



# Poststructuralist Backgrounds: the Political Strategies of Resistance in the Literary- Theoretical Debates during the 1960–1970s in Bulgaria

Постструктуралистские  
предпосылки: политические  
стратегии сопротивления в  
литературоведческих дебатах  
в 1960–1970-х годах в Болгарии

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SLAVICA TERGESTINA  
European Slavic Studies Journal

ISSN 1592-0291 (print) & 2283-5482 (online)

VOLUME 20 (2018/I), pp. 16–44  
DOI 10.13137/2283-5482/22381

The article attempts to reconstruct some of the political stakes in the conceptual and methodological debates among two groups of literary critics during the 1960ies and the 1970ies in Bulgaria: the structuralists and their opponents, the so-called “Impressionist critics”. This debate seems to be a pertinent context for addressing the emergence of poststructuralism since it was the intellectual ferment, in which Julia Kristeva formed her conceptual background, before later becoming among the first poststructuralist critics of structuralism in France. Before, emigrating, Kristeva was part of the group of the “impressionist critics”, who were developing ways of resisting official Marxist doctrine while retaining claims for Marxists legitimacy. They were very critical of the structuralists, who also were attempting to gain legitimacy, though by aligning with Marxism as a materialist science, a stance the “impressionists” viewed as contributing to alienation.

LITERARY THEORY, RESISTANCE,  
BAKHTIN, KRISTEVA, MARXISM,  
STRUCTURALISM, POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Статья пытается восстановить политический залог в концептуальных и методологических дискуссиях между двумя группами литературоведов в 1960-х и 1970-х годах в Болгарии – между структуралистами и их противниками, так называемыми «импрессионистскими критиками». Эта дискуссия, по-видимому, является важным контекстом возникновения постструктурализма, поскольку она представляет собой интеллектуальную среду, в которой Юлия Кристева первоначально сформировала свои идеи, перед тем как впоследствии стала одним из первых критиков структурализма во Франции. До эмиграции Кристева является членом группы импрессионистских критиков, которые пытаются разработать стратегии противостояния официальной марксистской доктрине, не отказываясь от поиска марксистской легитимности. Они критикуют структуралистов, которые также стремятся к легитимности, но основываясь на настойчивости марксизма как материалистической науки – позиция, в которой «импрессионистские критики» видят фактор, способствующий отчуждению.

ТЕОРИЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ,  
СОПРОТИВЛЕНИЕ, БАХТИН, КРИСТЕВА,  
МАРКСИЗМ, СТРУКТУРАЛИЗМ,  
ПОСТСТРУКТУРАЛИЗМ

**1** These debates formed the conditions for the canonization of works, themed around the traditional values of Bulgarian peasantry and the crisis of these values due to modernization. The Bulgarian structuralists stringently rebuked the valorization of traditionalism in these works, while most of the impressionist critics eagerly celebrated them. The latter stance ultimately became dominant in the Bulgarian literary scene during the 1980ies. The short stories of one of the authors, Nikolay Haytov, were the subject of the most public clash between Nikola Georgiev and Toncho Zhechev – one of the most conservative members of the “impressionist critics”. While these debates won’t be the focus of this article, it is important to note here that such seemingly trivial critical disagreements were often the only public form the theoretical debates took during the period. For example, Nikola Georgiev elected to avoid publishing theoretical texts, preferring instead to write critical analyses of concrete works that were highly suggestive of underlying non-explicit methodological coherence.

The present article will attempt to reconstruct some of the political stakes in the conceptual and methodological debates among two groups of literary critics during the 1960ies and the 1970ies in Bulgaria: the structuralists and their opponents, the so-called “impressionist critics”. Such a reconstruction seems appropriate when discussing the poststructuralist legacy of Eastern Europe, since it may produce understanding about some aspects of the conceptual background, out of which one of the earliest forms of poststructuralist criticism of structuralism emerged: the early theoretical works by Julia Kristeva in France, who before emigrating, was very active in the group of the “impressionist critics”. The group earned its name due to their style of writing and their perceived lack of consistent methodology. As early as the first half of the 1960ies it was embroiled in a heated polemic with the current Bulgarian structuralists, and especially with one of their most influential representatives, Nikola Georgiev. While the crux of the public debates between the two groups involved taking dissenting stances on the merits and the overall cultural and political value of the works of different Bulgarian writers that emerged during the 1960ies<sup>1</sup>, these discussions had an even higher stake – both groups presented conflicting forms of implicit resistance to the dominant Marxist orthodox doctrine in literary studies at the time – the so-called “theory of reflection”, developed in the 1930s by one of the most prominent ideologues of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Todor Pavlov. Both groups were attempting divergent heterodox brakes from the dominant party line, while claiming to remain strictly within Marxist methodology. This was done by highlighting heterogeneous aspects of Marxist doctrine – populism, progressivism, scientism, each side in the debate making claims for Marxist legitimacy through appeal to some of these notion at the expense of the rest. In this way the theoretical,

the literary and the political formed a very tight knot – a somewhat subtle strategy of resistance to the official ideology.

