

RESISTANCE TO THEORY: NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND

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Abstract: *The reason why the title of this paper evokes Dostoevsky's work is because all of the action my contribution refers to unfolds, just as in Dostoevsky's piece, in St Petersburg, or Leningrad in the cases of Soviet resistance to theory. Of course, there is also another reason: "underground" captures the location of this particular protest: away from the mainstream, scattered in the pages of samizdat magazines, in articles some of which have never been (re)published, i.e. they never left the dark room of subterranean critique to break into the light of day. And a third reason perhaps. When Nietzsche, in the winter of 1886/87, encountered Dostoevsky's novella, in Nice, in a French translation titled *L'esprit souterrain*, he certainly made a major discovery for himself (as he did through his encounter with Stendhal's writing) that stimulated a rethinking of what a philosophical discourse is and how it functions. Marking out underground instances of Russian resistance to theory (Krivulin's rejection of Russian Formalism and Groy's critique of Soviet semiotics and structuralism) could also occasion some rethinking of the status of theory and its fortunes in the past century, and today.*

Key words: *literary theory, underground, Russian Formalism, Soviet semiotics and structuralism*

Notes from the Underground is a prose work rather than a piece of poetry. The reason I am evoking it in the title of this paper is simple: all of the action that my paper refers to unfolds, just as in Dostoevsky's piece, in St Petersburg, or Leningrad in the cases of Soviet resistance to theory. Of course, there is also another reason: "underground" captures the location of this particular protest: away from the mainstream, scattered in the pages of samizdat type-written magazines, in articles some of which have never been republished, i.e. they never left the dark room of subterranean critique to break into the light of day. And a third reason perhaps. When Nietzsche, in the winter of 1886/87 encountered Dostoevsky's novella, in Nice, in a French translation titled *L'esprit souterrain*, he felt propelled by Dostoevsky into further reflection on the premises of his own philosophy (as he was, to an extent, through his encounter with Stendhal's writing). Marking out the instances of Soviet resistance to theory might *also*, let us hope, occasion some rethinking of the status of theory and its fortunes in the past century, and today.

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Let me begin with what I believe might be a much-needed differentiation between two fundamentally different meanings the word ‘theory’ has acquired over the last half a century or so. The first one (one can visualize the word “theory” being written with an initial capital “t” here) is reserved for theory conceived of as an important but somewhat softly defined body of thought that gravitates towards a substantial (if not full) overlap with Continental philosophy. There are two versions of this understanding of theory (with a capital “t”) that are worth pointing to, each represented by a seminal recent work. One is the equation of Theory with French post-structuralism; on this version, Theory unfolded in France in the second half of the 1960s and migrated to the United States in the 1970s. François Cusset, who has studied the process of this migration, has written persuasively about “French Theory” (to quote the title of his book published in France in 2003, in which the words “French Theory”, in English in the French original, drive home his point about the transformative – and global – power of Theory). Cusset makes an excellent argument about the possible reasons for this equation, or substitution. On reaching the shores of America, dominated as it was (and still is) by the traditions of analytic philosophy, French post-structuralist philosophy (foremost Deconstruction) was appropriated not as philosophy per se but as a powerful method of analyzing (and putting in question) narratives: literary, religious, legal. Theory, in Cusset’s words (2008, p. 99), became “mysteriously intransitive”: no longer a theory of something, but “above all a discourse on itself”²

The second version is the equation of Theory with the dialectical method, honed by Hegel but detectable before him, right down to medieval philosophy and letters (in Andrew Cole’s broad – perhaps a touch too broad – reconstruction). Theory, in this second version, allows one to perform a move within philosophy away from philosophy, as Andrew Cole (2014) would have it when he associates the birth of Theory with Hegel.³ Again, the ensuing claim is all-encompassing: “theory historicizes thought, studying its materialization across disparate forms of human expression – music, literature, art, architecture, religion, philosophy – either in a diachronic or synchronic analysis – or, aspirationally, both at once” (2015, p. 810).⁴

There is, however, also another understanding of theory (we could visualize the word as being written with a small ‘t’ here); it focuses on a particular time-limited episteme and on a much more well-defined area, that of literature or the other arts: music, architecture, theatre, film, etc. The episteme I am referring to must be time-limited, for it is itself the product of a time-limited regime of relevance that bestows on literature (or these other arts) a sense of autonomy

² François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. by Jeff Fort with Josephine Berganza and Marlon Jones, Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 99.

