R E V I E W

of the documents presented at the procedure for habilitation as a professor in the professional field 2.1 Philology, scientific specialty “Theory and History of Literature”,

Announced by the department of “New Bulgarian Studies” at New Bulgarian University, Sofia

(the competition announcement was published in the State Gazette, issue 65 of July 17, 2026)

Author of the review: prof. Dr. Sc. Milena Kirova, University of Sofia

Only one candidate – Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ss. Maurice Name Fadel, a full-time lecturer in the 'New Bulgarian Studies' department at NBU – applied for the announced professor position. The candidate fully meets the minimum national requirements under Art. 2b, para. 2 and 3 of the ZRASRB, as well as all the requirements for the position of 'professor' set out in Appendix 2 of the NBU Academic Staff Development Regulations.

The competition was conducted without any violations.

Candidate Information

Maurice Fadel earned his PhD in 2002 with a dissertation titled 'History and Interpretation of the Views of Paul de Man.' In 2022, already a tenured lecturer at NBU, he also obtained the Doctor of Sciences degree after successfully defending a dissertation on 'Detectives, Spies, Cold War: Crime and Spy Literature in Comparative Perspective.' Between 2002 and 2005, he worked as a research associate at the Institute of Literature at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. In 2005, he was appointed as a senior assistant at the Department of New Bulgarian Studies at NBU, and in 2010, he became an associate professor. Since 2020, he has been the head of the Department of New Bulgarian Studies.

For the announced professor competition, Assoc. Prof. Maurice Fadel is presenting one monograph and 14 articles (11 in Bulgarian and 3 in English), published in scientific collections and specialized periodicals since 2022. These publications fully meet the requirements for holding the academic position of 'professor,' as accepted by ZRASRB and according to Appendix 2 of the NBU Academic Staff Development Regulations.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maurice Fadel has also provided a list of citations that exceeds the required minimum, a list showing sufficient participation in national and international scientific forums, a list of supervising two successfully defended PhD students and fourteen successfully graduated master's students, as well as a list of involvement as a team member in carrying out several scientific projects.

Content and scientific contributions of the presented publications: monographs, articles, and studies

In Maurice Fadel's scientific work, we find two main characteristics that appear early on and continue to be relevant to this day. The first relates to the theoretical bent in his thinking, to his tendency to build on every kind of concrete research—whether critical or of a literary-historical nature—on some theoretical foundation and to use the conceptual and terminological tools developed within that framework. This is clearly seen both in his dissertation for earning the degree of 'Doctor of Science' and in his habilitation work for being awarded the academic title of 'Associate Professor'.

The second feature is reflected in the presence of overlapping concentric circles of interest in a certain topic. Each circle sparks a series of specific studies, which gradually come together into a complete monographic work that wraps up the research for that circle.

The book with which Assoc. Prof. Maurice Fadel primarily participated in the announced competition for professor ("The Broken Frame. The Undermining of Representation in Literature," published by New Bulgarian University, 2025, 215 pages) clearly shows affiliation with both of the characteristic traits mentioned earlier. It consists of a theoretically motivated introduction and seventeen parts, grouped into two sections, which, in turn, relate in a meaningful dialectic of the relationships between poetic suggestion and verbal expression. In practice, three main models of these relationships can be identified: language as a means for immediate interpersonal communication; absent language as a space where new meanings emerge; resistance to language as a technique for producing poetic meaning.

The very repetition of the word language suggests a strong interest in that type of literature where language carries the most meaning-forming weight, or poetry. It is no coincidence that fourteen of the seventeen individual sections are devoted to poet-authors and their works. Even the section that concludes the book, analyzing the imagery of the “teacher” and “leader” in Bulgarian literature during the era of state communism, is based on the use of poems by authors like Dimitar Polyanov, Bozhidar Bozhilov, Lyudmil Stoyanov, Nikola Furnadzhiev, and others.

The theoretical framework, which was mentioned as one of the two main features in Assoc. Prof. Fadel's research practice, is also present and visible, even right on the cover of the published book. Its presence is clearly highlighted in the title of the section Introductory Words ('The End of Literary Theory, the End of Representation'), thereby defining the necessity of (and pointing out the task of) each of the seventeen sections that follow until the end of the book.

The theoretical part deals with a somewhat rarely discussed problem in the history of Bulgarian literary studies: the necessity and possibilities of overcoming representation, which is fundamentally inherent in the traditions of Bulgarian literature. The focus of this section is on a question that is both specific and relevant for contemporary humanities research: 'if literary theory belongs to history [as we increasingly see and have already come to believe], does the same apply to the problematization of representation?' (p. 9). Here, by the way, I would like to add a note that the refusal of theory also becomes possible through theory, something like a second-degree theory, or metatheory, an auto-theorizing impulse of the need for self-denial.