One noteworthy point of contention between impressionists and structuralists was their reception of Mikhail Bakhtin’s thought and especially his notion of “carnival”, developed in his book on Rabelais (Bakhtin 1984), as well as its ideological and methodological ramifications, though this aspect of the debate was less public on the structuralist side and thus requires some reconstruction. The “impressionist critics” at the time were among the first to embrace Bakhtin’s ideas outside the USSR. The structuralists resisted Bakhtin precisely because the impressionists embraced him, while the impressionist relied on his ideas as a backdrop for their criticism of structuralism. Thus the contrasting attitude toward his positions to a large degree informed the theoretical aspect of the work of both of these groups. The article will focus on the different takes on Bakhtin that emerged in these debates, not least because they lead into Kristeva later work, since she was instrumental in introducing Bakhtin to western audiences and based her influential notion of “intertextuality” on his writings.

### **THE “IMPRESSIONIST CRITICS” AND THE AHISTORICAL “VALE”**

What brought the “impressionist critics” together was a diagnosis of the modern condition as suffering from almost inextricable effects of alienation. Most of them – Toncho Zhechev, Zdravko Petrov and Krastyo Kuyumdzhiev – developed a strikingly conservative project for the overcoming of this condition. They advocated that cultures like the Bulgarian one, situated in a geographical and historical “vale” in the periphery of Western civilization, may indeed have the capacity to retrace back the steps on the road of modernity and reestablish traditional

values and an ahistorical, cyclical existence. This contra-modern conservative nationalism was still marginal during the 1960s, being more overtly incompatible with orthodox Marxist progressivism, but would eventually come to dominate the rhetoric of the Bulgarian Communist Party during the 1980s and even paved the way for some of the political language of the far right in current Bulgarian politics.

The conceptual basis for this conservative turn in most of the writings of the “impressionist critics” was effectively presented in a monograph by Toncho Zhechev (1975), dedicated to the history of the struggle for an independent Bulgarian church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which ends with a discussion of the plot of a poem from the Bulgarian Revival, involving the folklore motif of embedding living sacrifices in buildings, so that their basis is stable. This folklore motif was used by Zhechev as an allegory for the sacrifice of traditional values in the name of progress and modernization. He dwelled upon the notion of debt, accumulated by such sacrificial logic of history and insisted upon the need for making amends in the form of restoration of lost traditions.

In his appeal to tradition Zhechev nonetheless was seeking Marxist legitimation. In the introduction to *The Bulgarian Easter*, he claims the authority of Marxist historical theory as overcoming the alternative between the “ancient” view of history as a circle and the “petit bourgeois” notions of perpetual progress (13). According to Zhechev its superiority amounts to seeing repetition of conflicts and contradictions within historical continuity. What is remarkable here is the strategic appropriation of orthodox Marxist revolutionary rhetoric in favor of an affirmation of tradition. This involves a double gesture. On the one hand, the historical paradox Zhechev highlighted in the introduction to his book was the perceived coincidence of the “patriarchal” order with the most radical egalitarian politics: “The more undeveloped,

patriarchal in socio-economic sense [a people is][...] the more susceptible and prone it is to the most radical, the most daring... ideas” (14). Thus for him “*only* [my emphasis] the national idea, formed in the fight for an independent church”, a fight, that was steeped in traditional religious values, “passed with all of its strength into later Bulgarian revolutionary movements and had a long life in the post-Liberation political history” (14). A similar logic is found in the discussion of the ideas of the Russian 19<sup>th</sup> century arch-conservative politician and philosopher Konstantin Leontiev: “The tragedy of Leontiev was the tragedy of the Russian conservatism [...] Why it managed to have a positive social function, only being in opposition to power, thus becoming a sort of liberalism?” (136).<sup>2</sup> By a conceptual and rhetorical “sight of hand”, he emphasized the quasi-dialectical “contradiction” as this precise continuity of tradition within revolutionary practice, rather than the more orthodox Marxist presentation of revolution itself as having a history and tradition, or history itself as a revolutionary process. This gesture comes with the implication that there is no revolutionary practice that is not rooted in the “patriarchal life” of the community. Thus for Zhechev conservatism and traditionalism can be seen paradoxically as the drive behind progress and radical political action.

On the other hand, he seems to be insisting, that while the deficiency of societal and institutional progress spurs radicalization, this radicalization itself amounts to a betrayal of its own conservative conditions. He discusses the political activism of various figures during the Bulgarian Revival as perceiving their own society and traditions as deficient in comparison to the “more developed” societies, and thus attempting a sort of “Imitation” that goes further than what was being imitated:

**2**  
The interest of Zhechev with Leontiev in the book is premised on the part the latter played in the struggles for an independent Bulgarian church, but he is referenced not so much because of being representative of the inherent conservatism of this struggle, but rather because the discussion of his ideas allow Zhechev direct engagement with conservative politics.

## 3

Apparently his strategy worked – by his own admission, Zhechev's book was enthusiastically received by the leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov, who asked him for a meeting and an autographed copy of the book immediately after its publication. See (Zhechev 442).