³ See the argument in Andrew Cole, *The Birth of Theory*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

⁴ Andrew Cole, “The Function of Theory at the Present Time,” *PMLA*, 2015, V. 130, No. 3, pp. 809-18, here p. 810.

and self-sufficiency, without which the semblance of timelessness constituted in the act of theoretical reflection – with its uncovering of seemingly universal principles (or even immutable rules) – would not be possible (Tihanov, 2019).⁵

These two meanings – and manifestations – of theory (with a capital and with a small “t”) have over the last fifty years or so functioned not in isolation from one another, but in constant imbrication and overlap. Let me adduce an illustration of this complexity drawn from the scene of theory in Germany of the 1960s.

In mid-1960s Germany, these two meanings – and projects – of theory intersect in a way that is indicative of, and marked by, earlier developments in the German humanities. The version of theory that tends to extend to a full overlap with dialectics is very much alive in the legacy of what we still refer to as “critical theory”, an intellectual project that commenced in the 1920s and was already influential by the late 1950s. In the 1960s, this project revives Benjamin’s work which the ’68-ers rediscover; it also formulates what Adorno would call “negative dialectics”: reversing Hegel’s postulate “the whole is the true” but remaining dialectical nonetheless, albeit negatively so. This extended understanding of Theory as coextensive with dialectics (almost exclusively of German provenance) is not the only one on offer in Germany during the 1960s. A competing version of Theory seeks inspiration in hermeneutics, and thus also largely in the domestic intellectual tradition. To some extent, of course, in the version practiced by Gadamer hermeneutics meets the dialectical method; Hegel is undoubtedly important for the subtle moves of mediation that are on display in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer’s opus magnum published in 1960.

On the other hand, literary theory as such (the second project of theory, “theory” with a small “t”) is barely present in Germany until the mid-1960s. If anything, a great deal of what constitutes literary theory arrives initially as an export from France, in the guise of structuralist semiotics. Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, in a severely abridged translation (Bartes, 2014, 30),⁶ becomes the first harbinger of this particular project of theory in Germany. As Horst Brühmann notes, Barthes’ *Mythologies* appeared in Germany (as *Mythen des Alltags*) at a time when not a single book was available in German by Foucault, Althusser, Derrida, Lacan, or even the members of the Tel Quel Group; Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* had been translated into German in 1960, but without the theoretical passages (Brühmann, 2014, p.32).⁷ Thus, at least initially, French literary theory arrives in Germany without the supporting frame of French Theory. In both

⁵ I elaborate here on arguments advanced in my book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019 (see especially the Prologue).

⁶ See Horst Brühmann, “Als Diskussionsgrundlage für Großstadtbüchereien empfohlen.’ Zu Übersetzung und Rezeption der *Mythen des Alltags* in Deutschland”, in *Mythen des Alltags – Mythologies. Roland Barthes’ Klassiker der Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Mona Körte and Anne-Kathrin Reulecke, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2014, pp. 25-40, here 30 (19 of Barthes’ 53 *mythologies* were translated in the 1964 Suhrkamp edition).

⁷ Brühmann, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

France and Germany, what anchors and advances structuralist literary theory is the parallel revival, for the first time in Europe since the 1930s, of Russian Formalism; in retrospect this could be seen as a self-reflexive gesture, by some of the structuralists, of establishing intellectual provenance for their own work. This process begins precisely in the mid-1960s. In 1964, a German translation of Victor Erlich's 1955 monograph on Russian Formalism is published in Munich; the next year, the first books of works by Russian Formalists appear in France and Germany: in France, the famous anthology edited in Paris by Tzvetan Todorov, with a preface by Roman Jakobson, and in Germany – a selection of Boris Eikhenbaum's writings brought out by Suhrkamp. To complicate matters, some of the essays included in Todorov's anthology of Russian Formalist literary theory (by Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum) are carefully read and referred to a few years later by Marcuse, the indisputable intellectual guru of the 1968 protests, thus staging a consequential meeting between theory and Theory (Tihanov, 2005, pp. 689-690).⁸

