

HRISTO  
BOTEV

*HRISTO BOTEV / POEMS*



# H R I S T O B O T E V

## P O E M S

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N A R O D N A K U L T U R A  
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## CONTENTS

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Hristo Botev, Foreword by <i>George Tsanev</i> . . . . . | 7 |
|--|---|

### P O E M S

|   |    |
|---|----|
| On Parting, translated by <i>Elizabeth Mincoff</i> . . . . .                      | 19 |
| To My First Love, translated by <i>Katya Boiadjieva</i> . . . . .                 | 23 |
| Sharing, translated by <i>Sider Florin</i> . . . . .                              | 25 |
| An Elegy, translated by <i>Katya Boiadjieva</i> . . . . .                         | 26 |
| To My Mother, translated by <i>Katya Boiadjieva</i> . . . . .                     | 28 |
| To My Brother, translated by <i>Sider Florin</i> . . . . .                        | 30 |
| In the Tavern, translated by <i>Katya Boiadjieva</i> . . . . .                    | 31 |
| Hadji Dimiter, translated by <i>Marco Mincoff</i> . . . . .                       | 33 |
| My Prayer, translated by <i>Marco Mincoff</i> . . . . .                           | 35 |
| Thunder Clouds Are Rolling Up, translated by<br><i>Katya Boiadjieva</i> . . . . . | 37 |
| Eloped, translated by <i>Katya Boiadjieva</i> . . . . .                           | 40 |
| The Struggle, translated by <i>Marco Mincoff</i> . . . . .                        | 43 |
| Saint George's Day, translated by <i>Sider Florin</i> . . . . .                   | 45 |
| A Patriot, translated by <i>Sider Florin</i> . . . . .                            | 46 |
| Haidouks, translated by <i>Sider Florin</i> . . . . .                             | 47 |
| The Hanging of Vassil Levski, translated by<br><i>Sider Florin</i> . . . . .      | 52 |
| Explanatory Notes . . . . .   | 53 |



## HRISTO BOTEV

In the development of Bulgarian social thought Botev represents the culminating point, while in the history of Bulgarian literature he is even today unsurpassed as a poet of genius, with a body of work to his name of exceptional artistic strength. He has given voice to the most secret yearnings of the people and to the most advanced thought of his times. He is indeed very closely bound to his day, but his social ideology as well as his poetry are distinguished by a far-sightedness which raises him above this temporality and carries him into the future so that his work has become the constant inspiration of the most progressive portion of the Bulgarian nation even after the liberation and up to the present day.

Botev's character as a man of public affairs and a poet was formed under the influence of the historical conditions existing in Bulgaria after the Crimean war (1853—1856) and more particularly during and after the sixties, and under the influence of the democratic ideas and utopian socialism of the Russia of the sixties and seventies of the last century. The epoch in which he reached maturity and became active is marked by the general decline of the Ottoman empire and the rise of the Bulgarian national-revolutionary movement. Elements of capitalism had already penetrated the feudal economic system of the Ottoman state and the change in public relations had made it possible for representatives of the masses, deprived of their national liberty, to become important factors in the life of the community. The



Bulgarian people were beginning to find the political absolutism of the Sultans and the economic oppression of the Turkish feudal lords and Bulgarian chorbadjis impossible to bear. In the depths of the masses had begun to expand those social forces which were to clear the way for progress, by destroying the feudal system of the Turks and shaking off foreign rule—in other words, by achieving a national revolution. Men, ready to organize or to fight for the Bulgarian revolutionary movement were beginning to appear among the merchants and manufacturers, the peasants, the artisans, the already proletarian workers in the towns and the national intelligentsia.

It was Botev who was to become the supreme representative of this movement. His conception of the revolution and of the future organization of the country, his views on the methods, mission and aims of the fight for liberty, raise him high above the level of his fellow-revolutionaries as the representative of the most progressive part of the Bulgarian nation.

Botev was born in Kalofer on December 25th, 1848. His father, Botiu Petkov, a teacher and scholar, had been educated in Russia. After receiving his primary education in his home town, Botev too left for Russia in the autumn of 1863 and entered the 2nd gymnasium for boys in Odessa, with a Russian scholarship. At the end of 1865 he was expelled for political reasons. In Odessa he devoted himself to the study of Russian literature and was particularly attracted by the writings of revolutionary-democratic and advanced writers and men of letters such as Belinski, Herzen, Chernishevski, Dobrolyubov and others. He joined the illegal groups that progressive Russian youths had formed and established a connection with the Russian revolutionary movement which he continued throughout his life.