*In the most backward countries, patriarchal until recently, there emerges a particularly extreme political and ideological radicalism, which imitates the ready results in the advanced countries, without knowing the evolution that led to them. Forces that are new, formless, lacking tradition, thirsting for innovation and success come to life, and they rapidly exchange the religious conscience, developed by superstition, with bourgeois political superstitions. In their slogans and cultural program from most backward they become not just advanced, but the most advanced, most progressive. (14)*

He seems to be implying that this “overradicalization” stems from a breakdown of the immanence of the dialectical process of history, i.e. from the lack of continuity between radical political practices with traditional ways of life. In this way Zhechev's early writings seem to stake the following project: evolution out of tradition is the only true horizon for emancipatory politics.<sup>3</sup>

These pronouncements resonated with the current literary process itself – many authors during the period were writing about the dissolution of the traditional Bulgarian peasantry due to the party politics of nationalization of private agricultural lands. This crisis was held by Zhechev, Petrov and Kuyumdzhiev as only an episode in the grand process of modern dismantling of traditional forms of life. Sometimes their take on these topics even amounted to naturalizations of this profoundly political process.

While most of the authors that focused on the suffering of the peasantry at the time wrote in a social realist style, there was one marked exception – the works by Yordan Radichkov. Radichkov's prose involved the setting of Bulgarian peasantry, but it relied on almost modernist techniques of writing that espoused various forms of absurdist

humor. While some of the more traditional critics were displeased by his style – after all, the life of Bulgarian peasants was not supposed to be a laughing matter – Kuyumdzhiev attempted to assess his work as conforming to the overall tendency of depictions of the crisis of traditional ways of life due to the degradation, brought about by the process of modernity. For this purpose in a series of articles from the beginning of the 1970s he evoked Bakhtin’s notion of carnival as an explanatory concept of the seemingly unorthodox and extravagant laughter in Radichkov’s works<sup>4</sup>:

*[Radichkov] observes from a position, from a perspective that may be called sub specie aeternitatis, that is – from the point of view of eternity. This is the ancient peasant’s view of the world, the view of the ‘peasant civilization’, more ancient than religions, the state, ideology, and history. A civilization, which with some of its layers – the oldest, the firmest, the most conservative – remains untouched by history, beyond it. [...] And if here everything attains a carnivalesque and grotesque form, displays its comic sides, this is not Radichkov’s fault, but the worldview of the peasantry itself, the peasant’s ‘eternity’ that has seen a lot more than a few changes of civilization, of spiritual and worldly powers, of decorations and costumes. [...] At the peasant’s forum during the carnival everyone is devil and angel, mocker and mocked, perpetrator of evil and victim at once. (Kuyumdzhiev 68–70)<sup>5</sup>*

The passage ends with a reference to Bakhtin having described this atemporal, prehistorical, mystical “worldview of the peasantry [...] in his famous book on Rabelais” (70). This ahistorical reading of the significance of Bakhtin’s carnival, its use as a conceptual template for a return to the past, was later combined with a similarly “eternalist”

**4**  
In a recent article on the insertion of Radichkov’s works into the Bulgarian literary canon, Boyko Penchev also discusses this reading by Kuyumdzhiev. (Cf. Penchev 11–20).

**5**  
The quote is from a later article that combines two earlier texts by Kuyumdzhiev on Radichkov that were published in the beginning of the 1970s.



**6**  
It is notable that in the West this humanist turn was vigorously opposed primarily by structuralists like Louis Althusser. For more on this very complex dynamic around the humanist – anti-humanist controversy, see (Nikolchina 2013, 2014).

**7**  
Later it was reprinted in (Stoyanov 1988b: 209–540).

**8**  
For some parallels between the ideas of Lukács and Bakhtin, see (Tihanov 2000).

reading of Nietzsche’s notion of the Dionysian (see Miglena Nikolchina’s article in this issue).

The radical conservatism, legitimized through a populist sentiment in the still dominant Marxist environment of the 1960–1970s, was not the only heterodox doctrine that emerged within the literary debates, it wasn’t even the only position that formed in the work of the “impressionist critics”. One of the most influential members of the group, Tzvetan Stoyanov, a prominent figure in the field of Comparative Literature, presented a markedly different strategy. What brought him close to Zhechev and Kuyumdzhiev was their agreement in identifying a problem in modernity – the problem of alienation, considered both psychologically and socially. Yet, there was a stark contrast in the way he sought to remedy the situation.

#### **TZVETAN STOYANOV: AMBIVALENCE AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY**

The notion of “alienation” was the core concept for the “humanist” reformation movement of Marxism, most prominent in the Eastern Bloc during the 1960ies. It held Marx’s early writings, and especially his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* as its conceptual pivot and attempted to provide an alternative to the more rigid structural Leninist reading of Marx, thus serving as a form of resistance to official party politics.<sup>6</sup> One of the more systematic attempts in Bulgaria to pose the problem of alienation as the crux of modernity was Tzvetan Stoyanov’s book *The Ties that Break Off: Ideas and Motifs of Alienation in Western Literature*, first published in 1967<sup>7</sup>.

The study attempts to trace various forms of alienation in Western European literature since the Enlightenment, while the basic premise is strikingly similar to Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (1972)<sup>8</sup>:

the various forms of the psychological experience of alienation are seen as stemming from the reification of the dynamic productive forces and relations in society, which leads to destruction of the numerous social threads that tie the individual to his or her community and world. Of course, these early ideas of Lukács, which emphasize the Hegelian heritage in Marx, while extremely influential in the West, were repudiated in orthodox Marxist circles. That is probably why Stoyanov never explicitly cites Lukács, though the parallels are very prominent. He even reaffirms the solution, proposed by Lukács – that the working class should not be considered as fully defined by alienation and reification, since it is supposed to produce the remedy for alienation (Stoyanov 1988b: 218–219). For Lukács this comes in the form of thought directly intervening in the social process (which was one of the reasons for the rejection of his position by orthodox Leninists). Although Stoyanov doesn't expressly state this solution to the problem of alienation, his study is primarily dedicated to presenting the various historical forms of alienation, together with the proposed *intellectual* projects for overcoming and compensating it. While the starting thesis seem not too terribly original, the following analyses present a fascinating multifaceted approach to the problem of alienation, which is developed in a dialectical manner. Different historical actors, philosophers and literary authors are presented as identifying a form of alienation and then proposing compensations that in turn only deepen the alienation they were supposed to overcome.

