



ONE THEORY'S UNDERDOG IS ANOTHER THEORY'S TREASURE: THE NOVELISTIC GENRE IN DIFFERENT REGIMES OF RELEVANCE

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My paper aims to present, by means of a metacritical approach, the many shifts and negotiations in the history of understanding and defining the status of the novel as a literary genre, as they are retraced by Galin Tihanov in his latest book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*. Interwoven with many other aspects of Russian literary theory that reverberated within the present paradigm of comparative studies and helped shape the principal framework of world literature, Galin Tihanov's critical assumptions on the numerous trials regarding the novelistic genre in the Russian theoretical undertakings are of tremendous relevance for a field of study that engages, more than ever, in cracking the many codes of the novelistic world canon.

Keywords: Galin Tihanov, novel, genre theory, Russian theory, world literature.



In the *Introduction* to what is one of the most important editorial projects dedicated to the novelistic genre in the past decades, namely *The Novel*, Italian professor Franco Moretti, the editor of the volume, defines the novel while exposing its utter complexity as follows:

“A history that begins in the Hellenistic world and continues today. A geography that overlaps with the advent of world literature. A morphology that ranges euphorically from war stories, pornography, and melodrama, to syntactic labyrinths, metaphoric prose, and broken plot lines (...) At the beginning of the historical arc, we wonder whether to speak of “the” Greek novel—or of a cluster of independent

forms. At the opposite end, we explain why it is that the best known African novels are not written for African readers. And so on. The more we learn about the history of the novel, the stranger it becomes.”¹

Over the years, most of the scholars engaged in transnational studies retrace the hereditary links between the novel (in its now stabilized form) and the epic as well as its evolution and survival as a genre. These approaches range from encyclopedic to macroanalytical, since, as Moretti states, the history of the genre is a bizarre one in terms of geography and morphology. The novel, both as a phenomenon and a cultural artefact,

is at the same time local and global, supranational and subnational, prenatal and postnatal.² Theorizing this genre lends itself to a host of constant exercises of calibrating and recalibrating the network underpinning the different formulas and plots that either went out of fashion or have won the canonical battle over the ages. More recently, a significant number of academic projects have demonstrated that the emergent methodologies structured around “macroanalysis” (Matthew L. Jockers), based mainly on collective efforts, have managed to render visible the most intricate articulations of the genre.

While such approaches are not the subject of Tihanov’s latest volume, the “afterlife” of Russian literary theory helps retrace the central nodes of the novel’s historiography. From the very beginning, Tihanov offers a metacritical approach on the many stages of literary theory, from its birth to its eventual “death”. His analysis is especially oriented toward events placed in interwar Eastern Europe, a place immersed in a complicated web of communicating vessels that engage both 19th century theoretical formulations and contemporary ones. His idea of the “afterlife” of Russian literary theory and, its importance in the recent developments in the field of World Literature functions as a common denominator, connecting the milestones of literary theory in the most surprising ways.

Negotiating the place of the novel

Measuring the role that Russian formalism had, alongside the figures that distanced themselves from its tenets, but remained relevant to the overall theoretical background in Eastern Europe, Tihanov revisits literary theory’s moment of birth. The Russian formalists have been in the avant-garde of this discipline and its effort to autonomize literature in the artistic field. In order to do this, these young thinkers are confronted with the urgent need to define literariness and to create the necessary instruments for analyzing and diagnosing it. On registering this historical turning point, Tihanov notes:

“This regime of relevance, in which literature is valued for its autonomy and uniqueness as a discourse that is unlike other discourses, breaks with previous regimes of relevance in which literature’s significance is linked to its capacity to convey ideas, emotions, or knowledge of the world, or to instigate socially and politically oriented actions. Those previous regimes of relevance foreground forms of writing that still preserve the links of literature to an earlier state of symbiosis with philosophical, historiographical, pedagogical, and political discourses. Suffice it to point to the genre of the philosophical novel (recall Voltaire) in the eighteenth century, or the novel of education and

the historical novel in the next century, and we promptly obtain a good sense of this different regime of relevance in which literature is still an allegory, a tool of cultivation, and a transmission mechanism for values and ideas formed elsewhere—with the language of literature consistently taking a back seat, seldom seen as the prime reason why literature itself should be taken seriously.”³