In the plan for practical observations on contemporary Bulgarian literature, for example, it is clearly seen that representation is not at all ready to step back, much less to self-destruct. This is probably related to the ongoing process of overlap between ideas of 'high' and 'low,' elite and popular literature. From this follows the question: do we need theoretical pedestals and corresponding methodological models to discuss, understand, and predict the processes happening in 21st-century literature? Simply put, should representation even be discussed as a problem, or should we delegate the conversation about it to some other—closer or more distant—era?

This is exactly where the answer proposed by Maurice Fadel comes in, after he has already asked himself the question, 'How can we approach literature theoretically consciously, without 'doing' theory?' (p. 13). How can we preserve the very 'concept of literature,' since it is produced, understood, and defined precisely through the means of that theory? By looking at each individual literary text in a way that doesn't 'force' it into some theoretical framework and doesn't make it dependent on some structured method, but takes into account its specific, reasonably knowable, historically specific, individually inherent qualities. Or, in the author's own words, by problematizing the presence of representation in each text, 'but nowhere in an abstract-theoretical way' (p. 13).

From here on, the book's seventeen sections follow, which do exactly that: they examine seventeen cases of specific 'textuality,' uncovering and defining the uniqueness of their artistic impact in different combinations of its resistance to language as the main mechanism for generating the effect of representation. In other words, theory should be put to work in solving specific tasks – an approach that isn't theoretical in the usual sense; I would call it something like 'applied theory,' more in tune with the contemporary way of seeing the world.

It's interesting that the first case – the one that usually gives a series its face – is among the exceptions to the rule of choice, meaning it is not poetic but narrative. This concerns the cycle of stories 'If They Could Speak' by Yordan Yovkov. The ability of this cycle to communicate with the reader, to generate implications without the 'mediating reality of the sign,' simply put – beyond the ability of the characters to speak, to communicate in a most human way. The silence of the animal characters creates a space beyond language, and it can only be accessed through 'non-linguistic means,' some special kind of secondary interpretation that 'makes us think that semiotic, and hence linguistic, analysis of Yovkov's texts won't get us very far' (p. 15). And the author suggests an approach that is more philosophical because it relies on Jean-Luc Nancy and his theory of tamed animals as a kind of extension of the human, as a type of 'prosthesis' of human identity, in this case, of the characters' identity.

Another analysis, which I believe is among the most significant contributions of the entire book, belongs to the same first section, aptly titled "Against Language": "Women's Poetry and Translation." The author's interest is focused on how Elisaveta Bagryana translates a specific poem by Anna Akhmatova—a seemingly modest reason, but one that allows the researcher to reach insightful observations and convincing conclusions about them. The presence of "puzzling discrepancies with the original" in Bagryana's translation clearly cannot be explained by a lack of language knowledge or an inability to craft poetic text. It arises from the divergence of two types of worldviews, from the resistance to the "female language" (i.e., mindset and sensitivity) of a Russian poetess who only seems similar in character and experience to Bagryana. This makes our poet translate not just the text of a poem, but the whole kind of experience behind it. Speaking in the first person singular, Bagryana actually translates the female perspective of the Russian poet Akhmatova into the language that's typical of the male modernism in Bulgarian literary tradition.

The second section of the book is titled 'Despite Language,' and as the title, brief as it is, suggests, it arranges eleven cases in which representation is shaken, without denying access to its main carrier, language, and within the scope of that invisible battle that language is capable of waging with itself. Such a battle is conducted, for example, in the poetry of Konstantin Pavlov, where nonsense is not devoid of words, but these words practically reject language's ability to produce socially shared, communicative meaning. In this way, nonsense activates the demythologizing potential of language, and 'the myths that underpin the value of art are continuously exposed' (p. 124).

Another strategy of resistance against the representational function of language can be seen in the poetry of Atanas Dalchev. At first glance, the imagery seems highly referential because it depicts concrete, even material things that exist objectively in reality. It is precisely this "radical referentiality," taken to its extreme, that the author uses to express what philosophy calls "logical positivism," which in Dalchev manifests as a relentless resistance to any form of theatricality – both in art and in life.

And I'll mention one more case from the panorama of this diverse and challenging section in its observations. It's about an unshakable presence in the Bulgarian literary canon – the poem "September" by Geo Milev. Maurice Fadel's analysis exposes a rarely noticed and even more rarely discussed ambiguity in it. It's commonly known that Geo Milev celebrates the power and justice of the people's anger; so why then is the image of the enslaved people 'trapped' in Hegel's master-slave dialectic? How much of this people is truly Bulgarian, and how much was invented in the spirit of the avant-garde from the early decades of the 20th century?

Without going into more examples from Maurice Fadel's book, I would like to express the general conclusion that it is a valuable, in-depth, and often provocative research work with original interpretations. Added to it are the articles included in this collection, which complement the thematic scope of the book and expand the range of authors and works covered.

Based on everything I have said so far, I believe that the candidacy of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maurice Fadel is very suitable and well-supported with all the materials submitted for this competition. I suggest that the esteemed academic jury award him the academic title of "Professor"

in the professional field 2.1 Philology, with the scientific specialty “Theory and History of Literature.”

November 13, 2026