Similarly to Kuyumdzhev, Stoyanov makes a strategic use of Bakhtin's ideas as disclosing a counterpoint to alienation in his presentation of the historical process. The significance of Bakhtin for this project is primarily in offering a picture of a *historical* cultural form that lacks alienation – the famous “carnival” in its employment of the grotesque:

*The grotesque in the Renaissance is vital, we can even say positive, not in the cheap, but in the grand, philosophical sense of the world, as Bakhtin has convincingly demonstrated in his work on Rabelais. It is tied to the germination and birth, with cycles of life in the living organism, with the eternal continuity of life. [...] The grotesque speaks in the name of the organic, non-alienated consciousness, merged with the continuity of time and space, with the ancestral and cosmic communities. (Stoyanov 1988b: 372)*

This reference is at first part of a contrast that Stoyanov is outlining between this carnivalesque continuity and the Romantic uses of grotesque and “freakish” imagery. He insists that the Romantic grotesque has lost its ties to this overwhelming cosmic integration of carnival and is one of the many ways in which alienation manifests itself in modern art:

*Thus the grotesque degrades from a symbol of cosmic and biological energy into a symbol of degradation, of ugliness, and the disguises of this degradation take three forms. In some cases the Romantic grotesque is ‘demonized’ – becomes a pure monster, a vampire, carrier of evil without any positive charge. In other case, the reverse takes place – it is sentimentalized [...], it plays the part of a frightening rigid façade, beyond which the suffering subject contorts and entices sympathy [...] And at last there are ‘middle cases’, where the two principles start to merge and seemingly return to the former ambivalent whole – but this ambivalence now has a different basis: even in the most freakish human type remains pure subjectivity, the abstract sympathy towards the destructive self remains. Objectively [...] this grotesque body undoubtedly [...] must be removed from the face of the earth. But subjectively, seen from the ‘inside’, we feel for it. [...] It is ‘a monster that suffers’! (373)*

According to Stoyanov this split into two sides, into two “worlds”, is foreign to the Bakhtinian carnival and thus opens up radical contradictions, fosters alienation.

Still, there is some ambiguity on Stoyanov’s part as to this dismissal of Romanticism. Later on he explicitly states that the Romantics were attempting a return to the fullness of life in carnival, and not just substituting it with these modern contradictions:

*The Romantics attempt to revive what Bakhtin termed ‘culture of popular laughter’, the spirit of carnival during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. [...] They show keen sense, understanding and love for the carnival. [...] With the Romantics [...] we see a longing for laughter, in which things change places, merge or lose their bounds. Frightening and happy, ugly and sweet, vicious and good-natured emerge together form one element, here there no longer are any coordinates, but a single ambivalent ‘field of meanings’. (417–418)*

This integral and dynamic in its continuous ambivalence “field of meanings” is precisely presented as a worthy project for overcoming alienation. Stoyanov praises the Romantics for emphasizing interest in historical continuity: “The Romantics are very sensitive to this feeling of wholeness, they want to understand the continuity of matters, they feel the transitory, change” (419). Yet, their historicism instead of restoring the de-alienated integrity of life turns into passive sentimentalism.

*Longing passionately for a return of the past, the Romantics also mourn it as irretrievable, which is crucial part of their attitude toward it. [...] What the Romantics achieve is not a return of the past, but a return to*

*the past, i.e. their efforts are not aimed at active change of the present in the direction of the past, but rather the subjective immersion in past times, interest, study. It is restored ideally, not actually (449).*

Thus carnival degrades into a masquerade: “The masquerade is false, repulsive, it is also a symbol of life, yet this is not the creative organic life, but rather the life of alienation, disintegration [...]” (451) This problem of the modern masquerade as a degradation of cosmic and organic unity of opposites Stoyanov detects (472) in Edgar Allan Poe’s uses of parodies as comic cyphers, hidden behind the horrific overt meaning, a product of a *rational* procedure. As long as the reader has managed to acquire or discover the code, he or she can decipher the comic subversion as the governing principle of the language of Poe’s writings. The parodic elements in carnival, in contrast, are seen as “neutralizing the separate in its hypertrophic tendency, not allowing it to become dominant, to disturb the harmony and to introduce its ‘dictatorship’. Parody is agent of harmony!” (473).

While he constantly describes how the Romantics missed the mark with their nostalgia for the carnival, Stoyanov remains unclear whether he himself endorses an active attempt at reconstituting the lost holism of carnival. On the one hand, he certainly presents Bakhtin’s descriptions of the carnival as a social institution that provides a model for de-alienation. Still, his constant focus in his study are the various attempts at presenting the past as a positive model for the present with the concomitant failures of such nostalgic projects: he traces a line from Rousseau through Herder to the Romantics, in which all “nostalgic” compensations turn out to produce further alienations. It seems that instead of a contra-modern attempt at avoiding modern conflicts and contradictions, he rather intends to project a dynamic model of

uninterrupted and ambivalent integration of these continuously emerging contradictions into a “field” of non-hierarchical, non-stable, ambiguous meanings. This is less a return to carnival, and more an insistence on something akin to what Bakhtin sees in the novel – polyphony.

