

REQUIEM FOR LITERARY THEORY?

Tihanov, Galin. *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019, 272 s.

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The main goal of the book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* is more clearly captured by its subtitle: *Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*. Its author, Galin Tihanov, a professor of Comparative Literature at the University of London, seeks to showcase the range of positions developed in Russian theory of literature in the interwar period (and partly also later, in the second half of the 20th century). For Tihanov, the phrase ‘regimes of relevance’ refers to the variety of approaches adopted by selected leading literary theorists of the time. The author assesses the methodological and epistemological frameworks of the respective theoretical approaches and ultimately reveals the importance of art for individuals and society.

Regarding the concepts of “Birth” and “Death” used in the book’s title, it should be emphasized that Tihanov views the interwar Russian literary theory as one of the cornerstones of thinking about literature in general. The expression associated with the end not only says that this glorious period had already culminated and is, in fact, over but also implies a critical attitude towards the current state of affairs: roughly speaking, literary theory today is not heard and brings nothing new. Tihanov’s work thus offers more of an overview of the history of ideas, a trip into the intellectual past.

One other aim of the book should be mentioned, too: the term “beyond Russia” is meant to point out the links between Russian and Western thought. This type of investigation exhibits a wide range of allusions, stretching from direct influence to looser parallels, and includes the willingness of some Western scholars to act as apologists for certain counterparts from the East (this type of activity was particularly relevant to Bakhtin’s work).

What I find revelatory about the whole text is, above all, the intention to show the transitions between the particular schools and their methodologies. Despite the autonomy of each approach, there is a considerable amount of interaction and mutual influence.

The work is divided into five chapters, each of which is dedicated to one of the main representatives of interwar Russian literary theory (and some of them include — as I already said — links to the Western tradition). Only the last chapter, devoted to émigré criticism including the crucial discussion in the exile press, seems to break from this order. Since the main focus of this section is not so much an examination of methodology, I will leave this part of the book aside in my review.

The opening chapter, called “Russian Formalism: Entanglements at Birth and Later Reverberations”, discusses some of the key tools and techniques developed by the members of OPOYAZ and the Moscow Linguistic Circle. In their pursuit of



scientism, objectivity, and positive knowledge, Tihanov sees the fruits of modernism. Their conception of literature can be subsumed under overarching notions such as autonomy, specificity, and intra-literary relations. Tihanov here reiterates some of the facts that have traditionally been associated with this methodology: literature is an autonomous and specific field of inquiry that neglects subjective engagement, psychology, and other sciences and disciplines (mainly sociology, history, politics, or aesthetics). Formalists seek support only in linguistics and therefore focus their analysis on literary devices that remain unchecked by other disciplines.

The author of the book refers mainly to Shklovsky as the leading representative of this method, which — I fear — could cause some misleading explanations. Another thing I find somewhat lacking in the interpretation is the fact that Formalist theory has undergone considerable development, with huge differences between the early and later phases. Shklovsky's concept of estrangement remains central for Tihanov, however, he perceives it as ambiguous. He claims that this theory is situated between innovation and conservatism. The latter notion is conceptualized as an attempt to re-awaken and regain the substance of things as if they could represent something permanent, unchangeable, and essential. And — contrary to the general awareness — he sees the relation between Formalism and avant-garde as „unsettled“. Unlike Bertold Brecht or Herbert Marcuse, to mention some Western thinkers dealing with the notion of estrangement, Shklovsky — Tihanov argues — developed a single-minded theory that was not a part of wider social interests and was not connected with any social productive forces. He suggests that the Formalist task is only to change our perception of the aesthetic form, but not of life itself.

Referring to Formalism, the most convincing and revealing parts of the book, in my opinion, are those dealing with the intersection between three major intellectual streams in Russia in the late 1920s. Tihanov points out some mutual mediation between Formalism, Marxism, and — to a lesser extent — Eurasianism. In particular, he emphasizes their common tendency to depart from the central position of the individual. Furthermore, he recalls that the Formalists of the late 1920s perceived the necessity of studying the extraliterary “series” and the broad field of history. It is known that in this way they moved on to establish their own sociology of literature.

