

Why Does Formalism Still Matter?

The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond. By Galin Tihanov. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2019. 272 pp.

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After the debates about the end, or in a more radical fashion, the death of literary theory have themselves run out of steam—I allude here to the title of Bruno Latour’s infamous essay about the end of theory, entitled *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?*—, it is arguably a bold move to take up—yet again—the subject of what literary theory once was. Fortunately, Galin Tihanov’s new book does not attempt to reconstruct, let alone revitalize, the often rather unproductive and apocalyptically-toned discussions about where and when theory went wrong or what it has become today and—last but not least—why we are dissatisfied with it in general. Instead, the book aims to contextualize the subversive nature of literary theory while taking into account both its origin and current state. Tihanov meticulously and transparently demonstrates this subversiveness of literary theory while focusing on Russian Formalism as the genesis of a theory that is at one and the same time specific to literature and seeks the specificity of literature.

Some readers who are familiar with Tihanov’s research interests might shy away from this new work for fear of its being exclusively centered on Russia, or that it might overemphasize the significance of a school that is no longer considered “cutting-edge” in the humanities. Fortunately, the word “beyond” in the subtitle of the book is quite telling in more than one way: it does not only encompass the dissemination of Formalism from Russia to Central Europe and then as an inspiration to structuralism and other text-immanent reading practices in Western Europe. “Beyond” also refers to how the history of Russian Formalism can unveil new aspects of the connection

between literature and literary theory. And *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* also seeks answers to the question: in what ways did this first *par excellence* school of theorizing literature and literariness manage to fuel literary theory for decades? Russian Formalism is thus proposed as a phenomenon that could explain what is meant by the death of literary theory today in a general sense—at least in academia.

Tihanov's own take on the rise and fall of literary theory, however, differs greatly from the approaches explicated by similarly distinguished scholars: from e.g., Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's idea of certain crises boosting interest in the theory of literature; Jonathan Culler's proposal that theory is an open-ended commitment which constantly pushes our thinking forward into uncharted territories; Paul de Man's concept of the resistance to theory rooted in the fact that theorizing often dissolves or deconstructs the very taxonomy under investigation. Tihanov's work is not a book of continuities or chasms being bridged either; it does not prioritize discussion of some kind of Formalist heritage in e.g. French Structuralism, which would otherwise be a far easier and less demanding task than what he has undertaken. Instead, in his analysis of Julia Kristeva's interpretation of Mihail Bakhtin's main works, Tihanov shows just how much these two schools can be at odds, or at least how each and every attempt at incorporating Formalism on behalf of another school of literary studies is destined to fail—which is even more obvious in the case of Marxism, an issue to which I will return shortly.

The Birth and Death of Literary Theory clearly explains why certain factors that are supposed to have affected the history of literary theory have been selected by the author and what is to be understood by the label “literary theory” in the first place. Although Tihanov acknowledges that theoretical reflections on fiction had always existed, even before the concept of literature came to be, he emphasizes the uniqueness of a literary theory that simultaneously competes with philosophy and aesthetics and situates itself as a means of reading fiction in its (i.e., fiction's and theory's) own right. And since this autonomy of theory converges with the autonomy of literary texts—which is principally granted by theory itself—for the first time in Russian Formalism, the birth of theory *per se* can very well be located in the discursive formations of an era that made this particular school of literary studies possible. The assemblage of such discursive formations that can produce theory in itself is taken as a “regime of relevance,” which admittedly has some Foucauldian and Derridean overtones. Regimes of relevance in Tihanov's formulation indicate some fairly obvious Foucauldian influence because they enact how we are educated and granted access to think about and deal with literature. And they also display some traces of Derrida's idea of “différance” in their constant unfolding which makes literary theory not only a product of a certain regime of relevance but also a constitutive agency in how the regime itself develops. Therefore, the regime that is up for analysis

in *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* is the interwar period in Central-Europe and Russia: it gains significance due to the unprecedented autonomy that was provided for both the object of investigation (i.e., literature) and the means used for investigation (i.e., literary theory) without any type of intermediary (e.g., the preeminence of authorship that grants autonomy to literature in Romanticism).