This is even clearer in the text Tzvetan Stoyanov wrote last (and couldn’t quite finish before his death in 1971) – *The Genius and his Mentor* (1988a: 417–599). The subject of this book was the “guidance”, provided by Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev to Feodor Dostoyevsky. Pobedonostsev, the de facto censor of Dostoyevsky’s later works, was a prominent political figure in the Russian Empire, who was deeply involved with the “paternalist” conservative movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. The paternalist doctrine involved emphasis on the “fatherly” nature of traditional forms of power and was distinctly contra-modern. Still, there was something very peculiar in Pobedonostsev style of conservatism. Pobedonostsev’s paternalism, according to Stoyanov, employed a very modern strategy of manipulation:

*[...] ‘manipulation’ of the public, the organized mass ideological and psychological effect of the governing structure on society. ‘Manipulation’, of course, is an ancient phenomenon, but now it receives such stark specific manifestations [...] the conservative Pobedonostsev is among the first that recognized the ‘modern’ side of the phenomenon and decided to put it to use [...] The soul becomes a battleground – in the past it was still a battleground, but the whole of society, unified by faith, was struggling against the devil as something foreign; while now the society itself is split, the devil is on the inside...! Thus Konstantin Petrovich axiologically defines two types of manipulation – on the one hand, he defends the good, the right, ‘our’ manipulation, which is noble and blessed [...]; on the other, he rejects the antagonistic, the ‘devil’s’ manipulation, which brings doom. (439)*

For Stoyanov, what is modern in Pobedonostsev's views is the acknowledgment of this disintegration of the fabric of society through ideological means, this breakdown of social ties that brings about alienation. By reinforcing one of the positions, Pobedonostsev himself becomes an agent of alienation. It is worth to note that the distinction between "right" and "wrong" ideology that is criticized here mirrors precisely the Leninist rhetoric that was predominant in the official party doctrine, especially in terms of the place of the artistic expression in society. Stoyanov insists on developing this analogy by focusing on Pobedonostsev's politics towards the arts:

*[...] the traditional practice [of control over artistic expression] could not satisfy Konstantin Petrovich. It was predominantly negative – persecution, punishment, preventive, its aim was not so much to do something, but to block others from doing something – which was necessary, yet insufficient. Together with the negative side there had to appear a positive one. (468)*

This "positive" strategy was to attempt a non-traditional form of manipulation by becoming a mentor for a literary genius and turning him into his ideological instrument by subtly guiding him to the "right" conceptual position. The benefit of this procedure was, of course, a work of art that hides its manipulative nature, while at the same time heightening the effectiveness of the ideological message by engaging not only rational thought, but the imagination as well. Stoyanov points towards the prolific correspondence between Pobedonostsev and Dostoyevsky during the latter's work on the "Brothers Karamazov" novel, which shares many features of Pobedonostsev's paternalistic position.

Yet, the intent of Stoyanov in this book is to show how this relationship brings a dialectically opposite result, and Dostoevsky turns out almost unwittingly to be a “manipulator of the manipulator”. This ideological mismatch between the mentor and the writer comes about in an even subtler way. Stoyanov focuses on two aspects of the novel – the way it intensifies the complexity of its criticism of modern western ideologies and the way in which it somewhat fails to consistently provide a positive counterpoint. In respect to the first ambiguity Stoyanov presents a reading of Ivan Karamazov’s “Great Inquisitor” as Dostoyevsky’s way of presenting western Catholicism and socialism as collapsing into the same nihilistic position – they both lose God, and by losing God, lose everything, for which they stand:

*According to Dostoevsky, the ‘materialists’, or, which for him is the same, the ‘nihilists’ in their internal development reach a moment, where they ‘destroy’ not only the hierarchy of God’s world, but the world itself. [...] As long as the materialist negates God’s reason, he needs to negate ‘matter’ itself, i.e. himself. [...] Usually things are considered to be the other way – that ‘materialists’ elevate matter, while religious thought degrades it. [...] But Dostoyevsky tries to convince us this is so only apparently – you can have ‘matter’ only with God, because God nurtures it and moves it (508).*

This complex dialectic in Dostoyevsky, outlined by Stoyanov, seems both consistent with paternalistic denunciations of “materialism” as “nihilism”, and at the same time exceeds its one-sidedness. In effect Dostoyevsky seems to be drawing upon the language of his mentor’s ideology, in order to produce a new conceptual position. This excess of complexity in Dostoyevsky’s writing is presented by Stoyanov as



9

The reference Stoyanov made to Leontiev as an embodiment of the paternalist position may easily be read as an indirect criticism of the strategic use of his ideas by Zhechev.

troubling for Pobedonostsev and his reductive instrumental attitude towards literature.