The shift from the literary object as an instrument to the literary object as an autonomous artistic phenomenon, highly relevant to the new generations formed in Russia, Czechoslovakia or in exile (Tihanov also touches on this subject) creates the grounds for the development of a theory of literary genre. Due to the rather obvious nature that pertains to the permeability of the novel in all that constitutes social, ideological or moral values, the genre lags behind the discussions related to aesthetic autonomy, with poetry and drama being at the forefront of the critical tradition of the time.

Referring to the development of the novel, Galin Tihanov addresses some of the most prominent figures that have approached the subject: Roman Ingarden, Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, but also a rather odd figure for the field of genre theory – Gustav Shpet. Revealing the close relation between philosophical discourse and literary theory in the first half of the XXth century, Tihanov engages in Lukács’s *Theory of the novel* and Ingarden’s *The Literary Work of Art*. Both indebted to a dynamic, relational vision between the metadiscourses on philosophy and literature, the two theoreticians go against the formalists, who asked for the separation between these disciplines. Lukács’s early contributions to the theory of the novel, Tihanov notes, is more or less „the result of frustrated hopes to accommodate art in a larger philosophical framework”⁴. His writing from the 1930s, dedicated to realism and engaging Marxist theories, doubles as both decisive endeavors that guarantees Lukács’s notoriety and a reemergence of Marxist literary theory:

“Lukács’s writing on realism and the novel, done mostly during his time in Moscow, became part of an internationally constituted field of literary theory to which he had not before fully belonged (...) With Lukács’s articles on realism and the historical novel, literary theory on the Left finally gained firmer ground and visibility: it joined an established mode of inquiry, pursued internationally beyond the level of political expedience.”⁵

There is a certain evolution measurable through the shift from aesthetics to literary theory between the various figures discussed by Tihanov. As Lukács departs from Ingarden in terms of vision and philosophical orientation (Ingarden is tributary to Husserl), his own theory of the novel stays distinct from Bakhtin’s considerations, while Gustav Shpet remains both a transitional and a bizarre figure:



“It was only Shpet for whom aesthetics remained not just a starting point but an enduring and methodologically central framework. Rather than seeking to modify, or diverge from, aesthetics as a master discourse, Shpet was at pains to retain it; as far as literary theory is concerned, his work was a case of abortive inception.”⁶

Borrowing from Lukács, Gustav Shpet defines the novel as a “negative” genre, defined through a series of absences, such as the lack of “composition”, “plan” or “inner form.” He sees the novel as a “degradation of the epic.”⁷ Shpet’s considerations on this literary genre can be registered within the general vision of the era. Employed most of the time politically, the novel is a second hand literary object. Lukács himself placed the novel in the position of a weak link in the chain of epic tradition.⁸ For him, the novel is the epic formula that owes to a cultural age in which „the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality”⁹.

