” retelling of Cassandra, and a transgender, interplanetary transporter malfunction. The familiar sci-fi themes of time travel, alien encounters, and sex robots also appear, all with quotable comments on their respective spheres of influence. But perhaps the most “subversive” topics pervading the composition are the decidedly un-collective concepts of “self” and “identity.”

For the closing tale, “The Plundered Truth”, let’s look at the cast of characters: So, in a story in a story written for Dilov by his computer, which is also him, we only find the author’s real-life friends, Arkady Strugatsky and Karl Levitin, one Lyuben Dilov confronting another Lyuben Dilov, and a seemingly innocuous cameo by Dilov’s secretary. It is strikingly tempting to draw a parallel from here to Dilov’s initial impression of the computer’s voice in the beginning: “...maybe the

dark-eyed, passionate, and secretly-in-love-with-her-boss secretary. Its voice was well-selected, but I don't yet know whether or not I will love this secret secretary back."

The computer-composer had already been directly accused by Dilov of writing itself into an earlier story, as a martyr for an owl-like alien race being imposed upon by the arrival of humans. And its mischievous, Scheherazade-like voice, which Dilov skillfully delineates from his own, can be detected in some others of its self-produced characters. But this designedly subtle call-back to the secretary, less than ten pages from the end of the book, whirls the reader's cognition back through the ten preceding stories, and upon examination we find that all ten, seemingly hidden in plain sight, are covalently bonded by the shared electron of marital infidelity. Now, if you're imagining Dilov crafting some banal confession to his wife, Milka, the mother of his children, his great love and muse, please try to pay closer attention. This encoded, guilty admission is for unfaithfulness to his own creative influences from bygone eras, to the "tradition of all dead generations," as Marx put it, and for partaking in modernity, as demanded by his own revolutionary era, and his own contrarian whimsy, and his Marxist administrators. Ironically, when critics accused Ursula Le Guin of departing from genre tradition, they called her work "Balkanized."

Nothing in its finishing or function separates *The Missed Chance* from Dilov's other intricate productions, but the full blooming of the central concepts within the limits of the format, itself carefully selected, leaves this piece as one of the most instructive "textbooks" on writing style we have at our disposal today. But be careful not to confuse it with his later short story "How to Write a Science-Fiction Story", which is actually Dilov's comment on "just following orders."

Time travel is SF's flying trapeze. The discerning reader demands a daring spectacle and suspended reality, but every flyer must be skillfully caught and landed safely on the opposite board. And no nets, please! So, why not start the book with its third chapter and go back for its first two? *Unfinished Novel of a Student* (1982), Dilov's contrary foray into the tradition, proclaims its own nonsensicalness from the start with a disclaimer reminiscent of these introductory words from Lucian's *True History*:

...I turned my style to publish untruths, but with an honest mind than others have done: for this one thing I confidently pronounce for a truth, that I lie: and this, I hope, may be an excuse for all the rest... Let no man therefore in any case give any credit to them.

Dilov writes in the introduction, "Let the reader not worry if some things seem unmotivated and unclear, they also seem so to the author", and then later when the unnamed, modern-day historian is considering the career switch to science fiction,

You can shovel all the historians in our country! And besides, our so-called science is making up more than a few things! At least SF isn't telling you the lie that what it's telling you ever really happened!



The historian had learned of his literary destiny by accident after stumbling into the twenty-fourth century. Soon after, but ages earlier, a little too much Corinthian wine compels a careless student of Temporal Flight to prematurely tell the ancient Greeks about their aeorema, the machine used to more convincingly lower the “gods” from above in the theater. Later, the future’s interference in the past is illustrated even more immaculately; a chrononaut’s indiscretion with an ancient Nazarene girl accidentally launches Christianity. (It’s worth remembering Dilov’s audience here: the Bulgarian Orthodox Church had been a vital force in forming the national identity in the nineteenth century, but the arrival of Soviet oversight had forced even Christmas behind closed doors.)