Yet, according to Stoyanov<sup>9</sup>, a further embarrassment for Pobedonostsev became the portrayal of the “positive” (from the paternalistic perspective) characters in the novel. Alyosha, the supposedly “utterly beautiful human being” in the novel, barely acts in it and Dostoevsky confessed to Pobedonostsev that in terms of this character the novel was not even a start of a novel. The situation with his mentor Father Zosima became problematic as well – his speech in the novel, which is rife with notions, taken wholesale from the rhetoric of paternalism, was faced with criticism from a very unlikely source – from Konstantin Leontiev, a fellow traveler of Pobedonostsev, who publicly took issue with Zosima’s position as being “almost heretic” (529–35, 542).

But the worst perpetrator of the subtle subversion of the mentor’s ideological rationale was the unfinished structure of the book itself. Stoyanov speculates about the thoughts, burdening Pobedonostsev after Dostoyevsky’s funeral:

*Maybe during the first days after the funeral he was reconsidering his long history of closeness with the genius. [...] Was he evaluating things only from the side which benefited him? [...] And taking into account only this “first novel”, with all of its apparent tendency, was everything in it “all right”? If Alyosha’s story was finished, maybe it would have been otherwise, but now the novel was as it was – in this case wasn’t there a change in the basic points, wasn’t there a need for a new evaluation, this time only of what was written and not what was intended? Wasn’t there a need for deciphering Brothers Karamazov once again [...] especially since Dostoyevsky loved circumlocution [...]? Wasn’t there some hidden “half-expressed” [...] beyond all the mentioned meanings*

*in favor of the “conservative” ideology, what in fact was the deepest symbolism of the novel, what was it “trying to say” as an autonomous work [...]? What was it [the novel itself] “trying to say” first of all with its plot, with the horrific murder of the father, around which the whole appearance and disappearance of the characters revolves? [...] [A]fter all who exactly killed Feodor Karamazov, and, which is even more important, why was he killed? (548-549)*

A “paternalist” novel about the unresolved and unresolvable murder of the father! Here the crucial point is that this predicament is ensured primary by the text itself, rather than some sly trick, perpetrated by Dostoyevsky himself. This almost deconstructive potentiality of the complex structure of the novel to strain, to override, to overturn the intended meaning, the product of the mentor’s “guidance”, is the propensity of writing, on which Stoyanov staked both his methodological engagement with Bakhtin, and his personal and political activity. Dialogical meaning, even, as mentioned earlier, to a point of parodic travesty that undermines any dominant position, was seen as subverting the ideological manipulative pressures and restrictions and seems indeed to have been Stoyanov’s own utopian political and intellectual project. Pobedonostzev here turns into an allegory of the various manipulative party operatives and censors that Stoyanov had to work with on daily basis, and the ambivalence of words, used in these exchanges, is presented as a strategy for expression of conceptual dissent, hidden precisely in its ambiguous manifestation. However, this strategy is not presented as akin to the calculated operation of the likes of Poe, whom Stoyanov criticized precisely on this point. He sees true resistance not so much in intending a hidden “parodic” meaning that subverts the manifest one as in a form of an overcoded doublespeak, but rather

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In fact structuralism during the 1960ies was a target of methodological and political scrutiny from many sides, including party officials. See Darin Tenev's contribution in this volume.

in the unintended fact of ambiguity that comes about with language itself. This general heteroglossia is what seems to be the crux of his reliance on Bakhtin.

The ideas of the “impressionist critics” converged around common topics, yet they diverged significantly in the way they interpreted them. Both Stoyanov and Kuyumdzhev used Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, but on closer scrutiny pertinent differences emerge. Unlike Stoyanov, who explicitly praises the continuity of history and the Romantics for emphasizing it, and considers Bakhtin’s carnival as precisely historical cultural institution from pre-modern times, Kuyumdzhev stylizes it as a persistent ahistorical timelessness that remains parallel to the movement of historical time. In fact this type of conservative antihistoricism comes very close to the ideology of “paternalism” that Stoyanov was trying to demystify. One can even speculate whether *The Genius and his Mentor* was an allegorical polemic not only with party “manipulators”, but also with this conservative tendency in Stoyanov’s own circle.

### **ANTI-HUMANISM, VAGUENESS AND BAKHTIN**

For Tsvetan Stoyanov and his impressionist colleagues structuralism with its purported scientific rigor embodied the modern ill of alienation.<sup>10</sup> While the two groups had fundamental disagreements, the theoretical and ideological lines of dissention were rarely publicly discussed before the 1980s, which demands an effort for reconstruction. The present article will attempt to explicate the structuralist position through the way they engaged in criticism of Bakhtin, whose ideas were largely instrumentalised by their opponents. The structuralist answer to the use of Bakhtin in the writings of the “impressionist critics” became public at a later point. During

the 1990s Nikola Georgiev published a couple of articles (1990, 1999) containing criticisms of Bakhtin. These articles seem to attempt to shed light upon Georgiev's earlier antagonistic engagements with the Bulgarian Bakhtinians during the 1960s and 1970s, where the brunt of his resistance to Bakhtin was left without express comments, in the background of his arguments. The first article directly engages with the case of Radichkov and makes a point about the use of Bakhtin (though without expressly mentioning Kuyumdzhiev) with the aim of depoliticizing his writings:

*[...] the ruling ideologeme created an image of him [Radichkov] [...] that was conservative in literary terms and devoid of conflict in social terms. [Radichkov] was interned into the package of the freshly formed at the time official mythologemes of the originally native, the roots, the Bulgarian folklore, the mythological [...] If he's read with both eyes open, it becomes clear that all these roots and speculations about the people's psyche are secondarily taken up and ironically displaced. [...] Radichkov's works were driven through his [Bakhtin's] notions of carnival, the grotesque, popular laughter culture [...] and emerged from them once again as ours, native, non-modern. [...] Because Bakhtin's carnival is the triumph of the popular, and consequently democratic element over some pretentious scientists. [...] (Georgiev 1990: 4)<sup>11</sup>*

This sarcastic polemic continues in the second article, on which we will focus our attention, since it discusses Bakhtin in detail.

