

# Introduction: A Broken Promise

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This text is an introduction. This means that its own genre makes it face problems that are insoluble. (In fact every introduction is impossible, but we will not elaborate on that now.)

The author made a promise to his American publishers to explain very clearly in this introduction the **context** of the whole collection: the chain of recurrent circumstances and events, the sharing of a common political and intellectual (besides a very private—that of close friends) milieu, and the particular plots of events that made the writing of the texts in this book possible. This would be a background which could make the texts, at least relatively, comprehensible.

As it happens, the promise, frivolously made, was impossible to keep.

And this is so not only because, as according to the general deconstructivist “truth,” the context can never be described in a way that will guide and lead to a satisfactory and adequate understanding/using of the text. Every “representation” and “narrating” of a context always involves some totalizing procedures: politics of representation, control over the myths that set the semantic scale of an intellectual community, self-proclamation of the narrator (introducer) as the “legal” heir of this context, etc. The narrative about this context is impossible—and not because of the general reasons mentioned above, but because of some very specific ones.

In the first place this context does not exist anymore. The circle of friends, where “The Transparent Book,” “Goethe’s Indigo,” or “Political Aesthetics of Communism” were born is gone. This could, of course, serve rather than disserve the narration: there is no easier way to take control of the mythology of a community than the act of retrospectively re-writing it, especially when nobody is there to contradict the narrator. But what actually happened to this community, to this intellectual circle, is something besides disintegration—it was a destruction of its potential to construct meaning, an effort to throw away and lose for good the hermeneutic key to it. In order to make possible its own disintegration it had to stop understanding itself: this was a necessary precondition for its destruction. Once the key is completely lost, the human and intellectual experience of this community begins to fade and escapes the totalizing mechanisms of the narration; today this experience seems to the author of the introduction himself somewhat unreal, and the effort to revive it—full of suspicious sentimentality and retrospective ideologies.

So the narrative has to narrate its own impossibility—to tell why this community cannot be told about.

Three of the four authors presented here were close friends for about ten years and the texts that they produced then bear the traces of this friendship: traces of discussions and arguments in pubs and streets of nighttime Sofia, of shared depressions and exaltations, of shared books—lived through together, of countless talks, dialogues and disputes, of reactions and reactions to the reactions, which nobody would manage to reconstruct now. This was as much discussing-things-together as it was living together, and everyone—under the influence of the other, under the influence of their own influences reflected in the other, etc.—was gradually losing (obliterating) his traditional, ideologically and professionally permissible profile, fixed by the totalitarian surroundings. And in the communal intellectual happenings Ivaylo Ditchev was less and less “a young writer,” Alexander Kiossev—a “young literary critic,” and Vladislav

Todorov—a “young theater critic” (that this was a natural process of shaping each other became clear later when Ivan Kristev joined the group and had to give up the perspective careers of a “young philosopher” and a “young poet” as well). These men not only ceased to be “young,” but were also gradually turning into—for good or bad—something different, something for which the completely pieced-out-into-strict-categories totalitarian culture of Bulgaria simply had no name (nomenclature). The combination of studying the postmodern writers and leading a totalitarian/posttotalitarian existence created a common hybrid discourse and a community of obscure but passionate intellectual positions. From an orthodox-totalitarian point of view (including the totalitarian point of view of a narrative about them) they appeared like an intolerable monster. At the same time the new discourse they tried to create was not enough to explain everything. To slip away from professional nomenclatures did not suffice. This friendly debating circle was a “form of life”—vivid intertextuality, which the participants themselves experienced as an intellectual oasis. But in the cramped space of the oasis the bodies clutched at each other, the thoughts existed only in the ambivalent tension of aggression/erotics one towards the other. Thus the eroticism of the situation was paralleled by a claustrophobic feeling in a closed space: later Vladislav Todorov would call all this “promiscuous closeness.” Like every oasis, this one would also at some point lose meaning and disintegrate (although at the time nobody was clearly aware of this)—and the disintegration would leave behind not only an intellectual but a corporeal void too.