The protagonist of *Unfinished Novel of a Student* is Cyana (named after cyanide), a well-intentioned but flippant aspiring chrononaut. She is vigorous and youthful, the least informed but the most willing. Her superior, the aged Professor of Temporal Flight, warns her about the dangers of time travel with his own tragic testimony but to no avail. Experience cannot silence sanguinity, but it can waylay it; he sends her to the asteroid belt. The central research computer has stopped responding to the scientists there but only after it compiled an unsolicited treatise on human abuse against machines. Tasked with debugging the stubborn computer, Cyana and Dilov check all the familiar boxes of asking where the human and the machine begin and end and so on, but the way Cyana fixes the “broken” computer is purely Dilov. She tells it a story. She recounts her research mission to the Cretan Labyrinth and her run-in with the Minotaur. Dilov often appealed to readers’ familiarity with the Classics, Daedalus’ Labyrinth also supplying the titular metaphor in *The Path of Icarus*. Cyana sums up her framed narrative, “My Minotaur,” a lesson in the subjectivity of truth, with diplomatic platitude:

...they’d been envisioning a being less selfish than themselves, to be objective and fearless in its judgement. Humans have always strived to become that ideal, but when they realized they would never achieve it, they created a computer from metal and energy to have a more virtuous companion on their path. And here again, with these stories of yours, you’re making yourself just that—their fair and fearless judge. Love them in the future, dear colleague, help them because humans are very lonely in the universe and, in this endless loneliness, there’s no one to lead them out of the labyrinth they built.

“Colleague Cyana, you are a cutie,” said the computer beyond the wall that humans had placed between it and themselves.

The “real” Labyrinth was solved using a thread from Ariadne, a detail with symbolic value for which the author doesn’t fail to account, because Dilov, rather than telling the future facing forward, follows the threads back through the endless maze of tragic lies that brought us here, and reminds us that we’ll be looking back on them just as endlessly when the future arrives. But if you haven’t guessed the prime intent that unites all the threads by now, then you haven’t been paying attention. It’s love.

Around the time the Berlin Wall came down, the Eastern Bloc's first generation of speculative masters took a step back. Arkady Strugatsky died in 1991, Lem's final novel had already been written, and Dilov was occupied delivering a specific, vital message to a specific audience who needed it. Bulgarian identity was then, and is still now, actively developing, and I find an apt metaphor in the post-Communism debate over formal personal address. Bulgarian men had called each other "Mr." in the Kingdom, but it had been replaced by "Comrade," then after 1989, a brief reactionary period of "Citizen" before going back to "Mr." (in Bulgarian: *Gospodin*, *Drugaryu*, and *Grajdanin*, respectively) Dilov's characters very often used "Colleague", by the way.

Dilov had released some short stories during the last few years of the Communist regime, notably "Adam's Rib" and "Down by the Spring," and prolifically defended SF's credibility in his articles and interviews, but the next substantial batch of new material that was officially published has been described as the "manuscripts in the drawer," meaning they had been prepared in anticipation of imminent regime change and the freedom of expression that entailed. Among these are a short story collection called *We and the Others* (1990), a brief historical memoir called *Sex Life Under Totalitarianism* (1993), and a difficult to categorize gathering of anecdotes entitled *Impressions from a Planet: Notes of a Science-Fiction Writer* (1990). The "manuscripts in a drawer" nomen was only selectively applied at the time, indicating a perceived distinction between those who were legitimately oppressed and those who didn't have much to say anyway.

Saparaov writes that Dilov "doesn't like categoricity. His skeptical writer's attitude prefers the open discussion, the collision of contradictory points of view without a didactic-unambiguous answer." Such an ambitious Socratic endeavor necessarily employs many elegant, but deliberate, deliveries. Pieces of such intricate devices can be, have been, and will always be taken, quite literally, out of context. So in Dilov's writing, one encounters '-isms' that are considered, at best, dated by today's standards, but the author never digresses (even when he does) from the non-linear and non-dualistic meander that leads the reader straight ahead through a logical circle that tidily reduces to absurdity anything that lacks compassion.

