

Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2019, ISBN: 978-0-8047-8522-8, 258 p.

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There are few literary critics and theorists that delve into the afterlives of past theories and theoretical trends as dazzlingly and lucidly as Galin Tihanov does. In this respect, his latest volume, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*, is not an altogether unforeseen event in terms of its premises, nor is it a surprise in terms of its object of study. His latest work revolves around the location of theory, underlining the co-dependence between literary theory and history, employing, with a slightly different twist, Michel Foucault’s notion of *regime of relevance*, “a constellation of social and cultural parameters that shape the predominant understanding and use of literature for the duration of that particular constellation” (19), all the while not only owing to, but also investigating the imprint on contemporary literary studies of Eastern and Central Europe theory, notably the Russian formalist critical and theoretical developments.

*The Birth and Death of Literary Theory* is “a book about the foundational paradoxes of literary theory and the regimes of relevance in which it is embedded” (1), as the author himself states in the *Prologue*. The scope of this volume concerns the actual birth of literary theory, a fairly distinctive moment to be found in the interwar decades in Europe, developing both within national frameworks and, especially, in exile, with a greater focus on some idiosyncratic figures that have been associated with, but also departed from, Russian formalism, such as Gustav Shpet or Mikhail Bakhtin. This particular process – the making of literary theory – resides in the separation of literary theory from aesthetics and philosophy, the present volume engaging in an analysis of this moment along with its later reverberations.

Somewhat interwoven with *World Literature* frameworks, Galin Tihanov's volume begins with the figure of the exiled, identifying in the process of the spatial dislocation of theory a key aspect in its formation: "Modern literary theory developed at the intersection between national enthusiasms and a cultural cosmopolitanism that transcended local encapsulation and monoglossia"(12), while tracing the mobility of Russian and other Eastern European thinkers in a cosmopolite Europe: "For a number of years, the activities of the Russian Formalists took place in a climate of enhanced mobility and benefited from the exchange of ideas between metropolitan and emigre Russian culture" (12). The *Introduction* however investigates the nuances of emigration, from East-Central Europe to the so-called Parisian center. Tihanov points out the unquestionable fact that exile in the interwar decades was significantly different from its post-war counterpart. Thus, whereas post-war exiles (like Tzvetan Todorov for instance) have earned their doctoral diplomas and matured in Paris, the interwar generation of *émigrés* were still formed in their homelands: "More exiles than established emigres, they were immersed in a genuinely heterocultural environment and, more important, made a point of preserving a fully bilingual existence as intellectuals. The second wave lost that bilingualism: its theory was produced almost exclusively in French" (13). Moreover, the investigation into the emigration of literary critics within East-Central Europe is, in itself, noteworthy. Tihanov finds in this specific circulation a fundamental contribution to the birth of modern literary theory in East-Central Europe, in the sense that exile, states the author is "an enabling factor that unlocks creativity" (13).

Moving on to the *making* of literary theory in Central and Eastern Europe and particularly in Russia, Galin Tihanov identifies it as "a response to radical changes in literature and its social relevance" (18). In this sense, the author states that:

This early version of the autonomy of literature inaugurated a new regime of relevance, preparing the ground for the Formalist account: literature's relevance does indeed reside in its uniqueness, but that uniqueness cannot be deduced from the exclusive social position of the writer; rather it must be located in the special way in which language is deployed in literature (...) I submit that the rise in the years around World War I of literary theory as an autonomous discourse and field of enquiry that thinks of literature in terms of its uniqueness (informed by the notion of intrinsic "literariness") was tracking the

transition to a new regime of relevance in which literature—for the first time—began to matter not because of what it can do for society or the individual, but because of what it was: a discourse taken to be original and different from other discourses” (20-22).

The obvious conclusive assessment of the brief, but nonetheless rich investigation of this process concerning literary theory renders it “the product of a regime of relevance that validates literature for its presumed artistic uniqueness and originality” (24). Identifying East-Central Europe as its birthplace, Tihanov synthesizes the labor of modern literary theory by pinpointing the main aspects that determined its formation:

First, in none of the four countries involved (Russia, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia) was there a particularly strong domestic tradition of philosophy that could impose its authority and thereby prevent the purposeful transformation and modification of established philosophical discourses into tools of literary theory. The intelligentsia in these countries lived after World War I on borrowed philosophical capital, mainly of German-Austrian provenance; and it was intellectuals from these four countries that were most active in the process of creatively transforming the various mainstreams of that philosophy (phenomenology; neo-Kantianism; Marxism) in the direction of literary theory, via a divorce (at times incomplete) from aesthetics (25).