Then came the political changes in Bulgaria: the “desert” of totalitarianism was taken over by a melancholic flora growing in the post-totalitarian chaos; the intuitions of space all of a sudden changed and the claustrophobic Eros of the oasis cooled down.

This introduction should try to hold the texts in a contextual unity and offer the reader the general form of their meaning. In addition, it is meant to perform this impossible

hermeneutic operation at a point of time when the centrifugal energies of that very context dispersed the circle all over the world. Today Ivaylo Ditchev is in Paris, Vladislav Todorov in Philadelphia, Alexander Kiossev in Goettingen, and Ivan Kristev is on the way between Sofia, Oxford, Saarbruecken, and Boston. This suggests that the feeling of community the circle had created had been cracked and crumbling from the very beginning and probably had never been totally communal.

What is more, the “story” that each member of the group took away with them after the disintegration turns out to be quite different—not to say incompatible and hostile—from the other stories; denying the basic conceptual patterns of the rest, recalling different details and nuances of the relationship, continuing different (forgotten by the rest of the group) lines of former discussions. In this sense the hermeneutic key to the group was not lost, it was broken into pieces. And this introduction holds just one piece, one fragment of it. The rest, with which it could build up again the hermeneutic whole, the **symbol** (‘symbolon’—the Hellenic piece, which the other carries to identify the community) are not only distant, but do not fit together. The elements of the hermeneutic puzzle were not simply transpositioned, they were transformed; the shape and contour of each fragment participates already in some other, completely different linguistic and human game; and joins together into other symbolons. The former fragments do not fit each other.

The impossibility of a proper introduction is increased as well by the fact that in a certain sense the texts published here owe something to a larger intellectual milieu, for which—*mutatis mutandis*—the above is also true. In the period between 1987 and 1990 the friendly circle of the authors existed amongst a crazy intellectual amalgamation of young university professors, graduate and undergraduate students—men and women of letters, philosophers, theater people, artists, sociologists, poets, and simply snobs—and this society sometimes perceived itself as in-

volved in some act of resistance against totalitarianism still parasitizing inside its system of institutionalized languages and genres. The group "Synthesis," which gathered occasionally in the house-museum of the late Bulgarian writer Angel Karaliichev (this certainly with some effort could be interpreted symbolically—the group parasitized on the living space that had belonged to one of the numerous official Bulgarian authors, whom nobody read anymore) was not a dissident organization. It did not make the effort to "live in truth"—as "typical" dissidents like Vaclav Havel did (by the way, such people hardly existed in Bulgaria). Its strategy was to transgress the safeguarded totalitarian genres like fiction, philosophy, sociology, and theater which were ideologically limited and rigid. These genres had to be mixed and cross-fertilized to reach the point of appearing scandalous and becoming unregulated strategies of expression—"mystification," "inflammations," "disfiguring figures"—as the group itself defined the genres of its own writing and talking (indeed "Synthesis" existed mostly orally). For these "genres" the totalitarian state simply had no controlling mechanisms. The "radicalism" of that kind of intellectual-artistic behavior was certainly hyperbolized—and this hyperbolization was due to the fact that to the most part of the members of "Synthesis" totalitarianism itself, being in its late stage, was a purely linguistic phenomenon—a self-reproducing semiosphere with its own automatisms, which need to be broken.

The group "Synthesis" itself, was only a part of an even wider semi-academic, semi-artistic milieu without a common ideology. In this milieu "Synthesis" existed at times together, at times versus and against other different groups; in relations which ranged from overlapping and mixing of the groups to rivalry and open hostility. To this milieu belonged Marxist circles and secret Christian Orthodox communions, avant-garde theater groups, and students' research teams. These societies preserved their identity with an unerring instinct, drawing the line between themselves and totalitarian organizations like "Club of the Young

Writer” or “Council of the Young Scholar” that the official Communist power in Bulgaria carefully bred. In addition, they had the clear and sometimes condescending self-awareness of being a “generation” different from the preceding one of cultural clerks serving the totalitarianism.