Russian Formalism becomes a perfect example for this convergence of autonomies without intermediaries in view of the compelling theorem of exile that Tihanov hints at in the Prologue and Introduction and then develops throughout his book. On the one hand, the main representatives of Formalism were émigrés to Czechoslovakia, Poland, Germany and France. With the figure of the exile, the book even constitutes a common ground between major theoreticians, for instance between György Lukács and Roman Jakobson, stating that even though their exile was the most productive stage in their careers, they never fully adopted their host culture. On the other hand, exile is taken as a more abstract concept, too, and evokes a unique tension; whereas literary theory dismisses the idea of monolingualism in literature, it also—for the first time, with Formalism—puts emphasis on the specific way language is used in literature as the latter's *differentia specifica*. Accordingly, the valorization of fiction is no longer subjugated to social, political, or economic functions but is based upon the ability of literary texts to refer back to themselves. This becomes especially clear in Tihanov's discussion of Bakhtin (and paradoxically, with regard to his flight from Formalism) when the question of how the heteroglossia of the novel can be synthesized with the mono-thematic descriptive form of the epic is posed. One might even venture so far as to suggest that scrutiny into the self-reflexivity of and in language in literature is taken as a forerunner to the research into autopoiesis and recursive operations which characterized Soviet cybernetics several decades after the birth of Russian Formalism.

With Formalism as the first theory of literature that exclusively relies on text-immanent interpretation, it became inevitable that theorists of this school would clash with representatives of other influential interpretative trends. Of course, the book reflects on the rivalry between Marxism and Formalism and how the former tried to integrate the latter by means that are painfully familiar to those who lived under Communist rule; e.g. by organizing debates on how Formalism could take up Marxist causes, or writing long forewords that are attached to collections of translated essays and explain how new theoretical trends fit the main ideology directed by the Party. This rivalry between Marxism and Formalism peaked with the Leningrad dispute of 1927, but the book also offers tidbits about brief encounters which confirm that the conflict did not in fact stop back in 1927. For instance, Tihanov drafts the intellectual biography of the émigré libertine Emilia Emmanuilovna Litauer, who sharply criticized those Formalists who did not express their support for a more progressive

and socially active platform in the Formalist movement that would both analyze and encourage new artistic forms in order to utilize their social-political functions.

In his quest to trace the birth and death of literary theory, Tihanov argues that the imperative of radical historicity is an indispensable tool. Radical historicity, however, does not mean the act of taking into account decisive events and person-ages which are then chronologically chained together, but a cluster of case studies on episodes that seem to concern stand-alone phenomena at first, yet are carefully linked together by the book's narrative. Sometimes radical historicity, however, manifests in rethinking already established connections; for instance, the comparison between Formalism and Positivism makes Tihanov remark that Formalism wanted to be more positivistic than Positivism itself, but exclusively within a realm specific to literature. Hence the Formalist obsession with metrics and typologies provided scientific analysis while their method also managed to take authorship—understood as the genetic locus of the work of art which was an important factor for Positivist interpretation, in any case—out of the equation. The many encounters between Marxism and Formalism are also approached on unorthodox, yet enlightening ground when Tihanov examines how the two interpretative trends mainly differed over how they understood performativity: the former regarded interpretation as an intermediate but nonetheless crucial step towards taking action in the socio-political sphere, whereas the latter appropriated interpretation as already performative in unveiling the autonomy of the work of art, which also encompasses the multisensual experience of form and matter and not simply the identification of linguistic elements and relations as building blocks of literary texts.

The book's chapters focus on multiple characters who, one way or the other, played their part in the extension of literary theory: some are lesser known libertines like the above-mentioned Litauer or the classical philologist Olga Freidenberg, who was interested in how literature came to be, while others are widely read in scholarship and they are the ones who get their own chapters. The main protagonist of *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* is undoubtedly Viktor Shklovsky, who in Tihanov's narrative becomes the prototype of the exile: with his pioneering thoughts on authorship as an intersection of discourses, and with his theory of estrangement that is presented as a forerunner to "horizon change" and "aesthetic distance" as subsequently conceptualized by Reception Aesthetics. And there is also Shklovsky's controversial idea of sublimation, which ultimately put the blame for the mass cruelty and inhumane actions brought about by World War I on the failure of art, and on art's inability to renew itself. Therefore, unlike the artists in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy who expected the Great War to be the first actual global event—and to get a glimpse of this atmosphere, one may turn to László Márton's masterfully written novel *Die Überwindlichen* (The Defeatables)—, Shklovsky praised Mayakovsky's