In light of these assessments, the author proposes a series of five chapters, each dedicated to the peculiar manifestations of literary theory in interwar Russia, while also tracing and measuring their most significant effects on contemporary researches engaged in defining and mapping *World Literature*.

The first chapter – *Russian Formalism. Entanglements at Birth and Later Reverberations* – follows the relation between Formalism and Marxism, focusing on what separates them in terms of understanding the relevance of literature, and, more importantly, on the way in which the two groups’ disputes and differences have shaped their shared theoretical framework, embedding scientific methods and thinking patterns into the humanities. Acknowledging once again the undeniable capital of Russian Formalism in the making of modern literary theory, Tihanov articulates in this chapter the multiple possibilities of reexamining the birth of this particular school of thought, its life, and its afterlife: “It is this legacy of Formalism that later lived on in French

Structuralism and narratology, little as some of the Paris Structuralists were inclined to admit that. In other words, we have to begin to think of Russian Formalism as a typical brainchild of modernity” (31). Having reminded us of the divergent aspects of Formalism and Marxism, Tihanov aims to provide a viewpoint of the historical proximity of the two, left out of sight until now, by investigating the famous 1927 dispute between Formalists and Marxists, concluding that “neither of the two methods would work in isolation and without some form of mediation” (36).

The second chapter of the book is entirely dedicated to the peculiar figure of Gustav Shpet, “a thinker who participated in the process [of gradual emancipation of theory from philosophy], but his place in it remained contradictory and inconclusive: while foreshadowing some important tenets of Structuralism, his ultimate loyalty tended to be a philosophical and aesthetic approach to literature and the arts” (68). Debating the role of Shpet on the Russian cultural scene, Tihanov starts from a slightly different premise than one may expect, by aiming to assess not the quality of Shpet’s original work, but his fundamental contribution as an “indefatigable promoter of Western philosophy” (76), his cultural input as a participant or “sometimes driving force” (76) of a great number of periodicals through his literary translations. While delving into Shpet’s lifelong work and activity, Tihanov renders visible the landscape of the translation field in interwar Russia.

The third chapter targets and examines another rather uncommon figure, singular while also strangely entangled with his contemporary theoretical and cultural movements. Mikhail Bakhtin is still associated and frequently assimilated into Russian formalism, yet his work and its non-negligible postmodern echoes are better understood while read in the logic of his own theoretical regime and critical agenda. The main focus of Tihanov’s investigation in this chapter revolves around the contribution that Bakhtin made to genre theory or novel theory. The author follows the evolution of Bakhtin’s critical system regarding the novel, from the lack of interest that Bakhtin shows in his early intellectual career towards genre theory, until his 1930s and early 1940s work that shapes and defines the novel in a different regime of relevance from his contemporaries. While the novel was considered a rather inferior genre compared to poetry, Bakhtin engages in demonstrating the contrary. Gradually separating the novel from the epic, Bakhtin is one of the first to acknowledge the privileged modern status of the novel.

Tracking down this movement in Bakhtin's system of thought, Tihanov sees this evolution as a mutation from the notion of polyphony to the notion of heteroglossia:

In the 1930s, however, the notion of polyphony was gradually ousted by that of heteroglossia. Bakhtin understands heteroglossia as a phenomenon independent of the author's individual artistic attainment. It is rather a state of affairs in which language is no longer used holistically but as a range of partial sociolects. Whereas polyphony encapsulates a mixture of aesthetic but also moral overtones – listening to the other, not placing oneself above him or her – heteroglossia disowns this potential rigor of the moral expectation. Instead, it promotes a more neutral view of language and the novel, one that makes no moral demands (102). It was only now, in the 1930s, that Bakhtin produced a necessary link between heteroglossia and the novel: the novel is considered the preeminent, if not the sole, embodiment of heteroglossia, the cultural form that is best suited to capture and accommodate the often divergent languages and voices at work in society (103).