This latter essay is titled "The Stuttering Dialogue" and it is dedicated to the jubilee of a former structuralist who turned to Bakhtin's notion of dialogue as a basis for his humanist ethics – Tzvetan Todorov, who in his youth used to be Georgiev's peer during their

**11** Boyko Penchev (12, 19) also makes a point of these comments by Georgiev as indications of the struggles around the canonization of Radichkov during the 1970ies, though he does not go into detail about the conceptual position, espoused by Georgiev.

studies in the University of Sofia. While the occasion of the article is celebratory, the text itself is far from it. It reads more as a scathing demystification of the perceived unethical and authoritative aspects of Bakhtin's writings. Georgiev opens the article with a questioning of the "dialogical principle" in Bakhtin, Todorov and others by alluding to its being "unprincipled" (Georgiev 1999: 5). While the article focuses largely on the different interpretations and engagements with Bakhtin in the West, it points toward a possible reconstruction the lines of dissent around the Russian theorist in the Bulgarian debates during the 1960s and 1970s.

The primary attention here is given to the ways, in which the figure of Bakhtin was developed into an "image" (6) by his various exegetes, a process that, according to Georgiev, amounted to a full blown mythology. He meticulously combs texts by different commenters for phrases that form a perception of Bakhtin as "enigmatic", "mysterious", "prophetic", and even "saintly". Then he proceeds to propose a reason for their persistence in the writings on the Russian literary theorist: "[...] in literary studies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century the longing for the "harmonious person" (I borrow this cliché from the dictionary of the communist propaganda in Bulgaria during the 1970s) was vigorous. It turned out that too many people do not want to see "the humanities without the human", and consequently literary studies without the man" (11). The "harmonious person" is, of course, a cliché, developed out of the "humanist" Marxist discussions around alienation. It seems clear, that the mythologizing of Bakhtin in the eyes of Georgiev was an obvious symptom of resistance to the anti-humanist materialism in literary studies that structuralist methodology was in the process of developing during the 1960s and 1970s. This statement directly references the primary theoretical discord between

the structuralists and their rivals, but the political significance of these disagreements from the point of view of Georgiev needs some further clarification.

In an attempt to show the way Bakhtin's theories have been compromised politically during socialism, he points to some radical attempts at the demythologizing of Bakhtin's work in the writings of Russian scholars during the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> His insistence is on the various ways, in which Bakhtin's views, and especially the concept of carnival, were completely consistent with the orthodox party emphasis on collectivism and "the people".

But the crucial examination of the political relevance of Bakhtin comes when Georgiev turns to a discussion of Bakhtin's style. He continues the strategy of amassing quotations from various authors, all possessing a common feature – they all describe Bakhtin's writing as "puzzling", unclear, nebulous, vague (9–13). He even tackles from this perspective one of the most frequently debated issues in Bakhtin studies – the problem around the authorship of some of the works, bearing the signatures of his "circle". He insists on the view, that there is a stark contrast between the way Medvedev's "The Formal Method in Literary Studies" attempts to clearly define its concepts and Bakhtin's style both in his early and later works and points to Tzvetan Todorov's description of Medvedev's style as "concise, purposeful, with clear straightforwardness, with striving for terminological transparency and consistency" and of Bakhtin's writing as "confused composition"<sup>13</sup>, while criticizes him for resisting the questioning of the authorship on the basis of these observations (13).

This issue of the "vagueness" of Bakhtin's style leads Georgiev directly to the topic of the "ambivalence" that was so favored by Tzvetan Stoyanov:

**12**

See, for instance (Ryklin 34–51). Ryklin claims, that in his notion of "carnival" Bakhtin presented the Stalinist terror as some form of repeatable and necessary ritual violence, thus serving as some sort of relief for the trauma of the concrete historical political violence. Similar connections between Bakhtin's notions and totalitarianism draws Vadim Linetskiy in *Anti-Bakhtin* (1994). An older colleague of mine, Mihail Nedelchev, once mentioned a rumor he heard on a trip to the USSR in the 1980s, that during the 1960s the communist party let Yuri Lotman publish his structuralist studies in Tartu as a kind of "scientific export", a showcase for the heights of socialist scholarship, while at the same time combating its "dangerous" influence locally by allowing Bakhtin's criticism of structuralism to be published and to gain ground. While unconfirmed, this rumor clearly points at a perception of Bakhtin's theories at that time as conforming to official party doctrine.

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"Bakhtin's signed works are characterized by confused composition, repetitions to the point of restatement, and a tendency toward abstraction (due, perhaps, to German philosophy)." (Todorov 8).