The most profusely discussed figure in Tihanov’s volume is also one of the most decisive ones for the reception of the genre. Appropriated as one of the figureheads of poststructuralism, Mikhail Bakhtin fundamentally reverses the perspective on the novel, inherited from Lukács or Shpet. It is through Bakhtin that the democratization of the novel begins. In Tihanov’s words, “Bakhtin extolled the democratic charge of the novel and dreamed of a literature colonized by the novelistic.”¹⁰ Bakhtin’s conclusions, to which he reached only in his maturity, has been preceded however by an arduous and revisionist labour. In his earlier writings, Bakhtin too adheres to the premise of the genre’s “negative” nature, a genre that lacks a historical cohesion in terms of formula, without which a universal definition remains impossible to extrapolate. What Bakhtin does, instead, is to transform its “defects” into qualities, its constant ability to evolve and reinvent itself in accordance to the ebbs and flows of ages being its most relevant one. For Shpet, Tihanov asserts „the novel is a genre for the masses, corresponding to their average moral aspirations”¹¹. For Bakhtin, Rabelais’ novel, for instance, regarded as the least popular, the least understood and the least appreciated,¹² has a superior function of democratization „His [Rabelais’] novel must serve as a key to the immense treasury of folk humor which as yet has been scarcely understood and analyzed.”¹³ Despite the general lack of interest for the genre in Bakhtin’s youth, which Tihanov registers as a period of transition from ethics and aesthetics to cultural philosophy, Bakhtin cancels out, in 1930–1940, his earlier tenets regarding the novel by inscribing literature in the folkloric, mythical and ritualistic tradition.¹⁴ Dedicating a subtle analysis to Bakhtin’s work, Tihanov also exposes the complementary relationship between him and the Russian formalists. Language remains, for Bakhtin, as well as for most of the figures of Russian formalism, an

essential dimension, but at the same time, contrary to the latter, Bakhtin understands language as a descriptor of literary genre, not only of literariness:

“Language—and this is vital to comprehend—is not dismissed as unimportant; far from it. Bakhtin does share a continuous preoccupation with language with the Russian Formalists. But for him language is no longer significant as an embodiment of literariness, nor (as in pre-Formalist literary studies) as conveyor of ideas, emotions, and images. Language, for Bakhtin, is an indispensable descriptor of genre (we can only understand how the novel works as a genre when we grasp its unique, “heteroglot” in Bakhtin’s parlance, use of language that differentiates it from other genres)—which then becomes descriptor of entire domains of culture (e.g., the official culture of the Church in contrast to the popular culture of the street, each of which is informed by a fundamentally different use of language). So, like the Formalists, Bakhtin never turns his back on language; unlike them, he embraces language as a marker of entities larger than literature per se; his language-centered theory of culture thus restores, in a much subtler and mediated way, the bond between language and culture that the literary theory of the Formalists had attempted to sever.”¹⁵

In what concerns the novelistic genre, Bakhtin’s merits in the period is invaluable, as he negotiated the status of the novel in the European cultural field, changing it from an underdog to a superstar, much to the same results as his successful attempt to revise Rabelais in the literary canon. Tihanov manages to deconstruct Bakhtin’s discourse on the functions of Rabelais’ novel and extrapolates a general principle underpinning the theorist’s system, while also bringing together the apparent contradictions between the different writings dedicated to the novel. The contradictions signaled by Tihanov are mostly related to the understanding of authorship, which Bakhtin deems irrelevant: „the individual writer is no more than an instrument through which the genre materializes itself, no more than a mouthpiece that enunciates the calls of a generic memory.”¹⁶

The role of the epic in trying to localize the novelistic genres in the context of literary formulas are also a key component of Bakhtin’s approach. However, in contrast to Lukács’s and Shpet’s theories, who saw in the novel a late and ultimately inferior rendition of the epic, Bakhtin brings the two genres together as a constantly evolving whole:

“Bakhtin’s strategy was to imagine a marriage between the novel and the epic, resulting in a single, synthetic genre that preserved the features of the novelistic while countering its transitoriness and fluidity so inherent in the novel and yet so much at variance with the very notion of the classic. The epic substratum in the novelistic was meant to serve

as a guarantee of the permanence and stability required in any version of the classic, and to extend and preserve the features of community life in the modern age, in which social division and hierarchy were becoming a compelling reality.”¹⁷

For Bakhtin, then, the genre gains in terms of aesthetic legitimacy, but also becomes a dominant genre, since, in the words of the Russian theorist’s himself, “the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness”¹⁸. Furthermore, Bakhtin tries to reorganize the architecture of the genre, from investigating the chronotope, a structure that he himself coined (*Form of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*, 1937), to proposing a subgenre classification – one of the more relevant premises in today’s literary studies (*The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism. Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel*).

