

REVIEW

of the research achievements and publications of
Assoc. Prof. Todor Hristov Dechev, PhD

The review is part of the competition procedure for Professor in the professional field 2.1. Philology (Theory and History of Literature – Literary Theory), promulgated in the “24 chasa” and the State Gazette no. 87 of 19.10.2021 for the needs of the Faculty of Slavic Studies at the University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski.

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In the competition procedure for Professor in the professional field 2.1. Philology (Theory and History of Literature – Literary Theory), promulgated in the “24 chasa” and the State Gazette no. 87 of 19.10.2021 for the needs of the Faculty of Slavic Studies at the University of Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski” there is only one candidate and that is Assoc. Prof. Todor Hristov.

The publications submitted by the candidate for the competition procedure include two monographs and fifteen articles, two of which were co-authored; of the two monographs, one is in English and published in Routledge, and the other is published by "St. Cl. Ohridski" University Press; of the articles, one has been published in an edition indexed by Scopus, ten are in peer-reviewed journals, and four are chapters in collective monographs, all in English, three by Routledge and one by Bloomsbury. The candidate has participated in numerous research projects, national and international; he has given numerous presentations at scientific conferences at home and abroad. Since the beginning of 2002 he has been teaching at the Department of Literary Theory at the Faculty of Slavic Philology at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, where he leads the main course on introduction to literary theory, as well as numerous courses in bachelor's and master's programs. He has successfully supervised a large number of graduate students; three of his doctoral students have already defended their dissertations. Here I would like to emphasize that the candidate meets all the formal requirements – both those related to research and those related to teaching – for the position of professor.

The materials presented for the procedure are only a small part of the publications, participations in projects, presentations at conferences etc., that outline the scholarly trajectory of Assoc. Prof. Hristov. Even a quick glance at the publications – eight monographs and over a hundred articles published in renowned journals – will show his extremely high productivity, but what is really impressive is the extent to which the diverse topics of presentations and articles, the various issues he discusses, the many directions in which he pursues his activities are united not only by common interests, but by a carefully and consistently developed research program, which includes the development of his own methodology and creating a specific perspective that allows monitoring and analysis of unnoticed, ignored and overlooked. Phenomena. Thus, this high

productivity testifies not only to his amazing efficiency, but also to his scholarly innovation and to the impressive consistency of a scientific product.

This consistency of Todor Hristov's project can be traced and reconstructed from his first book on rural revolts, in 2007 (*The Legitimacy of State Power and Rural Revolts of 1900*), to his latest book on domestic scandals (*The Sound and the Fury. An Archeology of the Family Scandal*), one of two monographs presented for the procedure, through his translations of H. Garfinkel (*Ethnomethodological Studies*, 2005) and Rey Chow (*The Age of the World Target*, 2010), through his texts on the concept of value, his work on sovereignty (and in the first place *Freedom and Sovereignty in the April Uprising*), the study of socialism or the newer works on conspiracy theories, including some of the articles submitted for the procedure and the second monograph (*Impossible Knowledge. Conspiracy Theories, Power, and Truth*). Hristov's research program is driven by a Foucauldian interest in the dispersion of power, with a particular focus on the dimension of everyday life, in view of delineating the relationship between *power, resistance, freedom, right, knowledge, and truth*. This program does not give a still and stable picture, but captures the dynamics, multiplicity, gaps, ruptures and disruptions, refractions, changes and variability of the described phenomena and situations, through an approach that develops the Foucauldian apparatus and complements it with theories of fiction, political philosophy, theory of speech acts, neo-pragmatist philosophy, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, critical theory, conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, reflective sociology, socioanalysis, schizoanalysis, semiotics, etc. This approach, which I would describe as post-Foucauldian, despite the many sources and the many threads it collects, is not eclectic. It is a development of what has been called "Theory" since the mid-1980s, with a capital "T", but a development that focuses explicitly on the pointed node of relationships and builds coherent tools to ensure that its use does not involve easy instrumentation, but requires a focus on the singular, on the unique and the concrete. The big question, which I would say drives the scientific interest of this whole research program and its complex methodology, is the question of possible and impossible *resistance*, which is always related to the problem of *suffering* and to those who do not have power, *the weak*. Power, law, truth, knowledge are questioned every time in the context of phenomena and situations in which there is someone in a position of weakness. Hristov's program is an attempt to make the voices of the weak heard, an attempt to understand the various forms of resistance.