Case in point: In *Impressions from a Planet* we find a chapter entitled "We Feed the Children Lies" which describes Dilov's own experiences with state conspirators and mentions his father's work and imprisonment. He quotes a song, remembered from his father, that perpetuates stereotypes about Romani, the predominant minority ethnic group in Bulgaria. He goes on to compare his poor childhood living conditions, and also the treatment of writers in well-fed nations, to the conditions of "gypsies" (Bulgarians use the word *tsigani* but rarely the endonym *Romani*). The implicit hierarchy of cultures would have been fully relatable to Dilov's audience, not in any way controversial. He then recalls that, after relocating to Germany, the "gypsyism" of their young family, now immigrants living in Nazi Berlin, was even more confirmed. Already, the structure of the allegory is taking shape, but don't count your dimensions before they hatch; Dilov isn't done yet. Over just a few paragraphs, the author exponentially expands his father's "prodigal son" return to Bulgaria into a continuum of moral wisdom extending through time from Homer

to Archimedes, with nods to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jack London, encompassing both the racist song from earlier and his father's own journalistic accomplishments.

Valuable for the historical information alone, *Impressions from a Planet* runs considerably longer than any of the novels Dilov published. But the mindful voice is the same, bright optimism and cold truths are still treated with equal respect, and the simple intent of spreading only good still lends a certain warmth to the reading. In fact, reading this collection of personal musings being shared unencumbered by the more or less state sponsored censorship mechanisms, those familiar with Dilov's fiction work will be most struck by how successfully he had been delivering his "subversive" message in his own open code all along, but from the perspective of the fantastic.

Shortly thereafter, Dilov released another book of anecdotes, this time very easy to categorize. Fellows of the author, all Bulgarian, who had preceded him in death are commemorated with intimate recountings that are united by one purpose: cheer. *For the Dead, Either Good or Funny* is a continuation of Dilov's reflections on the Communist era, and again uses contemporary history, rather than SF, as the stand-in vehicle for the real discussion. In the chapter on Georgi Markov, the dissident journalist assassinated in London under apparent orders from Todor Zhivkov, Dilov writes about an embarrassing social faux pas that the quick-witted Markov had covered up with a joke, and then, abruptly:

By the way, in the same manner, through his death, he covered up the self-delusions of our whole generation and its shameful compromises... His ambitious urge to always come to the fore naturally turned him into the scapegoat for what our generation did not dare do.

In 1991, Dilov established the Graviton award, the first for SF writing and art in Bulgaria (it would later recognize translators, too). Specifically established as an honor "For Good Imagination", Dilov himself clarified its intent further: "for imagination that creates good". Its inaugural recipients were Agop Malkonyan and Tekla Aleksieva. At the presentation of the statuettes, though his own literary credentials were not confined to the genre, Dilov took the opportunity to respond to some of Bulgarian SF's domestic critics. These remarks, spoken on behalf of his fellow fantasists, would have been impossible just a few years earlier:

... our escape was an escape forward to greater space and more air to breathe... we tore our readers away from the absurdities of a poorly organized workday. We made them think about another reality. We prevented a machine, completely built for manipulating thought, from weakening the minds and imaginations of the young people... we reflected the real fears and hopes of our time, encouraged young people to worry about their future, to think about the great and common problems of humanity... It was not pure literature. It was real.

The Graviton award passed away with the author in 2008. I'm reminded of his lament in the preface for his own translation of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*:

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...a bookstore was opened in his honor in the Buddenbrook House; Hitler closed it down and it seems that to this day in the Free City of Lübeck, as it's called on the sign, no one dares or thinks of finally reversing this decision.