But while in the West the explosive mixture of theory (with a capital and a small "t") was celebrating its triumph throughout the late 1960s and in 1970s, in Soviet Russia the 1970s were already seeing theory fatigue, or even, as I will try to demonstrate briefly in this second part of my talk, an active resistance to theory. The political context should not be missed here. Literary theory, not just as a field, but as a university discipline based on textbooks and requiring the rituals of examinations, was first institutionalised precisely in Soviet Russia, beginning in the decade between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s. But this institutionalisation took place along strictly Marxist lines, impoverishing Marx's intellectual legacy and largely destroying the foundations of literary theory laid by the Russian Formalists (Tomashevskii, *Teoriia literatury: Poetika*, 1925). This is particularly true of the version of literary theory devised by Gennady Pospelov (1940), and less so of that cultivated by the more talented and only slightly less orthodox Leonid Timofeev (1934; then 1935 as an introduction to literary theory for beginning writers with the title 'Verse and Prose'; then 1945, as a university textbook), one of Bakhtin's guarding angels in the very early 1940s, thanks to whom Bakhtin got to present his paper "Epic and Novel" at the Gorky Institute of World Literature. The result of all this was that Russian Formalism, so much chastised and berated for so long, gradually acquired an aura of dissident aversion to dogma. The representative volume of Tynianov's writings on literary theory and poetics published in Moscow in 1977 was the work of scholars who were not prepared to talk, or walk, with the regime. Russian Formalism had become a byword for opposition to narrowly conceived Marxist theory.

It is against this background of canonising Russian Formalism by, and amongst, those seeking to eschew the imposed ideological mainstream (*inakomyслиashchie*, in Russian) that I wish to discuss now a stark example of resistance not to Marxist literary theory, but precisely to Russian Formalism, the guiding star – along with semiotics, of which a few words later, of those dissenting

⁸ See Galin Tihanov, "The Politics of Estrangement: The Case of the Early Shklovsky", *Poetics Today*, 2005, V. 26, No. 4, pp. 665-696, especially pp. 689-690.

from official theory. Not surprisingly, this voice against Russian Formalism comes from, as it were, a *practising* dissident, the poet and journalist Viktor Krivulin. In the Leningrad samizdat magazine *37* (1976-1981; 21 issues in total), edited by him and Tatiana Goricheva, Krivulin published a long review article on the above-mentioned 1977 representative collection of Tynianov's works. The title of Krivulin's contribution, "Notes on the margins of an untimely book" takes the reader back to Nietzsche and Gorky (*37*, No. 10 (1977), pp. 227-248, typescript, not republished since its appearance in the samizdat magazine). Krivulin attacks, to begin with, the principles of selection; he seems to be suggesting that after the republication of Tynianov's articles on verse theory in 1965, the 1977 edition is an unnecessary monument to artificially arranged unity and cohesion. Yet the crux of his criticism is in his profound disagreement with the technically-pragmatic, in the end "cynical", as he calls it, approach to literature introduced by the Formalists. This cynicism, Krivulin charged, allowed Shklovsky to turn his coat and adopt the position of a trickster interested in his own survival above all else. The same technicality and pragmatism marked Tynianov's approach to literature, according to Krivulin. In the end, the deeper problem here is that Tynianov, along with his fellow-Formalists, was practising an approach to literature that Krivulin found too secular, and in that sense too narrow. In a powerful passage in the last part of his long text, Krivulin writes: Tynianov was eager to understand how literature behaves at "the lower limit of language", that which places language in contact with the everyday (*byt*). Alas, Tynianov had no sense at all for the importance of understanding how literature positions itself at what Krivulin calls "the upper limit of language", the contact zone in which literature faces metaphysics and religion (p. 245). For Tynianov, the "junior sister" of literature, in Krivulin's remarkable paraphrasing of Tynianov's term "junior genres", is the anecdote, the rumour, and other forms of everyday discourse – but literature's "senior sisters" are the Bible, the Koran, and the Vedas, of which Tynianov doesn't know and doesn't want to know (p. 246). [Zabolotsky vs. Harms and Vvedensky].