In fact, the materials submitted for this competition procedure clearly show the crystallization of Hristov's approach with the extremely specific way in which a correspondence was found between the methodology, the conceptual apparatus, on the one hand, and the analyzed phenomena and situations, on the other. For example, in the texts devoted to conspiracy theories, what directs the research perspective is not the attempt to debunk the groundlessness of these theories, but the special situation that gives rise to them, a situation suggesting a knowledge about what cannot be known. An impossible knowledge that suggests some truth beyond knowledge and power, the uncertain truth of the weak, who seek an alternative to the status quo with their passionate speech as an attempt to defy order, not deviate from it (Hristov describes the subject of conspiracy theories in terms of "defiant rather than deviant", *Impossible Knowledge*, p. 99). Attempts to debunk this impossible knowledge not only cannot understand it, but also maintain the situation that calls for it. Therefore, a theory is needed that hears differently what the subjects of conspiracy theories say, a theory that is based on Foucault's conception of power and governance, but has a more comprehensive apparatus for analyzing statements and enonciations, and can take into account counterfactuals and fictionalizing acts without losing the critical aspect. (For the

specific fictionalization in conspiracy theories, for example, Todor Hristov offers a strong analysis in the article "Suspicious Fictions", where he analyzes Hristo Kalchev's novels and shows how a reality effect is created through fictionalizing acts, transgressing the existing pragmatic conventions of fiction. As a theoretical move, this requires upgrading Foucault with W. Iser's theory and supplementing Iser with Foucault. The result is neither Foucault nor Iser, but an element of Todor Hristov's own theory. This form of theorizing can be found in all texts submitted for the competition.)

The same form of coordination of the analyzed object and the theoretical work can also be seen in the book on family scandals, which tries to understand the speech of those who speak "as they should not speak" and "say what cannot be said", to understand what they have said beyond or on the this side of its reduction to noise. But this presupposes that the discursive analysis is supplemented with the theory of speech acts, ethnomethodology, analysis of conversations, the theory of the refrain of Deleuze and Guattari, etc. The result is a strict conceptual framework that allows us to see what has been invisible, to hear the meaning of what has hitherto been just noise. The theory that the book on family scandals builds traces the conjunctive relations between what is said and what is not said, the disjunctive relations of what is said with what may or may not be said (and the situations of renegotiation of these conditions for possibility), the entanglement of these relations with the questions of desire, power, capital, in order to outline the three fields that must be monitored: the associated field of actual and possible statements; the correlative field of objects, of subjective positions, of discursive figures and concepts; the discursive economy, which as an additional field determines the value of what is said through the movements of power and desire. There are references to Foucault, Deleuze, Hjelmslev, Austin and others, but the concepts and terms used have been modified and redefined to capture the specifics of family scandals and the discourse on them, as it has historically evolved over time, crossing different disciplines from pedagogy through psychology and sociology to family therapy.

Hence, two things should be said about the theory developed by Todor Hristov, which crystallizes especially clearly in the materials submitted for the competition procedure. In the first place, this is not a general theory that gives an unambiguous answer to the questions asked once and for all, but a theory directed at its object, rather a theorizing based on a certain theoretical attitude towards its object through the triple question of suffering, of the possible or impossible resistance, and of the distribution of forces. Secondly, and precisely because of this attitude towards the object, which is always specific, local, contextualized, this theory is open. It is open in at least two senses. On the one hand, it is not complete, but continues to evolve with each new analysis, with each new observation. On the other hand, it is open because, given the specifics of the object of analysis, it can absorb additional theories, to supplement itself with hitherto absent or unmentioned authors. In the book on family scandals, for example, for this particular object, which is the family scandal, it was necessary to take up theories of family therapy – but not to present them as giving the truth of the phenomenon, but to look critically at them and see which of them could be used in order to understand this "noise", which is not just noise.