Compelled, in all probability, to leave Odessa, Botev became for a certain time a teacher in the Bulgarian Bes-sarabian village of Zadunaevka. But soon he received the news that his father was lying dangerously ill. So, at the beginning of 1867, he returned to Kalofer where he took

up his father's post as a teacher. He now began his revolutionary propaganda which won him the hearts of the young, while the chorbadjis had nothing but hatred for him. On May 11th, 1867, in a fiery revolutionary speech he attacked the Turkish authorities and the Bulgarian chorbadjis. His position in Kalofer becoming dangerous, his father sent him back to Russia to continue his studies. But instead of going to Russia, Botev made for Rumania attracted presumably by the revolutionary enthusiasm among the Bulgarian emigrants there. Unable to obtain the means for his studies in Russia he remained in Rumania, leading a life of deprivation, earning his living as a typesetter and proof-reader. In 1868 he was about to enter Bulgaria with a group of rebels as their secretary, when the leader was arrested and the whole undertaking fell through. After much misery Botev established himself as a teacher in Ismail. Here he was in close contact with the Russian revolutionaries, especially with Sergei Nechaev, helping them to smuggle illegal literature into Russia. At the beginning of 1871 he went to Galatz, later to Braila. In these towns he continued to be the friend and fellow-worker of Russian revolutionaries. Inspired by the Paris Commune which he congratulated by telegram, Botev founded a "Bulgarian Commune" in Galatz, and on April 20th, 1871, he wrote his "Creed of the Bulgarian Commune" — the most progressive document of the Bulgarian revolutionary past before the liberation.

By this time Botev was already taking an active part in the Bulgarian revolutionary movement. On June 10th, 1871, he began the publication of a newspaper: "The Bulgarian Emigrant's Word" in Braila. It was the organ of the revolutionary party and achieved not more than five numbers. During the summer of 1872 he took up his constant abode in Bucharest, where Lyuben Karavelov and Botev were the joint editors of the newspaper "Liberty" and later of "Independence" as the paper was called after its suspension by the Rumanian government. "Liberty" and "Independence" were again the organs of the revolutionary party. In 1873 Botev published the humoristic paper

**"The Alarm-Clock"** which came to a stop with its third number. In 1874 he became a teacher again in the Bulgarian school at Bucharest. In the summer of the same year a central Bulgarian revolutionary committee was elected in Bucharest in which Botev was chosen as secretary, directing its affairs. After the suspension of **"Independence"** he edited another paper, **"The Flag"**, toward the end of 1874. The following summer another meeting of the revolutionary organization was called. By this time Botev had given up teaching and was devoting himself exclusively to his revolutionary work, so that soon he was at the head of the revolutionary organization, the more moderate members having been excluded. Botev actually became the leader of the revolutionary party of all the truly revolutionary democrats. In 1875 he published, together with Stambolov, a small collection of lyrical poetry: **"Songs and Poems"**.

In the same autumn, the committee, with Botev at its head, tried to organize a revolt in Bulgaria, an unsuccessful attempt. This however did not discourage them from continuing their work, heartened as they were by the examples of uprisings in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On April 20th, 1876, another uprising took place in southern Bulgaria. Botev enthusiastically applauded it in the opening number of his last paper **"New Bulgaria"** (May 5th) and proceeded to organize a large band of rebels whose chief he became. Following an established plan of action he seized hold of the Austrian steamer **"Radetzki"** on May 17th, forcing it to put him and his men ashore near the Bulgarian village of Kozlodui on the Danube. After several encounters with Circassians and the regular Turkish army, the band was dispersed in the Vratsa mountains. On the evening of May 20th, 1876, Botev, its chief, was killed. The poet's **"Prayer"** had been heard — he had found his grave **"among the fighting ranks"** for justice and liberty.

To this fight the great revolutionary Hristo Botev had devoted his life. Its fundamental purpose was the destruction of the Turkish feudal system, liberation from foreign rule and the overthrow of the political absolutism of the

Sultans. These aims, according to Botev, could be achieved solely through a radical national revolution. The purpose of the revolution however was not only the national but the social liberation of the people too. The task was enlarged and the attack was directed not only against the Turkish oppressors but the Bulgarian chorbadjis as well; national and social oppression must cease. At the same time Botev always saw the national fight as a part of the struggle of every people against oppression and exploitation of all kinds. He particularly insisted upon unity of action among the southern Slavs and the Balkan nations. Botev was an enthusiastic adherent of the idea of a Balkan federation, above all of a close alliance of the southern Slavs. Altogether he was fully conscious of the immense importance of the Slav nations and of the necessity for absolute Slav solidarity. But this unity and fraternity among the Balkan nations and the Slavs he expands into a general "reasonable" fraternal union of all nations.

