What is it That is Being Threatened?
Introductory Words
Что находится под угрозой?
Введение в тему
What is it that is being threatened by the approaches to literature that developed during the sixties and that now, under a variety of designations, make up the ill-defined and somewhat chaotic field of literary theory? Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory”

By the end of the seventies Paul de Man defined in a famous article the resistance to theory as a resistance to reading. Almost forty years later it has become obvious that the resistance to theory is in the first place a resistance to reading theory, to reading what theory had and still has to say. The recent opening of the dossier of Julia Kristeva and the allegation about her collaboration with the Bulgarian Secret Services is a perfect case in point as it provided a welcomed excuse not to read “difficult” texts. At the same time, as de Man himself pointed out, the resistance is not something external to theory but “a built-in constituent of its discourse”, it is triggered, as it were, by the inner tensions of the field, and it is this fact that most probably made possible theory’s own resistance to dominant ideologies and hierarchies. Theory was—and still can be—a form of resistance.

Yet, the stakes of doing theory then and now are not obvious. The ongoing fetishization of the word “resistance” in the present day context facilitated by its exploitation in the cultural industry (think, among so many other instances, of the last Star Wars episodes) makes us ever more blind to what the mechanisms and the practices of resistance in the complicated context of yesterday were. In this sense, the history of theory is necessary for theory as it can reveal through the transversal movement and the transformative development of concepts the logic of its inner tensions as well as their relation to the political and social conjunctures. It can be said generally that the stakes of literary theory throughout the 20th Century were at least triple—epistemological,
political and social. And what this means is that literary theory was seen as posing at least a triple threat, a threat for the established scientific paradigms, a threat for the political order, a threat for the social status quo.

This still too general account might be misleading and too dogmatic if one were not to look into concrete cases and investigate the overdetermined particular contexts. In the present issue of Slavica TerGestina the authors present episodes of the history of literary theory in Bulgaria from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s. The case of Bulgaria is interesting in more than one aspect. Even though Tzvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva, both of whom played a crucial role for the development of literary theory in the West, came from Bulgaria, none of the literary scholars of their generation who remained in the country came to be as known or reached their world fame. What is more, unlike USSR, Czechoslovakia or Poland, for the most part the very context of literary studies in Bulgaria remained non-transparent to the outside world despite the fact that at least two other Bulgarians, Alexander Ludskanov and Miroslav Yanakiev had important positions in the International Association for Semiotic Studies, and many others communicated intensively with renown colleagues from both the East and the West. As Todorov and Kristeva came to be associated with Bakhtin and structuralism, one should ask what was the role of Bakhtin and structuralism in their country of origin. What was the reason structuralism was so attractive? Why structuralism and not phenomenology, hermeneutics or something else? And what was the response to structuralism on the part of the Communist Party? Where did Bakhtin fit in all this? Were there other socially relevant theoretical paths at the time? How were the theoretical problems connected to the political conjuncture and to the Cold War ideologies?
The authors in the present issue address these and other related questions with the believe that every good theory should be self-reflexive and aware of its own history and its position. All the authors are members of the Literary Theory Department at the University of Sofia and the texts are to a large extent the result of their seminars and discussions in the framework of the Sofia Literary Theory Seminar. The history of literary theory proposed here is not history for history’s sake, but a proper moment of theoretization.

The closer look, which the authors offer, shows that things were not as one would have expected, if one were to follow the widely accepted scholarly representations of the period. The dividing line between the East and the West, or the one between the official representatives of the Party and the literary scholars, etc., were never simple; these were lines traversing the very things they were delineating, multiplying lines betraying internal struggles and discordances but also unexpected resonances, unforeseeable chances, and unstable alliances. The theories of these times, theories imbued with tensions, unstable and mobile, transformative, were sometimes deliberately blind to their environment and in this very blindness offering insight into the political and social stakes of the debates they were taking part in or refusing to be a part of; and sometimes were an involuntary and oblique offering to the system they were passionately opposing. Theoretical writing made difference in an unpredictable way with the disseminations of conceptions it operated at the margins of the dominant philosophical discourse. The phenomenon of the theoretical voices in the often dissonant choir of competing strategies striving to gain control over the state of affairs, caused sense of imminent danger with the promise for new possibilities eluding any form of external control. To read always poses a threat. Reading theory now, reading into the history of theory
now, when forms of naïve positivism find their way back to the academia and the politically correct offspring of the late critical reflection become functionaries of censure not that different from the one from socialist times, can reveal not only what the possibilities once were but also in what way theory can still open up ever new alternatives, alternatives to any attempt to seal off critical thinking.
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