My second example is Boris Groys's early piece, "Istoki i smysl russkogo strukturalizma", published under the pseudonym 'Igor' Suitsidov' in *37*, 1980-81, No. 21 (the last issue before the magazine ceased publication), just before Groys's emigration to West Germany in 1981; in the same issue, under his real name, Groys published an article on Malevich and Heidegger.

The title, of course, is meant to reconnect the Russian reader with Berdiaev and his book "The origins and meaning of Russian Communism" (English ed. 1937; first Russian edition, Paris 1955). Groys contends that Structuralism had become in Soviet Russia just another ideology, rivalling in intelligentsia circles the official ideology of Marxism. In the absence of a philosophical tradition, in the absence, ultimately, of metaphysics (to recall also Krivulin's critique of Tynianov) Soviet Structuralism put on the mantle of metaphysics; in Groys's account, it became nothing more than a 'conservative' "version of the left materialist wing of the humanities" and succeeded Marxism in this role during the 1960s-1970s. (p. 257

in Groys, *Rannye teksty*). “Structuralism insisted on becoming the ideology of the intelligentsia that was supposedly ready to begin to govern a society, in which all actions have only a systemic sense and which has lost intuition of its own historicity.” “But the [type of] rationality Structuralism [offered] turned out to be weaker than that of Marxism”, and “removed from participation in the institutions of power, the intelligentsia was able to deploy structuralism in its capacity as metaphysics solely for the purpose of its self-consolation” (p. 258). Structuralism is no doubt being attacked by Soviet orthodoxy, but this only underlines its own – Structuralism’s – monopoly on the humanities. It had thus become the new orthodoxy – even as some of its most talented practitioners, such as Lotman and Averintsev (both mentioned by Groys, in contradistinction to Viacheslav Ivanov, whose theory of the two hemispheres of the brain is ruthlessly ridiculed by Groys, as is an article by Toporov which attempts a structuralist-semantic reconstruction of the word ‘wisdom’ (Sophia), pp. 245-50; Groys is also rather caustic in relation to Pyatigorsky, p. 240), deliver examples of an inspiring interpretation of literature.

A third and final example. Itself a relatively small group of academics brought together by admiration for Nikolai Marr’s “new theory of language” and his methodology of cultural analysis, “semantic paleontology” (*semanticheskaia paleontologiia*) was a current in cultural and literary theory that had a considerable impact on some of its contemporaries (notably Bakhtin) and wider resonance beyond the 1930s. A major exponent of semantic paleontology, Olga Freidenberg (still best known in the West as Boris Pasternak’s cousin), was at pains to negotiate the boundaries between her own para-Marxist cultural theory and orthodox sociologism. She was to face, much later, criticism from some of her own pupils, more often than not for methodological reasons. In an article surveying the history of the ‘genetic method’, written decades after semantic paleontology had left the stage of Soviet literary theory, Sofia Poliakova charged Marr’s followers with reducing cultural history to a ‘gigantic tautology’ (*gigantskuiu tautologiu*). While in hot pursuit of primeval clusters of meaning, Poliakova maintained, Freidenberg produced a semantic universe, in which everything resembled and echoed everything else. ‘We are thus in the kingdom of sameness clad in difference’ (Poliakova, 1997, p. 370).⁹ In 1979-80, Freidenberg became once again the target of criticism, this time by a group of young classicists at Leningrad University

⁹ S. V. Poliakova, ‘*Oleinikov i ob Oleinikove*’ i drugie raboty po russkoi literature (Moscow: INAPRESS, 1997), 370 (‘Takim obrazom, my v tsarstve tozhdestv, oblechennykh v otlichiiakh’); the quote is from Poliakova’s article ‘Iz istorii geneticheskogo metoda: marrovskaia shkola’, first published in *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 7-8 (1994): 13-20. Poliakova contrasts in her article Freidenberg and Frank-Kamenetskii; the latter is declared a true scholar and thinker, Freidenberg is apportioned the dubious honour of a helpless and methodologically perplexed follower of Marr and Frank-Kamenetskii. This assessment is historically inaccurate and unfounded. Suffice it to point to Frank-Kamenetskii’s unequivocal praise of Freidenberg’s pioneering role in the mythological interpretation of the Greek novel, which overturned Erwin Rohde’s false assumption of the importance of invention and foreshadowed ‘by three years’ Karl Kerényi’s 1927 study, *Die griechisch-orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (which, according to Frank-Kamenetskii, was, compared to Freidenberg’s, rather narrow in scope, limiting itself to an examination of the Egyptian myth of Osiris and its impact on the Greek novel); cf. Frank Kamenetskii, ‘K genezisu’, *Russkii tekst* 3 (1995), p. 187.