Galin Tihanov places Bakhtin in relation to both the other exceptional character of the Russian interwar cultural scene – the aforementioned Gustave Shpet – and to Russian formalism. The two shared a strange feature in the economy of their socio-cultural background: they were neither religious nor Marxist thinkers: “Shpet's work on the novel called for a return to aesthetics as the proper home of literary studies. This preference for discussing the verbal work of art, including the novel, in the framework of aesthetics actually parallels, as we have seen, Bakhtin's early interest in categories such as form, author, hero, and dialogue (and his early indifference to genre) from the point of view of aesthetics, rather than from a perspective grounded specifically in literary theory” (100). In what concerns his departure from the formalists and structuralists, although he took part in the general episteme and the regime of enquiry that abstracted from the subject and the traditional notion of individual agency (106), Tihanov underlines Bakhtin's understanding and preoccupation with language. For him, the author states, “language is no longer significant as an embodiment of literariness, nor as conveyor of ideas, emotions, and images. Language, for Bakhtin, is an indispensable tool of genre which then becomes descriptor of entire domains of culture” (105). Synthesizing Bakhtin's matured views on genre theory, Tihanov notes that for the

Russian critic “the individual writer is virtually irrelevant, he or she is no more than an instrument through which the genre materializes itself, no more than a mouthpiece that enunciates the calls of generic memory. Bakhtin, in other words, despite his apparent attraction to canonical figures such as Goethe, Dostoevsky, and Rabelais, would ideally have liked to be able to write a history of literature without names” (107).

The last two chapters address a set of conceptual and methodological problems, such as the presence and importance of semantic paleontology in literary studies in 1930s (chapter 4) and the importance of transnational mobility (exile, emigration, estrangement) for literary theory (chapter 5). Referring to the former, Tihanov emphasizes the shared belief of semantic paleontologists and Soviet sociologists that “literature is a superstructural phenomenon conditioned historically by the base,” while also examining how the first distance themselves by stating that “no theory of cultural evolution was possible without embedding its hypotheses in, and corroborating them through, the study of glottogenesis and the evolution of language” (141). Galin Tihanov further investigates a branch of semantic paleontology that could be related with a recently developed digital model, namely topic modeling – paleontological morphology, or “the study of how plot emerged, assisted by changes in morphology and the formation of primeval semantic bundles” (141). Concerning the fifth case study of its volume, dedicated to the subject of exile and transnational dialogue, Tihanov builds upon the assessments and premises already articulated in its *Introduction*. This final chapter, however, highlights the figures of the two “most gifted ambassadors of the Formalists abroad,” as the author calls them, namely Victor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson. Tihanov follows the cultural dialogue, the short discussions that sustained and formed *émigré* literary life, engaging in analyzing the polemic on *young literature*, in respect to which he notes:

The new cohort of writers, whose formative years were spent largely outside Russia, had unorthodox answers to the question about the social mission of literature and its loyalty to tradition. An ongoing polemic reexamining the central axis of the Russian poetry canon of the nineteenth century and juxtaposing Pushkin and Lermontov was a salient feature of this rethinking of literary reputations that accompanied the rise of the new generation on the Paris literary scene. The location – Paris – is significant here, for the emerging

Lermontov cult was indeed confined to Montparnasse and was part and parcel of what was quickly becoming known as the “Paris note” in *émigré* poetry (166).

The investigation of this inter- and transnational circulation constitutes another notable intellectual segment of Galin Tihanov’s book. By measuring the capital of these movements from a historical point of view, he renders visible the ways in which Russian literati found in the Parisian cultural landscape not only contributed to the methods, patterns, and influences that shaped European modernism, but also altered and determined national and international views on canonicity and what constitutes the canon.

The volume ends with an *Epilogue*, a “fast-forward to *World Literature*” that proposes an analysis of the means through which Russian formalism and interwar European literary theory create the framework of *World Literature*. “Whether obliquely or more directly,” the author notes, “many of the major trends in Russian literary theory during the interwar decades were relevant to this regime of understanding and valorizing literature in the multiple contexts of its global production and consumption” (175). Tihanov examines what promoters of *World Literature* owe to past critics and thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin for instance, and how the legacy of modern literary theory founded by Russian formalists is an active agent in our understanding of *World Literature*. Essentially, for Galin Tihanov, “the current discourse of *World Literature* is an iteration of the principal question of modern literary theory at the time of its birth: should one think literature within or beyond the horizon of language?” (182).