The next chapter is devoted to the Russian scholar Gustav Shpet and it interprets his activity as that of a representative of phenomenology and modern hermeneutics. This aspect is of particular importance given the fact that hermeneutics — unlike Formalism — has not been considered a permanent and fixed element of Russian thought, cultural tradition, or memory. From this perspective, the section presenting Shpet's work (only recently published in English) and activities not only in the field of literary theory and aesthetics but also in the sphere of the history of Russian philosophy is indeed insightful and opens new horizons. Gustav Shpet, a member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, was close to Roman Jakobson. Shpet's definition of poetics as grammar — as Tihanov shows — had a major influence on Jakobson's well-known conception linking grammar and poetics in the 1960s. This is not the only area in which these two scholars seem to be close: folklore should also be mentioned, as well as the inquiry into the poetic function of words, i.e. when an utterance can be perceived as aesthetic. Nevertheless, Shpet's book *Aesthetic Fragments*, Tihanov argues, „presented the most philosophically sophisticated and substantive, if at time

oblique, polemic with Formalism“ (p. 90). The main point of Shpet’s critique is the skepticism — shared also by Mikhail Bakhtin — about the emancipation of modern literary theory as an autonomous discipline.

The third chapter is dedicated specifically to Bakhtin with emphasis on his ability to transcend several specific disciplines and fields, leading to new syntheses that reflect Bakhtin’s unbiased approach to concepts, theories, and knowledge in general. His terminology is thus rooted in a unique and creative attitude toward concepts that are based on metaphorical shifts, and in the transformative energy of language. Another conclusion that Tihanov repeatedly draws regarding Bakhtin is his intellectual journey leading from aesthetics and ethics to cultural studies, more precisely to the philosophy of culture. Tihanov focuses primarily on Bakhtin’s conception of genre, showing the evolution of his approach from his early writings to those of the 1930s or afterward. At that time, he saw the novel as the most variable and unstable, yet the most vital, dynamic, and significant modern literary form.

Despite the many differences between Bakhtin and the Formalists, some of which we have already referred, there are also many affinities that Tihanov again finds provocative. Among them are not only Bakhtin’s denial of psychologism and what he calls “individual agency”, but also his impersonal conception of genre, its memory, and development. Shklovsky, with his reflections on the fragmented structure of the novel and its self-mocking nature, could not but have had a great influence on Bakhtin as a thinker on “heteroglossia”. Another example of intersections between both schools could be seen in the idea that the individual writer is not more than a scribe or an instrument through which the genre speaks and materializes. The connections with postmodernism, based on these theses, have been discussed many times and have become fairly common knowledge. Furthermore, Tihanov outlines also some of Bakhtin’s parallels with Hans Freyer and Hans-Georg Gadamer, mainly with respect to their views of tradition and the classics.

The protagonist of the fourth chapter is Nikolai Marr, a somewhat curious scholar of the 1930s, who sought to create an independent Soviet science and a new, para-Marxist doctrine, clearly departing from the earlier scientific tradition and especially diverging from the West (he denied, for example, the relevance of the Indo-European language family). Marr founded a school called Semantic Paleontology, which opposed both Formalism and vulgar sociologism. The study of language (and subsequently of literature) is to be closely related to the study of material culture, especially archaeology, and ethnography, which are to provide us with evidence of socioeconomic formations, functions, and relationships. Communities that have been formed at the same stage of development, albeit in different places show typological similarities in the “ideological superstructure”. Literature as such is thus seen as strongly historically (genetically) determined.

Marr’s theory was applied to the material of literary works by another scholar, Ol’ga Freidenberg. She raised the question of the origin of literature, i.e. how this phenomenon came into being and brought up other inquiries concerning the mechanism of literary development and, above all, what caused its changes. Together with another representative of this current, Izrail’ Frank-Kamenetskii, she established three key stages in the history of world culture: myth, folklore, and literature, and declared that their “ideological superstructure” depends entirely on the mode of pro-





duction and socio-economic conditions. In this scheme, literature, which still retains certain links to myth and folklore, is a product of class society. Frank-Kamenetskii's argumentation that metaphor plays a central role in the development of the ideology of mankind, can, according to Tihanov, be seen as a kind of bridge to cognitive linguistics.

Some of the aforementioned intersections shed new light on the methodologies presented, allowing us to consider them simultaneously from a more nuanced and a broader perspective. But above all, Tihanov's book invites us to see the importance of literary theory itself, not only as a testament to the history of vanishing ideas but also as an inseparable part of our knowledge and a significant challenge for today and, hopefully, for the future.