who believed her work to be lacking in methodological rigour and philological exactitude. Freidenberg was aligned with Lotman, Toporov, Averintsev, and Losev, who were all thought by these budding scholars to be representatives of a new – structuralist – orthodoxy in philology, which, because it was perceived by many as a form of opposition to the regime, was felt to be beyond criticism. Seeking to rectify this undemocratic situation, the students organized small workshops, in which they questioned the methodological untouchability of Structuralism and semiotics (of which Freidenberg was considered a predecessor *sui generis*, by Toporov and to some extent by Lotman, whose notion of ‘explosion’ (*vzryv*) as a mechanism of cultural and historical change undoubtedly drew on her idea of the fitful birth of qualitatively new cultural formations¹⁰ (Lotman, 2009, p. 140)). The discussions (except for the one on Averintsev, which had not been recorded) were later published in the samizdat journal *Metrodor* (1978-1982; 10 issues in total).¹¹ Many of these discussions, I should add, were jocular and playful in style, thus deliberately challenging the position of authority Soviet Structuralism and semiotics had assumed.

In conclusion, I should like to make three brief points. First, there was no hiding place for theory in the Soviet Union. Often itself beginning as a form of resistance to Marxism, theory’s own symbiosis with power and authority would be readily detectable and assailable. Second, and this is a really novel and important point, critique of Russian Formalism and Soviet Structuralism came not just from within Soviet Marxism, as is still generally assumed today, but also from the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, with arguments that were no less forceful, and certainly often more valid. Third, my reflections here capture, in the end, some of the inherent strains between theory and ideology, or, if you will, between theory with a small and a capital “t”. Here are the two faces of this intrinsic tension: Krivulin who found Tynianov’s take on literature wanting, because he pined for theory with a capital “t” that would grow into an engagement with metaphysics and religion; and Zhmud’, and even more so Groys, who were uncomfortable with Soviet Structuralism having turned into an ideology in its own right and sought to scale it back to a stricter and more specific method, a theory with a small “t”.

¹⁰ Cf. Juri Lotman, *Culture and Explosion*, ed. M. Grishakova, trans. Wilma Clark (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), 140 (first published in Russian as *Kul'tura i vzryv*, 1992); see also Lotman’s article ‘O. M. Freidenberg as a student of culture’, *Soviet Studies in Literature* 12.2 (1976): 3-11 (first published in Russian in 1973 as ‘O. M. Freidenberg kak issledovatel’ kul'tury’). At the same time, one has to keep in mind that Lotman’s understanding of ‘explosion’ was sometimes marked by a very non-Freidenbergian Romantic belief in the genius of individual writers and artists as the agents of change (see S. Frank, C. Ruhe, and A. Schmitz, ‘Explosion und Ereignis: Kontexte des Lotmanschen Geschichtskonzepts’, in J. M. Lotman, *Kultur und Explosion*, trans. D. Trottenberg (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2010), pp. 227-59, esp. 254, 259).

¹¹ Some of the materials, including articles critical of Freidenberg, by S. A. Takhtadzian and A. K. Gavrilov, are republished in *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 15 (1995). For a fascinating retrospective by one of the participants, see Leonid Zhmud’, ‘Studenty-istoriki mezhdru ofitsiozom i “liberal’noi” naukoj’, *Zvezda* 8 (1998), pp. 204-209, see also the retort by one of Lotman’s defenders: Georgii Levinton, ‘Zametki o kritike i polemike, ili Opyt otrazheniia nekotorykh neliteraturnykh obvinenii (lu. M. Lotman i ego kritiki)’, *Novaia russkaia kniga* 1 (2002), pp. 14-17.

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