Botev, who, objectively considered, like all the other revolutionary democrats, under the force of historical circumstances, performed the work of a bourgeois revolution, in fact far surpassed its aims and already adumbrated the outlines of a socialist structure of society. He had grown into a socialist and called himself a communist. As is natural, his socialism was utopian, as that of his contemporary Russian teachers. He believed that Bulgaria could skip the capitalist phase and immediately proceed to socialism.

His conception of the fight for liberty no less than his ideas on literature had been formed under the influence of Belinski, Herzen, Chernishevski, Dobrolyubov, Bakunin. Both in his revolutionary practice and his work as a poet, Botev was not only the most consistent of revolutionary democrats, but a social utopist. Yet it must be mentioned that in his utopian socialism there are elements of scientific socialism. He speaks of the struggle of the workers as a class, of the part to be played by the International in this struggle, and of the capitalist structure of society as the fundamental evil. Botev also raises himself above the contemplative materialism of a Feuerbach. He sees the dark

side of capitalism, its contradictions, and conceives of progress as the result of the struggle between the opposing forces within society. He was a materialist, an atheist, a fighter against everything reactionary, and a propagator of the newest ideas and of contemporary science.

It is for that reason that Botev is a forerunner of socialism in Bulgaria. It is for that reason that he is closely associated with the social and literary thought of present-day Bulgaria. His work as a poet is a realistic reflection, not only of the basic aspects of contemporary life, but of the highest aspirations of the Bulgarian people.

Botev's poetical output covers no more than twenty-one pieces, but it is of exceptional quality both in its ideas and artistic form. It is entirely bound up with his own times, with the period of national and revolutionary growth in Bulgaria. However great his talent, however permanent a place the poetic ideas of his works have achieved, however overpowering his genius, Botev is nevertheless entirely the product of his times, and he reflects them, even though it be a distant perspective. Indeed it is he who is the supreme exponent of those times. But his poetry is the reflection of a historical moment on the aspiration of the future. And it is that which lends permanence or "eternal" values to Botev's poetry. That perspective, that dialectical factor which always adds something over and above the historically concrete, something that points ahead, is the hall-mark of all great poetry, and of Botev's too.

Thus the first characteristic feature of Botev's poetry is its contemporaneity, not to say actuality. He writes of what is immediately agitating the wide masses, of that with which they are living, of which they are dreaming, for which they are struggling. His personal emotions are bound up with the most characteristic and progressive aspects of contemporary life. The ebb and flow of the revolutionary moods, the progress of the struggle for liberty, the foremost fighters, those are the emotional contents and the figures of his poetry. "On Parting" is the reflection of a concrete moment of his life and at the same

time a typical moment for the rebel emigrant. In "Hadj Dimitar" we have the figure of the heroic warrior who with his glorious death set the hearts of all democratic society beating. "The Hanging of Vassil Levski" reflects the general mourning for the great revolutionary and democrat, and the awestruck admiration for his exceptional personality. And so one might go on—all the most characteristic of Botev's poems reflect typical moments and figures from the democratic and revolutionary movement in Bulgaria. That the lyrical confession is couched in the first person is of no moment. It merely shows that Botev is the most sensitive representative of the foremost ranks of the Bulgarian national revolution. When he expresses his feelings he is in fact reflecting those of the awakened and active part of the people on the one hand, and on the other he is representing the interests of the whole nation. For that is another characteristic feature of Botev's poetry—the complete unity between poet and people. Like no other poet Botev penetrates to the heart of the people and thrills to their deepest yearning. He is familiar with Bulgarian folk-songs, writes in the same manner, not learning from them, not imitating them, but carrying them in his heart like a singer of the people. In his feelings, his yearnings, his language, style and imagery Botev is a true poet of the people. That is why his poems are comprehensible to the last man of the masses. That is why they are sung as folk-songs. That is why simple people can through them best give vent to their feelings.

But Botev's poetry is no merely passive reflection. He never describes the miseries of slavery for their own sake, for the solution of a purely artistic need, nor even to arouse sympathy. It is actively that he reflects the troubles of the people—in a satirical, protesting revolutionary, fighting spirit. With the exception of his poem "To my Mother" the rest are all either a cry of indignation or a call to arms. Botev appears everywhere as a fighter, a revolutionary, not content to state or point out—he calls out for a reform of abuses through revolution. Struggle is for him the basic element of life, a means for

further development — “there is the laughter and tears, the good and the evil, there is the progress of man.” Struggle is the basic motif of his poetry, just as freedom its constant aspiration. Not only through his fiery articles but in his poetry too he is always fighting — against slavery, against Turks and chorbadjis, against the old order of society, against prejudices and superstitions, against the church and religion, even against the revolutionary and acquiescent attitude of certain poets.

