

Resistance to Theory  
Galina Tihanov  
QMUL / IGITI  
[g.tihanov@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:g.tihanov@qmul.ac.uk)

It is the recognition of the impurity of theory, its enmeshment in pragmatics, its orientation towards the production of a certain use value that compels us to think about the resistance to theory we are living with at present. There are several reasons for this resistance. Today I wish to focus on two of them. When it comes to literary theory, I have spent some time explicating the central reason for its demise – and the resistance to its various spectral appearances since then – in my 2019 book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and the West*. I argue there that the main reason why literary theory is no longer possible in the concentrated and self-sufficient form in which it was until the 1980s is because literature itself has transitioned to a different regime of relevance that is no longer interested in it because of its specific features (i.e. its autonomy as a discourse) and seeks instead to make various uses of it: to champion various social causes, to enter a cycle of self-therapy, or experience some entertainment. In other words, literature itself can no longer be, in this new regime of its relevance, an object of distant contemplation, supported by the erotic energy stemming from the enduring attachment to a self-evident canon, some of it instantly available through memorisation – instead, it becomes a means, it is once again instrumentalised, and this pragmatic stance redefines our approach to it. Remember William James and the great lessons of American pragmatism: truth cannot be argued over or distilled through disinterested procedures of contemplation or theorisation, because truth is forever amalgamated with how we use things and to what ends. Literary theory, sustained as it was during the 70 or so years of its existence by a notion of detachment, distance, and the capacity for analysis that is always lifted above the horizon of utility or instrumentalization, crumbled in the face of this new regime of relevance that began to privilege the public or private utility of literature in ways that would refuse to derive this utility from its aesthetic – or literary - features.

But there is also another reason, related to the one I have just discussed, but not identical with it. Theory as a project of Western modernity (for better or worse), has always

been underwritten by a deeply held belief in the possibility of disembodied thinking; precisely because of its disembodied nature, this thinking held a universalising intent which, in turn, would enter into a most unholy alliance with various projects of expansion and colonisation. Part of this story of disembodied and universalising thinking is, for example, Hegel's phenomenology, just as another part is the work of the Russian Formalists. The Formalists genuinely believed that the material they were reflecting on had universal significance and applicability. Thus, it didn't really occur to them to seriously test their hypotheses on samples of writing drawn from other cultural contexts: Arabic literature, Chinese literature, Sanskrit literature are very much expunged from their literary Eden.

I want here to return to my recent work on exile and theory and highlight the fundamental difference between exile and migration – and why migration is a factor that bears on our current resistance to theory. Exile is an individual experience, migration places mobility in the frame of mass experience and thus gives us a very different prism on the encounters between the West and a whole number of powerful cultural zones in which literature functioned differently for centuries and was reflected upon with a different methodological toolkit, that of poetics rather than theory as such. If we look at Shklovsky, Jakobson, Trubetzkoy, Lukács, and countless other exiles, their experience of exile was no doubt an experience of cultural encounters with otherness, but this experience was still evolving in the relatively culturally homogenous environment of the West (Europe and America). Today's reality of mass migration confronts us with an altogether different experience. According to the United Nations, the number of migrants and refugees currently approaches 80 million. So let us imagine an entire country with a population the size of Germany or Turkey unbound, relocated, and dispersed – sometimes forcefully –, forming vast and unstable contact zones, veritable conglomerates of cultural fluidity and heterogeneity. This experience of mass migration has fed into a sober recognition of the non-binding nature of the Western aesthetic and cultural experience. With this, theory has hit a buffer, reaching the limits of its own validity in how it identifies and seeks to reflect on phenomena that cannot be conceptually tamed with the frameworks of disembodied thinking. Evoking Adorno and Horkheimer, I would argue that what we could call the dialectic of globalisation is a powerful factor in our current resistance to theory.