Undoubtedly, this openness of the theory allows us to always think of other possibilities for its enrichment, other ways of its development. Hristov's discursive analysis would thus benefit from turning to Oswald Ducrot's distinction between *locuteur* and *énonciateur*, on the basis of which he provides specific tools for analyzing polyphonic utterances. (See, for example, Oswald Ducrot, *Le dire et le dit*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984, pp. 171-233.) Or, his analysis of the place

of freedom in Blaga Dimitrova's *Diversion* in *The Sound and the Fury* would be deepened if he took into account the influence of existentialism, of Beauvoir and Sartre, on the framework of the novel – and that would have enriched also his own notion of freedom. But such recommendations do not lessen the value of theorizing but only emphasize its special status and its hospitality to foreign concepts and ideas.

The fact that this open theory is not a general theory, that it is attuned to its own specific object each time, and that it is open does not mean that it is not a unified theory. On the contrary, it is a single unified theory that continues to evolve and offers an increasingly rich conceptual apparatus for analysis far beyond the phenomena and situations analyzed so far. I will give only one example of this, with the concept of passionate speech, developed by T. Hristov, which occupies a central place both in *Impossible Knowledge* (pp. 70-73) and in *The Sound and the Fury* (pp. 191-237, 238 -239), as well as in some of the articles. The concept comes from Stanley Cavell, a representative of neo-pragmatism and philosophy of ordinary language, but as with all other concepts used by Hristov, it is redefined. For Hristov, it refers to speech acts of passion that are successful when they improvise with conventions in such a way as to make the other engage with them, to respond to them passionately, as soon as he perceives them, and thus to make the other recognize the right of the subject of these acts. In the book on family scandals, passionate speech allows one to analyze and understand moves within such a scandal, where language breakdowns continue to speak passionately to say what cannot be said. In the book on conspiracy theories, passionate speech is related to the parrhesia through which the powerless forces the one who has the power to recognize their right. Thus, the concept goes beyond the specific cases and the specific issues through which it was developed. As Hristov himself writes in *The Sound and the Fury*: "I think that the concept I tried to construct can be applied to scenes of passionate speech outside the home, for example, to political conflicts, to protests that do not formulate demands, to scenes of seduction, to the cult environment of the New Age, even to conspiracy theories. But above all, I hope that it will contribute to a polemology of everyday life." (p. 239) All these areas of passionate speech are related to specific analyzes that Hristov has developed and proposed elsewhere. But they do not exhaust the spheres of possible use, on the contrary, they point to places and ways of using passionate speech that go beyond them. The polemology of everyday life, which is one of the most important aspects of Hristov's theoretical program, can still be developed in unsuspected directions, as he himself continues to demonstrate.

At the same time, this open theory gives rise to special theories in the individual cases under study, the significance of which should not be underestimated. This is the case, for example, with what I would call *a special theory of time in family scandals*. Without this being brought out in any way as a separate topic, the time of the family scandal is problematic and crosses the whole book as a question to which Hristov's theory provides an answer. A quick reconstruction of this answer, of this special theory of the time of the family scandal, would look like this. The temporality of the scandal is twofold. On the one hand, it is the temporality that causes scandals between family members. It includes the urgency of "enough", "I have to" and "I can no longer" (p. 138), what "destroys the present" and "hinders the future" (p. 140), the powerlessness of "no more", "not yet" and "never again" (p. 150), the rifts that separate the days from the course of time (p. 170-171), the serialization of discursive events (p. 186). This temporality reveals time as lost, and also as unexperienced. On the other hand, the temporality of the scandal is the temporality of the scandal itself with its rhythm and repetition, but also with the way it destroys daily regularities and habits, with the way it produces temporal cracks. These two sides of time reflect each other and