With the drawers emptied of their manuscripts, Dilov again resumed the voice of the allegorist, crafting narrative fantasy, rebuilding SF's powerful engines to propel his space-age, philosophical vessel ever further into the unknown. For years, his veil of satire had earned him sideways epithets like "under the zodiac sign of SF." But after having forayed into non-fiction in the free new marketplace of ideas, Dilov's waning creative years were spent telling fantastic stories. And perhaps it's not surprising, considering how often he spoke about the power that a good myth or fairy tale has to spread good among people. As far as I know, he never spoke highly of non-fiction.

The novella *Hominiana and Time* (1993) depicts a visit to a world that worships time, brutally enslaved by those who can give it and take it away. An excerpt,

... when you declare something your god, you automatically declare all other gods to be wrong. Meanwhile, the virtuous are constantly trying to expand the boundaries they carry within, to incorporate into them as much of the world as possible, and it is precisely this striving of the human soul that represents its merger with the infinite.

*Lilith's Bible* (1999) is a convincing retelling of the Old Testament that's impossible to decontextualize and warrants many pages more than I have left here. *Bigfoot* (1999), another novella, was released at the same time and follows the activities of an international expedition to the Himalayas in search of the Yeti. The Bulgarian title is also readable as *The Big Step* and the double meaning is intended. Interspersed with the adventure are the conscious thoughts of the Mountain Spirit's true nature.

It's easy to name names from the early days because SF writers were so few. Today, that's not the case; Bulgarian literature, including fantasy and SF, is thriving. But there is a general scholarly consensus that immediately following the fall of Communism, the new republic was producing literature of merit, but nothing of note (save for the authors with "manuscripts in the drawer"). Perhaps emerging Bulgarian authors yielded shelf space to the influx of translated options, with some Western publishers offering vast catalogues of previously unavailable, proven best-sellers, but I'm speculating.

*Maxwell's Demon* (2001) and *Choose Yourself* (2002) are Lyuben Dilov's final two novels. The author was already facing too many obstacles related to Parkinson's disease to continue his writing, but, ever prescient, he had foreseen this and prepared some works in advance for when such a time came. So, perhaps they will someday be retrospectively slid backwards in time to the twentieth century from whence they came, and the 1990s can be proclaimed Dilov's fourth consecutive decade as undisputed champion of Bulgarian SF.

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*Bulgarian SF Writer Lyuben Dilov*

In the very second sentence of *The Missed Chance*, Dilov writes, “I’ve worked with writing computers of all generations to date...”, but in the 2014 edition from *Enthusiast*, edited and noted by Lyuben Dilov Jr., that page includes a note at the bottom stating that the writer never once used a computer to write, relying always on his old German Erika typewriter. So then, some questions arise: As the robot age draws nearer and our cosmic horizon grows ever more distant, can we really, truly rely on ourselves like you say, Uncle Lubo? And was Arkady Strugatsy really the inspiration for “The Plundered Truth”? Did your father really sing that racist song? Were your thinly veiled barbs at socialist-realism sincere, or were they an absurdly reduced tacit approval? Has this reviewer occasionally quoted directly from, or loosely translated, your own kind words about Thomas Mann to describe you yourself herein? The path to these answers is fraught with difficulty, but it sure is a good story.

**Andy Erbschloe** is a native English-speaker living in Bulgaria. Primarily occupied as a homemaker, Andy pursues a variety of interests including sociolinguistics, labor socialism, comparative religion, mushroom picking, and sequential art. He prefers to earn knowledge in lump gold rather than any debased cultural coinage, with its idolatrous stamping and unfaithful measure. Actively translating Bulgarian texts from the public domain since 2019, the author is presently advocating for what he considers his greatest discovery: the science-fiction works of Lyuben Dilov, virtually unknown in English. Two Dilov novels, *The Missed Chance* and *Unfinished Novel of a Student*, are set for English debut in 2021.