All the groups and the loose communities referred to here were strange formations. They were naturally born as an inevitable intellectual alternative to the communist public code. They masked themselves as seminars and conferences, summer schools for young scholars—and workshops, philosophy salons, and poetic clubs. This was an attempt to outwit the system by simulative quoting of its own organizational-institutional and controlling forms (these were total, the whole life had to be “organized”—according to the totalitarian strategy).

In that kind of intellectual circle it was **possible** to mention the names of Max Weber, Vatimo, pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, de Sade, Fyodorov or Lyotard without the corresponding ritualistic Marxist formulas, which necessarily had to accompany them in other cases. Such an absurd list of names is not accidental. It reflects just how much this circle was productively lacking a single authority-center, that it did not have one and just one intellectual discourse—it was decisively *not* belonging to a common intellectual paradigm, a school. These authors could be mentioned, and their ideas passionately discussed without fear of sanctions. In this chaos of phenomenologists, structuralists, Orthodox believers, neo-Marxists and men of letters, postmodernists, sociologists, ethnologists, theater directors, and feminists, you could even expect that someone had read these authors. Actually the erudition was rather partial and very artistically fragmented—all these people were still semi-phenomenologists, not yet converted Christians, fresh and green postmodernists (the average age was between 25–30), the communities were organized “in pace”; this was an intellectual milieu in *status nascendi*, one that would never reach the point of being complete. In this respect the friendships, the rivalries, the discussions and the

“dialogue,” the latter brought to the status of an ideology (Bakhtin’s ideas were in the air), were not just a form of communication but also a form of the self-generation of the intellectual communities. Dilettantism was both their sin and their vital atmosphere; it was though legitimated through the dream of “inter-disciplinarity”—another ideologeme important for the community—which hardly anyone was able to clearly formulate as an intellectual program. But on the other hand the feeling of being somehow in opposition was shared by everyone.

It is very hard to describe this intellectual milieu because of its ambiguity. Its inexplicitness was not only the characteristic feature of an intellectual puberty, it had some deeper dimensions—it could be defined as structural or even logical. None of the groups that it comprised could clearly state its ideas and did not even want to. Yearnings, biases, and feuds were not very much articulated. The amazing thing by this milieu was the very act of somehow managing to stand on the very edge of totalitarian permission and legality. It played games with the power (were they dangerous or harmless?), games of dissimulations and double dissimulations; this was a milieu where every intellectual had in one way or another masked in conspiracy his/her “true mission” so that even for the participants in this game was hard to identify the cultural or political roles of his fellows in the public space. A very refined political and cultural as well as psychological intuition was needed to be able to distinguish between a totalitarian mask and the cultural face of your neighbor; who is with you, who is against you, and what is actually your own position. The act of identifying “who is who” in this milieu built on defense strategies, conspiracy, and a problematic resistance to the all-controlling eye of the Big Brother resembled the endless process of opening a Russian doll. The identification was structurally impossible. If the distinctions could be easily made, if one could clearly and without doubt distinguish the conformist writer from the religious thinker, the potential dissident from the undercover informer, the

radical community from the official institution, the post-modernist from the conservative Slavophil, this would be the end of the intellectual community. The ideological cops were always the first ones to make these distinctions. And this whole very ambiguous, but nevertheless fertile, intellectualism would be swept away in one single blow of repression by the created-for-that-very-purpose state services. Any clarity and perspicuity would actually fulfill their police ideal—total control. The ambiguity, the obscurity, the confusing and confused dissimulations, the blend of mimicry and resistance, all these were flaws of the milieu—but they were at the same time a condition for its existence, its constitutive basis. Its being in semiopposition, its non-transparent eclecticism (probably extremely repulsive for the current Western and Eastern lovers of historical *post factum* moralizing) were conditions necessary for its existence. And what is more—a prerequisite for its birth too.