He sets his poetry social tasks to perform. He cannot help appearing as a man of public life there too. For his sole inspiration is social reality, the revolutionary struggle of the Bulgarian people for political and economic liberation, and it is in revolution and politics that the source of his poetry lies. The hero of his lyrics is the fighter against chorbadjis and Turks, the protector of the poor, the revolutionary, fighting not only for the national but the economic liberation of his people, and for something even more: not only for the happiness of his own people but for the happiness of all labouring humanity. In “The Struggle” and “My Prayer” Botev’s patriotism is combined with internationalism, the national struggle is the struggle of all peoples for liberation from social oppression. In that synthesis Botev is entirely contemporary.

He is contemporary too in his theoretic concepts of poetry. For him poetry, and art in general, is a means for achieving liberty, a weapon in the fight for freedom, a revolutionary manifesto. And not only did he engage the whole strength of his exceptional talent in this fight, not ~~only~~ did he struggle in his flaming verses against the bad old order and ~~against~~ oppression, but as a critic too he stressed that purpose of art. Botev clearly and uncompromisingly declares that for the Bulgarian nation to cast off the barbarian yoke “science, and literature, and poetry, and journalism — in a word all the spiritual activities of its leaders — must assume the character of political propaganda, i. e. must take into account the life, the aspirations and needs of the people, must no longer be knowledge for knowledge or art for art.” Here Botev maintains

the most modern principles, the principles of revolutionary literature today. He is against pure, purposeless art, void of ideas. More yet, he is for an art unhesitatingly and consciously tendentious, the tendency, naturally, being progressive. He purposely stresses that literature must take into account the aspirations and needs of the people, i. e. must be socially useful, must contribute to the achievement of those goals which life and the historical moment set for progressive men, while underlining the importance of the artistic form too.

Of the way in which Botev conceived of "political propaganda" in art and tendentiousness in poetry, his own poetry is the most brilliant example. "Haidouks", "On Parting", "Hadji Dimitar", "The Struggle", "My Prayer" etc., all show what wonderful artistic form and what irrefutable power social and political ideas can achieve in literature. Botev's poetry is marked equally by perfection of form and saturation with deep ideas and a militant spirit. It is a model for the unity of form and content. In that sense Botev is still the teacher of the Bulgarian poets.

And there is something more I should like to say of Botev as a poet and critic. He is extreme and uncompromising in his belligerent pathos. In his verses he laughs to scorn the false patriots and enemies of the people, he scourges unmercifully the representatives of religion and all tyrannical social and political institutions. He always takes sides, he defends his positions with revolutionary passion. He permits no lukewarmness, no hypocritical objectivism in judging public events or literary works. It is impossible for both sides, so fundamentally opposed, to be in the right — the right is only on the side of the revolution. He judges everything, public events and literary works, from the point of view of the people and the revolution. Are they of use in the struggle, do they contribute towards the liberation of the people, do they strengthen its manliness — that is the criterion. Thus seventy years ago Botev had already applied the principle of the party in literature.

With all this Botev stands out as a forerunner of the poets of social realism, a forerunner of realistic socialist criticism.



If we add to what has already been said the beautiful language, rich, expressive, compounded of the noblest sounds of the Bulgarian tongue, we shall have by no means all, but at least the most important features of Botev's literary work.

Both through his uncompromising fighting spirit, his life and heroic death, his revolutionary will, and through his poetry, Botev has always been not only the teacher but a model for emulation among the progressive, fighting sections of the Bulgarian people. It was he who inspired the fighters against fascism. With his songs on their lips the partisans fought, realizing the depth of his words: "There is no power on earth that can stop a head which is ready to be severed from its trunk, in the name of liberty, and for the good of all mankind". Armed with the doctrine of Marx and Engels, of Lenin and Stalin, taught by the party of Dimitar Blagoev and Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian communists through the long night of fascism, faced with the firing squads and gallows, found strength in Botev's magnificent verses "He does not die who falls in the battle, fighting for freedom".

Botev is the inspirer of today's builders of socialism in the people's Republic of Bulgaria. For they are achieving, under another historical configuration and with a new content, that of which Botev had dreamed. "Accepting a new political, economic, social and cultural content, in accordance with the present historical configuration," says the leader of the Bulgarian people, Comrade Georgi Dimitrov, "the Fatherland Front appears as the inheritor of the cause and teachings of our great national revolutionaries and apostles, Vassil Levski and Hristo Botev". And in conclusion is it not appropriate to say that the great revolutionary and poet will inspire the Bulgarian people not only in achieving socialism but also in its fight together with the other democratic nations, against those "kings of capital" as Botev called the western capitalists, who are threatening mankind with new wars?

*George Tsanev*