

Tatiana Venediktova
Moscow State University

Literary relevance in search of a definition

I am grateful to Galin Tihanov for the invitation that his latest book implies – to discuss literature in terms of its relevance. The category of relevance is supremely pragmatic in that one cannot imagine anything like “absolute” relevance or relevance as “a given”: relevance would seem necessarily related to a point of view, to an activity, or to a particular perspective that deems something important, useful, or of value — actual or potential.

Galina Tihanov writes: “The history of ideas about literature can be told as the history of attempts to conceptualize the changing regimes of its relevance”. Of which historically there were three, and these can be very crudely defined as social/political, economic, and artistic. The first is the oldest, it probably came into being with written language itself and is still with us today – defining literature through its use in social practices, as a means to convey ideas, emotions, or knowledge of the world, or to instigate socially oriented action, to disseminate ideology and thus to support a particular order of values and form of togetherness.

There was/is yet another regime that could not have come into being before printed matter became cheap, accessible and mobile enough to circulate widely. A literary work in the form of a novel was first brought out into the market as source of useful pleasure, means of self-entertainment or self-help in the 18th century. Its function as a commodity has come to dominate in our time, even though in today’s global cultural market literature is increasingly in competition with visual, audial and VR products.

But of most interest to Galin Tihanov (and to me, incidentally) is the “third” regime of literary relevance – or may be “second”, because according to Galin, it has proved mysteriously short-lived. It emerged first in the work of the Romantics two hundred years ago, then continued through the years of aestheticism and *l’art pour l’art*, coming to fruition in the first decades after World War I as literary theory came into its own in Eastern Europe and Russia. The relevance of literature in this paradigm is associated with its discursive uniqueness and originality; literature’s value is imagined as intrinsic and not subject to any kind of utility or instrumentalisation. International versions of formalism that developed in the mid 20th century mark the high point of this regime of relevance and also prove to be its death knell. Toward the early 1990s it dwindles and ultimately dies, taking literary theory along with it.

What seems to go unmarked and what I find curious here is that the judgment about literary relevance in the first two cases was made from beyond the institution of literature (on behalf of

some entity like “society”, “social authority” or “market forces”), while in the third case literature’s value is proclaimed from within. The first regime of judgment Cornelius Castoriadis would describe as heteronomous and the latter as autonomous. Literary history as told by Galin Tihanov is a story of the enduring (and triumphant) power of heteronomy in literary history: heteronomy serves as the background for the birth and death of literary autonomy as a chronologically bracketed episode. As humanists and literature-lovers we are certainly interested in asking why the theoretical project proved to be a failure and whether there is any prospect for its resurgence in a new form?

It seems obvious why in the present climate the formalistic insistence on literature’s self-sufficiency no longer rings convincing and is “resisted”. One of the reasons, no doubt, stems from the fact that the idea of literary sovereignty is rooted in the idea of Romantic genius (in Galin’s words - “a prophet, a transgressor and an outcast at loggerheads with philistinism and utilitarian attitudes”). The genius’ uniqueness was located in the presumed capacity for transcendent vision AND mastery over language. XX-century literary theorists expose their roots when they claim a uniquely penetrating vision into the ways language is deployed. As literature claims to be the law unto itself, it is also imagined as a territory of individual freedom. The freedom, however, is confined, much of the time, within the walls of a particular art practice and/or academic usage. The proudly self-reliant exile who has chosen the literary text as the sole refuge made himself object of irony in the same breath with proclaimed superiority, – today, in a world inhabited by 80 million exiles, less romantically known as migrants, this figure appears even more diminished because pathetically unexceptional. In today’s world the human subject is increasingly of interest not as a self-enclosed monad but as a bundle of relations, a participant in the continuing and ever more problematic dialogue, alternately agent and patient, “groundless” yet constantly involved, passionately and unavoidably, in the changeability of situations and contexts.

If literature is relevant for this type of subject, that relevance remains yet underdefined.

In humanistic discourse today the term “relevance” occurs most prominently within the context of so-called “Relevance theory”. Over the past few decades it has been promoted and developed by linguists, cognitivists, anthropologists, as well as by scholars of literature and culture. In the late 1980s (i.e. just at the time when literary theory, according to Galin was coming to its end) Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson first brought their hypothesis to public attention. Relevance they defined as relation of interpretive effort and cognitive effect - a property key to human communication. Striving to optimize relevance humans operate more or less successfully in the in-between space of intersubjective experience. This space is fraught with risk but also rich in possibility, in it we invest (but also withdraw) trust, distribute and redistribute resources of critical intellect, attention and empathy.

In this new light, language can no longer be seen as a systematic code nor literary text as an autonomous object – either is more like an environment that we are immersed in and interact with. Or else, an instrument in cooperative social use. To theorize these processes and uses is a challenge and a problem.

That literary formalism produced a rich and well-integrated body of theory is beyond doubt. That the demise of formalism ushered in the *nascence* of theories in the plural (rather than indifference to theory as such) seems just as obvious. Three decades after text-centered theory supposedly died, we still have to make do with rather carnivalesque attempts to make theoretical “stabs” at literature (Lacanian, feminist, cultural-material, new-historicist, ecological etc.). The search for an integrative vision, a serviceable “Supreme Fiction” – that, according to the poet Wallace Stevens, must be abstract (offer room enough for the free play of intellect and imagination), must give pleasure, and must change – this search continues. Will we find something to suit our need? Who knows? But the very quest, paradoxically, keeps the Romantic legacy alive. Galin himself admits this in his recent paper as he writes: “Romanticism, one may suggest, was an examination of modernity, a check on its performance, an inspection of its resources. Such an examination was bound to take place with renewed vigor in different circumstances every time a society and a culture would find themselves at a critical juncture in their modern history”¹. Now that we find ourselves, once again, at a critical juncture, we ask ourselves about literature’s relevance.

Most certainly literature serves the interests of the market as well as bodies social and political – but above and beyond those it serves i.e. explores and “theorizes” the needs of an individual human subject upon which the modern market and social politics ultimately depend. So, what we seem to have is literature in search of a new definition of relevance, and theory in search of a new subject. What we find (this new subject) may prove not to be literature per se or literature in the bounds that we are used to. But the long experience of literature with human subjectivity will certainly come in handy.

¹ Tihanov G. Romanticism’s Longue Durée 1968 and the Projects of Theory// Interventions, p.8.