In this sense the hermeneutic disintegrity of this milieu was not something that appeared later in time, it was a virus existing in in from the very beginning. As I have already said, for most of us this loosely woven network was an oasis: an intellectual island inhabited by friendly rivalry and sometimes hostile communities, which often stood at a different distance from the official ideology and official cultural institutions. This, parallel to the erotic tension, naturally created the feeling of solidarity and trust—they were not spoken about, but they were the oxygen, the condition for the existence of this milieu. But besides the solidarity—this was a paranoid space as well—a space of suspicion and distrust. Since the totalitarian system allowed for almost only impossible ways of resistance and “life in truth,” nobody was completely certain, and could not be, that he/she had chosen the most correct position; everyone needed to fanaticize oneself—some procedure of self-persuasion and autohypnosis that he/she had made the “only possible choice.” This inevitably caused great suspicion and distrust as far as other people’s choices were different—and everyone secretly watched the conspiratorial



games of the others surrounding him/her, drew their own lines between masks and faces, questioned the authenticity of the motivation of the others. Everybody wanted to know to what extent these games could be harmlessly integrated into the totalitarian mechanism, evaluated the behavior of the other not only as a covered-up resistance, but measured it against another scale too—as a probably successful strategy for an official career in the totalitarian hierarchy. In this respect, things were really getting worse due to the fact that Bulgarian science and literature of the 50s and 60s were an outstanding example of whole generations that had “started” on their way with an authentic cultural impulse and had wound up as a complacent mob of communist officials; informal circles had merged into official organizations like the “Union of Bulgarian Writers.” “Dis-sidents” had wound up as secret agents of the ideological police or as belonging to the establishment totalitarian writers. So the structural ambiguity of the milieu had this dimension as well—from the very beginning of its existence the suspicion doubled the feeling of unity; different auto-interpretations haunted this milieu, the identities of its protagonists proliferated in number in a paranoid way, and the community itself managed to stay somehow on the edge between a solidarity of people in opposition and the secret hostile suspicion of everyone for everyone.

In the autumn of 1988, Vladislav Todorov and Alexander Kiossev—after knocking on door after door of the official institutions, after dissimulation, despair, and exaltation, after bottles of brandy for the printers and almost unbelievable luck—turned a semilegal manuscript with the title *Ars Simulacri* into 200 copies of a book. It was printed on an awful yellowish-gray paper with a flimsy binding. Later, in Ivaylo Ditchev’s house, the four authors together with the illustrator Luchezar Boyadjiev, spouses and friends had to glue the illustrations, carbon sheets, etc. And, for the simulation to be complete, they put on the back cover of the book-simulation a stamp of the New York Bakers of 1913 (which somebody had accidentally come across), to

parody the stamp of permission given by the official authorities.

Not by accident, in the first part of this book there is a recurrent trope. This is the trope of repetition: twins and carbon paper copies; doubling bodies, cities, and figures. The figure of Pierre Menar stands for this principle—a plagiarist of a greater Pierre genius than the author himself. This figure of the impossible identity is a symptomatic one. It bears the symptom of structural ambiguity which signifies the “recurrence of the suppressed.” Thus the pattern of the Double was pervading the political unconscious of the milieu.

The authors were not aware then of how stable were the configurations of their communal political unconscious. What they wanted to do was to bring *Ars Simulacri* to the utmost because they had just made their first enthusiastic steps in reading Baudrillard.

But today it is easy to realize how little the totalitarian simulations had in common with the “precession of simulacra,” that Baudrillard writes about. Because what he has in mind are virtual models whose only purpose is to produce reality—a tempting and luxurious one; the productivity (virtuality) of these models is not just a token of the disintegrating opposition between images and things, but also a sign for **potentiality** (“to produce means to materialize something by means of force,” says Baudrillard) and for **potency**. To produce in Western society is not a problem. The problem is the overproduction. **Reality** is set aside just by a command on a computer because “the force” has acquired sheer informational dimensions. The real stems from and is completely interchangeable with the virtual.

The totalitarian “simulacra” had nothing in common with that Western virtual society. In a sense they were just the opposite. The “virtual model” of our society (the communist bureaucratic utopia) had one characteristic—it could reproduce no reality but itself. As Vladislav Todorov wrote—factories produced ideological poems, but not commodities. The only thing that this nonproductive, and in that sense impotent, symbolic order was capable of doing was to con-

trol the other languages; to enforce a mandatory total world of appearance; to self-reproduce by means of terror.