Tihanov rethinks Bakhtin’s legacy. His agenda regarding the literary phenomenon in general was seen by postmodernists as similar to their own tenets, and thus made him a predecessor. The same happened with poststructuralism. Bakhtin’s thought, however, evades these overly specialised theoretical programs. In the same way his place in the context of Russian formalism was at the outskirts of the theoretical field, Bakhtin cannot find the place of the novelistic genre, neither in the plane of aesthetics, nor in the field of literary theory, while, at the same time, “it could not be safely boxed into later intellectual currents, including postmodernism and post-structuralism.”¹⁹ Considering the latest developments in the field of genre theory, with representatives such as Franco Moretti in mind, Bakhtin’s legacy seems to have more to do with the general principles of World Literature than with postmodernity. In the same way contemporary approaches try to analyze the novel macroanalytically, employing literary corpora and statistical tools for its investigation, Bakhtin also pleaded for the plurality of the novel and its intersectional nature. As Tihanov states, literature according to Bakhtin

“[i]s positioned at the crossroads of multiple modalities of expression and ambivalent discursive energie – word, laughter, bodily involvement, engaged in praise and parody – an is validated *across deep time* (to borrow Wai Chee Dimock’s phrase) as the product of the long duree memory of genres

and discourses. Literature for Bakhtin is a laboratory of becoming, in which larger discursive principles (monologue and dialogue; heteroglot and homoglot; centrifugal and centripetal) are shown at work as its true shaping forces.”²⁰

The idea that literature, and, in turn, the novel, is a product of a multitude of processes that can be rendered visible through the investigation of the historical shifts in literary formulas, plots, and devices²¹ – the core tenets of contemporary World Literature approaches – can also be found in Bakhtin’s interwar discourse. In this respect, Tihanov successfully bridges the theoretical gap between these two different periods of literary theory. The legacy and afterlife of genre theory in the interwar works appeared in Eastern Europe make a decisive comeback within the emergence of World Literature studies.

In the volume’s epilogue, which strives to provide an account of migrating theories into World Literature studies, Bakhtin again plays the most important part, through his attempt at „reconceptualizing the study of world literature as a study of the processes that shape the novel to become a world genre, a global discursive power.”²² Renouncing eurocentrism and focusing on non-European culture (visible in his interest for folklore and rites of passage) makes him a thinker well ahead of his time, with his theories themselves being, as Tihanov notes, a “journey not in space, but in time,”²³ much like what Wai Chee Dimock proposed recently.²⁴ Together with the theoretical treatment of Bakhtin, Tihanov also accounts for Victor Shklovsky’s contribution, who raises, in the same period, questions regarding translation and reading the world literary canon in translation in the same way David Damrosch²⁵ or, in contrast, Emily Apter²⁶ propose.²⁷ One of the main conclusions of Tihanov’s volume is also related to Shklovsky: “Let me repeat: 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? This specific iteration recasts this question, while retaining its theoretical momentum.”²⁸



Notes:

1. Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel. History, Geography, and Culture. Volume 1* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 10.
2. See Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents. American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
3. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 3.
4. *Ibid.*, 16.
5. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
6. *Ibid.*, 19.
7. *Ibid.*, 91.
8. *Ibid.*, 99.
9. Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: The Merlin Press, 1971).
10. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth*, 92.
11. *Ibid.*, 92.
12. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
13. *Ibid.*, 4.
14. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth*, 105.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
18. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Epic and Novel*, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 7.
19. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth*, 126.
20. *Ibid.*, 133.
21. See, for instance, Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (New York: Verso, 2005).
22. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth*, 176.
23. *Ibid.*
24. See Wai Chee Dimock, Lawrence Buell, *Shades of the Planet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).
25. See David Damrosch, *What is World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
26. See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London, New York: Verso, 2013).
27. Maria Chiorean, "Regimes of Relevance: The Newcomers," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2020): 20-28; Ștefan Baghiu, "The Relative Autonomy of Literature: Romanian Literary Criticism and Theory before World War II," *Transilvania* no. 5 (2020).
28. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth*, 182.

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