novel poetic attempts at mediating a global consciousness that finally does away with the glorious past of one specific nation and enacts something that might be called proto-aesthetic instead. Apart from Shklovsky, Bakhtin also gets a chance to shine in Tihanov's historical analysis of the birth and death of the literary theory, although in a different light than usual: Bakhtin's time spent as a political exile in Kazakhstan in the 1930s coincides with the period when he was working on his theory of genres, and consequently with his turn from ethics to the philosophy of culture. Furthermore, the 1930s is also the decade when heteroglossia was substituted for polyphony in Bakhtin's oeuvre, and having left the moral overtones of polyphony behind, he basically became a discourse analyst *avant la lettre*; one who investigates the different modes of speech, which for him gave way to securing the connection between language and culture, a result that was the exact opposite of what the Formalists were aspiring to achieve at that time.

While discussing the manifold relations between Formalism as a text-immanent way of interpretation and those other modes of reading fiction which bestow literature with various functions beyond the poetical dimension and thus ultimately turn literary theory into cultural theory, Tihanov also reflects on the present state of affairs in the humanities. For instance, when describing the predominantly German intellectual influence in Central Europe in the interwar period, the book does not fail to highlight the potential of Formalism, being a non-Western trend, to greatly help us in re-imagining the hierarchy between center and periphery in a European context: e.g., it was more important in Russia to establish a chair at the university level for national literature than in England. And of course, also not just in a European context; as Tihanov argues, Vladimir Propp's research for his seminal *Morphology of the Folktale*, Bakhtin's examination of pre-European folklore, epics, and rituals as well as Nikolaj Marr's project for a Semantic Paleontology that focused on the origin and evolution of language in connection with social and economic factors that had introduced crucial semantic changes at certain historical eras, were all undertaken with regard to the study of material culture and conducted by scholars who were thinking globally and were eager to uncover traces of Europe's past; traces from a time when Europe was not yet written in all caps, or in other words: when European culture did not act as the reference culture for many parts of the world. As Tihanov points out, beside contributing to the development of literary theory by focusing on the importance of language and verbal utterance in works of fiction—even if they were proto-genres like folk tales or epics—, these various investigations were always already inquiries into culture too. Therefore, the death of literary theory understood as the death of an autonomous discourse that considers its object also autonomous due to its discourse does not mean that text-immanent reading cannot be called into a dialogue with similarly

culturally-invested contemporary ways of interpretations, such as feminism, black studies, or postcolonial theory.

The discussion of the concept of translation with which Tihanov ends his monograph is unmistakably a hot topic in literary studies everywhere now. And the way the book lingers on this theme is but one way to start a dialogue between the contemporary modes of interpretation and the Formalist figure of the exile who reads and writes literature in a polyglot ambient and is in itself the epithet of transgression and subversion. As Tihanov argues, the importance of literariness also directed the Formalists' attention to the problem of reading works in translation and interpreting translation itself. Since if language was of outmost importance for them, then how the literariness of a text can be transported from one language to the other must also have been a question of no less importance. The multiplicity of languages via which a work finds its audience also makes it obvious that a literary text can make an impact in a language other than that in which it was originally produced. In turn, the examination of this impact and the means that enable it (e.g., the circulation of texts) poses the question of the canon; a question that also quickly arose among Formalists both in Russia and the diasporas. While in émigré circles there were lively debates on what the new ("young") literature should be about and what languages it should make use of, in Russia, Gorky's project of translating masterpieces of world literature—although he took the term "world literature" seriously, as is confirmed by his selection of works from Asia, Latin America and the Middle East—was still captivated by a rather conservative canon of the classics. Although he ultimately wanted to grant the masses access to several products of high culture, Gorky's socio-political agenda of educating the lower classes was doomed to fail because of the lack of any subversive undercurrents without which mobility in the social structure is always highly improbable. And as Tihanov remarks, Gorky's project was also at odds with the mission of Russian Formalism which, being a product of the interwar Central European regime of relevance, is regarded as transitional and nomadic—and as such it never ceased to exploit the tension between different modes of thinking and making use of literature; not only did it generate debates but it was itself maintained by them.