*It turns out, that one of the key concepts in Bakhtin, “ambivalence”, needs to be applied above all to his own writings – and to their evaluation. Whether this vagueness, nebulousness, etc. is for the better or for the worst depends on the evaluation of the means and ends, but in one direction it is clearly for the best: it contributes to the authority of Bakhtin’s discourse and the authority, rational or irrational, of the image that was created of it. Experience shows, that authoritarian language may with equal success or failure be based on mystifying metaphorical vagueness, or the opposite, on brevity, conciseness and simplicity... The two types, seemingly contradictory, merge and often are used together, though clearly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century there appeared ideologies [...] that were slanted in one or the other direction”. (14)*

The ambiguity of language, on which Stoyanov based his political project, here is presented as deeply suspect and profoundly ideological. Let’s reiterate: the two “authoritarian” strategies, outlined by Georgiev, are, first, ambivalence and vagueness, and second, declarations of simplicity. The first one bears the marks of Stoyanov’s preferences for Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, while the other has seemingly quite a lot to do with Zhechev’s and Kuyumdzhiev’s praise for the simplicity of the ahistorical condition of the “peasant’s worldview”, beyond the temptations of modernity. One can easily conclude by way of elimination that according to Georgiev the value of the scientific rigor of structuralism may be found in its being both clear and complex, that is – both non-manipulative and non-reductive. This line of reasoning is in line with the way the structuralists during the 1960s defended themselves from attacks – just like the “impressionist” humanists, they were claiming a Marxist lineage for themselves, though on a different basis: as continuing the tradition of developing Marxism as a materialist science.

While Marxist humanism and structuralism may no longer be as relevant in themselves in current theoretical debates, what can be glimpsed from the complex and multifaceted divergences from the official Marxist doctrine in literary studies during the 1960–1970s is theory itself as a site of struggle and political resistance, rife with risk and promise, and with conceptual and political creativity. Furthermore, as we mentioned in the beginning of the article, this clash between incompatible conceptual positions in Bulgaria would eventually bear fruit in the West – Julia Kristeva, who was very much directly influenced by Tzvetan Stoyanov in her formative years as a scholar, emigrated to the then bastion of structuralism, Paris, where she criticized the static models of structuralist thought and ultimately developed a theory, in which poetic language compensates the *alienating* effects (especially vis-à-vis the body) of the signifying chain of symbolic language, thus becoming one of the foremost voices of what soon after became known as “poststructuralism”. ♡



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## Резюме

Статията се опитва да реконструира част от политическите залози в концептуалните и методологическите спорове между две групи литературоведи през 60-те и 70-те в България – структуралистите и т.нар. „импресионистични критици“. Това начинание е полезно за адресирането на постструктуралисткото наследство на Източна Европа, тъй като дава достъп до интелектуалния контекст, в който се формират идеите на Юлия Кръстева, която впоследствие ще се превърне в един от първите „постструктуралистки“ критици на структурализма във Франция. Преди да емигрира, тя е много близка до кръга на „импресионистичните критици“. Групата получава това название най-вече заради липсата на следване на ясна методология в техните изследвания. През 60-те групата е ангажирана с разпалена полемика с българските структуралисти и особено с един от най-представителните им фигури, Никола Георгиев. Публичните дебати между тези две литературоведски направления се съсредоточават главно около спорове, свързани с оценката на творчеството на конкретни автори (най-голяма острота конфликтите придобиват в обсъждането на дебюта на Николай Хайтов) и рядко достигат до директни обсъждания на концептуалните им предпоставки, което налага нуждата от реконструкция на теоретичните им възгледи. Удачен подстъп към такава реконструкция се оказва разнопосочната употреба на идеите на Михаил Бахтин в текстовете на „импресионистичните критици“, тъй като това може би е една от най-ранните рецепции на Бахтин извън Русия през 60-те. Ключовият акцент в статията е начина, по който тези групи оформят своите възгледи в съпротива срещу официалната марксистка доктрина, доминираща през периода, като редом с

това правят опит да легитимират тази съпротива в марксистки термини. Част от „импресионистичните критици“ (Т. Жечев, З. Петров и Кръстю Куюмджиев) развиват една подчертано консервативна концепция, залагаща на представата за аисторични съпротивителни сили на българското село, сили, които те искат да задействат срещу разрушителните ефекти на модернизацията. Но този възглед се оказва неприемлив за друг важен представител на групата – Цветан Стоянов. Стоянов споделя безпокойството на Жечев, Петров и Куюмджиев от ефектите, съпровождащи процеса на модерността, и особено проблема за „отчуждението“. Същевременно той е силно скептичен към техния консерватизъм и традиционализъм. От своя страна структуралистите (възгледите на които са реконструирани в статията най-вече въз основа на по-късни текстове на Никола Георгиев върху Бахтин) търсят своята легитимация през връзката на своята методология с марксистското настояване върху материалистична научност. Георгиев прививда в концепциите и жестовете на Бахтин (и имплицитно в писанията на българските му последователи) две взаимосвързани авторитарни тенденции – опростяване и неяснота. Последната е особено важна в контекста на разглеждания дебат, доколкото проекта за политическа съпротива, който Стоянов се опитва да оформи през 60-те, разчита силно именно на „амбивалентността“, понятие, което, разбира се, заема от Бахтин.

В своя финал статията посочва по-директните връзки на елементи от разглеждания дебат с по-късните критици на Кръстева към структурализма – в тях именно проблемът за отчуждението ще изиграе ключова роля.

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