complement each other. Todor Hristov's implicit special theory of time in the family scandal shows from here that the temporality of the scandal is a disintegration and scattering of chronological time in two directions. First, it is related to the past and the future. What happened in the past is reflected in what did not happen, the unfinished past tears with its wound the possibility for time to move forward, the future fails. Second, it is related to the present, which seems to dictate the rhythm of the scandal. Hristov speaks of the special function of the "now" as the third condition for the success of passionate speech (the first two conditions are affect and desire). The present moment is decisive in the sense that it is a moment when there is no more time (pp. 208, 217), which is why it appears as a "crack between two moments" and creates a sense of urgency (p. 220).

This temporality of scandal in Hristov's special theory is not detached, but is inextricably intertwined with the discourses on family scandals, which actively participate and determine what a family scandal actually is, the discourses of Revival pedagogy, fascist psychiatry, Marxist sociological psychology that explains clashes with social forces, etc. *The Sound and the Fury* traces these discourses from the mid-19th century to the early 21st century through literary texts that in the spirit of New Historicism are maintained in conversation with texts from various other sources – and each time the analyses continue to build and enrich the special theory of scandal temporality. The chapter on passionate speech comes after the tracing of the other discourses on family scandals. This chapter, based on what has already been done, concludes the book with Hristov's own theory, which allows the reader to now return and reread the previous chapters in a different light. For example, the second side of the temporality of scandal, the present moment as a moment of urgency, a rift between two moments, is fully developed only here, but without it the rhythm of the scandal in the previous chapters would remain inexplicable. It is only here that the picture of the scandalous time with its two faces becomes complete, and this allows the reader to explain "the small explosions that break the clumsy rhythm of everyday life" discussed earlier (p. 112).

More special theories that Hristov's open theory builds, include the theory of fictions of family scandals (a theory revealing literary works on domestic quarrels as second-degree fiction, insofar as an element of fictionalization must necessarily be assumed at the level of the scandal itself – cf. p. 144) and others. These special theories make the whole endeavor even more valuable as they allow historiographical theorizations that simultaneously capture the fleeting phenomena and situations of everyday wars and at the same time provide a critical apparatus to be used in the analysis of various problems.

Todor Hristov's contributions in this direction are extremely valuable. Along with the already mentioned advantages of his research program, I would like to mention at least one more thing – this type of development of Theory with a capital "T" supports the dialogue between different disciplines and shows how much literary theory can still contribute to other disciplines and how much it can still draw from them.

This conversation with other disciplines, this conversation between different theories, with Todor Hristov does not remain only at the level of his personal theory, he passes directly into a conversation with a number of Bulgarian and foreign researchers and thinkers. The presented materials testify with sufficient force to this continuous conversation: from the co-authored articles to the references to and discussions of the views of his colleagues in footnotes and in the argument of the main text, he actively participates in the scientific life and raises the level of its debates.

Finally, I would like to add briefly to the candidate's teaching activities. I have had the opportunity to co-lead master's courses with him for years and follow what he does, and I have personal impressions of this side of his activity. Conversations between disciplines permeate his classes and inspire students. The way he doesn't stop introducing new material every year in *all* his courses, the way he doesn't stop updating the content, the way he doesn't stop looking for the challenges of the present, the way he doesn't stop provoking the thought and activity of students, is impressive and admirable.

From what has been said, no matter how little of the scientific and teaching merits of the candidate it presents, it should have become obvious that he both formally and substantially fulfills all the requirements for the position of "professor".

The attached reference for the contributions correctly reflects the research (scientific and applied) achievements of the candidate.

Based on what was said above, I strongly recommend the members of the scientific jury to grant Assoc. Prof. Dr. Todor Hristov the academic position of "professor"!



Assoc. Prof. Darin Tenev

06 March 2022 r
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