Bulgarian fantasist Lyuben Dilov died in 2008, but his humanist tech-magic satires live on and provide a glimpse into a segment of Soviet-era intelligentsia who were dutifully ridiculing the excesses of the West while also lampooning their own self-appointed leaders behind a veneer of distant stars and time machines.

Translating any older book well demands familiarity with the context of its writing and the audience it was written for. But SF, in theory, should be more forgiving. Being inherently futurist and instructive or at least cautioning, it should escape its substrate and offer its audience a future less burdened by the contemporary shackles that bind reader and author alike. It’s not cynicism! Proper science-fiction just isn’t written about how great your society is now. Imagine: Let’s keep doing this! Forever! In every corner of the universe!

Following that logic, translating an old time-travel book should be even easier, in theory; especially one conveniently structured with well-known elements of Slavic folklore. Lyuben Dilov’s *Unfinished Novel of a Student* spans four millennia. It was submitted to the Bulgarian state publisher in 1985. And as its translator, contrary to logic, I find that it isn’t even clear if my obligation is to the readers of the ’80s, the ones of today, or the ones in the twenty-fourth century. I’m worried that it might be all three.

Over thirty years after its publication, it took about three years to translate *Unfinished Novel* to English. Our language changed in the thirty; and about the same amount in the three. For example, in the past, you may have been frightened to discover someone “following” you. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) changed it in 2020 to be a good thing. In 2021, they revised the entry for “mass extinction”, so these things aren’t completely devoid of semantic consequence. Dilov didn’t write about mass extinction in this book, an unforgivable sin for any SF writer in our own era. In the 1980s, Dilov and his colleagues were tasked with writing “socialist realism” about the future as a place of universal abundance and equality. In 2022, OED added an entry for “energy poverty”.

Socialist realism, the prevailing philosophy dispersed by the Ministries of Culture of the various Soviet-ized states, saw art as a tool to build the ideal citizen, and their science-fiction was no different. There was no mandate to explore the furthest bounds of technology, only a mandate to create the ideal citizens to be responsible for that technology. So when Isaac Asimov has two robots having a conversation with each other, that would essentially be outside the genre
of “speculative fiction”, the SF/fantasy of the Soviet world that utilized familiar, localized human structures like folk tales and myths.

In *Unfinished Novel*, the borrowed Slavic folk structure in turn borrows heavily from sci-fi tropes and scenarios. Lyuben Dilov wrote this about originality in his 1981 novel, *The Missed Chance*,

…originality is not contained in the unrepeatableness of a given plot or situation - the question is what you express through it.

We're fortunate for Dilov's forgiveness. Isaac Asimov's short story “Cal” (1991) is remarkably similar to *The Missed Chance*. I wonder if Asimov read the Russian translation?

I made all Dilov's talking computers genderless, and I made other “contemporary” linguistic choices, mostly related to gender. The decidedly non-English source challenges the translator to imitate the texture of the original's lexical choices. Translator Brian Nelson uses the term "creative imitation". But the heaviest lifting of bringing the future of the past to this present now is matching the cadence, and that's all in the context.

Dilov excuses himself from any technical continuity errors right from the introduction,

Let the reader not worry if some things seem unmotivated and unclear, they also seem so to the author…

and the translator asks only this same consideration because no human knows the secrets of time, right?

Well, in Slavic folklore, Baba Yaga knows them. And in *Unfinished Novel*, the Professor of Temporal Flight knows. Everyone who comes into contact with foreign times must have their memories wiped; everyone but him. By Dilov's time, Soviet state atheism had degraded the Christianity that had corroded Baba Yaga's paganism before it. So Dilov's professor hearkens back to the dual-natured Baba Yaga of pre-Christian folklore: both creator and destroyer, bridge between the living and the dead, lacking free will. Completing the allegory, Baba Yaga is often depicted as the goddess of masculine-femine duality and of time.

But history books and propaganda movies, not only religions, are also used to nudge society towards desired change. We find that not only our hero Cyana but also her twentieth-century beloved, at various times, find employment as historians. This allows Dilov to hint that maybe historians are flawed humans too, despite whatever era they write from or about.

Another facet of Slavic folklore is the appearance of three brothers, and this is rather clearly reflected in the three men Cyana encounters off course in her malfunctioning chronolet. When faced with the unimaginable future girl and her chronolet, the first two are tried and found wanting. Just like in the tales, the third is the fool who turns out wise in the end. This one was the historian, now changed professions to, guess what… a SF writer. But rather than him saving the
damsel from the dragon, it’s Cyana who comes back to retrieve him from the wastelands of the twentieth century, easily defeating the dragon (his wife) with her future judo.

Dilov did foresee Cyana’s multifunctional smart watch but not the “selfie” which entered English way back in 2014 alongside “wardrobe malfunction”. Cyana does experience “wardrobe malfunction”, however, on a few occasions along her journey: not understanding why her skirt is too short for rush hour in “contemporary” communist Sofia, or why Praxiteles shouldn’t sculpt her fully nude in tyrannical ancient Athens. This is Dilov’s take on the conflicting mores and virtues of disparate societies and how their hypocrisies, if there are any, always look sillier from a distance. And fittingly, even some of Dilov’s own ideas about decency may have already fallen out of favor by now.

Coincidentally, Dilov was the first to formulate a Fourth Law to supplement Asimov’s Three, preceding Asimov’s own Zeroth Law by nine years (The Path of Icarus (1976), Robots and Empires (1985))

Dilov excuses himself from any technical continuity errors, but he then constantly reminds the reader that you won’t get any disclaimer like that from a historian, no matter the number of their Laws.

An Excerpt from the Introduction to Unfinished Novel

In this novel, we’ll be describing the adventures of a history student from the twenty-fourth century. We’ll go on to discuss the machines of time and also time’s messes which cannot but occur when people and machines meddle in its course. Let the reader not worry if some things seem unmotivated and unclear, they also seem so to the author. For, time is the foundation of clarity in our lives - if it gets mixed up, the natural order of everything gets mixed up.

But this natural order of things is not actually natural at all. Humans have invented their own time; they’ve forged it into shelves, racks, cupboards, and chests of drawers to arrange in them, one after another, the works of their own hand - and works not made by hands too - while real, universal time is probably just one shelf with no beginning and no end, so that no matter where you set something on it, you will still never know exactly where it’s located. That’s why, with the invention of the time machine, humans would confuse only their own time, not universal time. In universal time, it wouldn’t be illegal at all for a novel like this one to not look like a novel and to begin, for example, with its third chapter instead of its first. And it is not illogical for it to remain incomplete because, even according to the laws of our thinking, for the reader of today, it isn’t possible for a given action or event which will occur in several centuries to be completed.

Therefore: do not blame the author for the mess he dared present to you! It is ours, it is human.