The very “reality” was precipitated as an irrational, anti-utopian residue, as a dark, obscure remainder after the nonproductive ideological procedures of the totalitarian society. Being a function of an utopia that never came true, reality seemed utterly wretched, disgracefully failed, consisting mainly of **deficiencies**—of commodities, books, technologies, entertainment, authenticity . . . and most importantly of signs. This was an a-semiotic “pure reality” that could only demonstrate its own wretchedness. Reality could only speak in a **figurative way** since what constituted it was precisely the **deficiency of language**, and in order to be articulated it was forced into using the only legitimate form of expression—imitation of the reigning ideological language. Reality itself manifested as a painful absence that perpetually created simulations which problematized, picked on, perplexed, scandalized, and blocked the functioning of the totalitarian discourse.

Ideology masked reality and deprived it of its genuine voice. In order to speak up, reality employed (as counter-simulation) imitations of the ideological language. The virtual and the wretched reality struggled to outwit one another. Thus the totalitarian simulation failed to organize the Desire; it failed to unlock the luxurious games of temptations and lustful images. Since “reality” could demonstrate only a number of deficiencies, the totalitarian discourse was capable only of organizing the Disgust and Intolerance in symbolic models.

In this sense, the Art of Simulation practiced in the milieu I am trying to describe was not something invented in it. It was neither its fault nor its contribution. This art was “ontologically there.” If we dare to parody Heidegger—simulations simulated. They were the Word of the very totalitarian Being.

Can explanations like these foresee or prevent, even to a small extent, the misunderstandings that stalk that book?

Some time ago a foreigner that had come across some texts of Todorov, Dichev, Kristev, and Kiossev formulated his impressions in the following way: "I have never suspected that in Bulgaria I could find such a virtuoso reception of . . ." and, if I am not mistaken, here followed the names of Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard. I tried to explain the inadequacy of the term "reception" in cases like ours, and I think we finally did not understand each other. He was thinking in classical categories—great authors—great books—diligent readers. But the young intellectuals of Bulgaria (and probably these in Poland, Romania, Russia, etc.) were reading authors and books outside and beyond the structures of their Western institutionalized worship. They were reading them without a context and without a corrective: egoistically, abusively, conspiratively, and passionately as an alternative form of intellectual and political life (language), which was to overcome the deficiencies. And that is why the Western Medieval or postmodern, psychoanalytic or structuralist, hermeneutic or deconstructivist texts were not an object of a disciplined study and research by young scholars and artists. They were a focus of ecstatic energy. That is why these people were not "reading the classics" (were they from the Middle Ages or postmodern), they were searching for allegorical forms in order to express a different, silent, and painful experience. Through this process of allegorizing, the *ideologemes* of totalitarianism acquired some "conspiratorial" meaning. The voices were becoming hermetic, the communication was encapsulated. This again shrunk the circle, and this mute experience in the name of which people had started speaking became once again alienated and incomprehensible.

The reading came out to be not a reception and not a communication, but a mutation—a transformation of the genetic structure of texts and readers.

So, after the political changes there were reasons enough for the Diaspora of the circle, and for the different languages to start roaming the world, and the mutant

symbolons to invade the West and the East. And probably this is well illustrated by the already swelling up difference between texts like *Political Aesthetics of Communism*, *The Post-paranoid Condition*, *An Essay on Terror*, and *An Essay on Political Terror*. Those fragments, broken off from the body of the “promiscuous closeness” had become already complete in themselves—locked up so as not to let the past in. Each one tells its own story. And while the former texts written in the style of “inflammations and disfiguring figures” reproduced the figure of repetition, the latter unconsciously reproduce the figure of dispersing (“of the galaxies”—wrote once Iwaylo Ditchev in a short story, but there is no need of such grand metaphors any more). It is just a dispersing of human beings, friends, texts.

And the “introduction” itself, a genre to be understood only within quotation marks, has only one chance left: to reproduce, by no means unconsciously, the figure of impossibility.