

## **Metaphors of Genre Inequality in Iurii Tynianov's 'The Literary Fact'**

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Iurii Tynianov was one of the leading figures in the Society for the Study of Poetic Language [OPOIAZ], a group of literary theorists and linguists founded in Petrograd around 1916, which constituted one of the two hubs of a movement now better known as Russian Formalism, the other being the Moscow Linguistic Circle. His principal interest as a theorist was the process that he termed 'literary evolution', which he explored in detail in his two major theoretical articles of the 1920s, 'The Literary Fact' (1924) and 'On Literary Evolution' (1927). In both of these articles, literary genre is the basic unit of analysis.

This paper will focus on the representation of the inequality among literary genres, the unstable position of one genre relative to others, in the first of these articles, 'The Literary Fact'.<sup>1</sup> This first theoretical article, written during a period of relative calm for the Formalists, is much more digressive and suggestive than the second, 'On Literary Evolution', a condensed and tightly structured piece presented as a numbered list of theses. It therefore offers a more direct insight into the origins of Tynianov's ideas.<sup>2</sup> The aims of this approach are, first, to demonstrate that in 'The Literary Fact' Tynianov uses at least three different metaphors to represent the inequality among literary genres; secondly, to reveal, through an examination of the immediate context in which he uses them, that each of these metaphors is associated with a different theory of historical development; and, thirdly, to anchor this highly suggestive use of metaphor within the context of the development of Formalism. This approach raises broader questions both about the language of literary scholarship, which cannot be overlooked as a neutral means of expression, and about the multiplicity of extra-literary forces that determine literary inequalities.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Literary Fact' was first published in the journal *Lef* in 1924 and was later included as the first chapter in *Archaists and Innovators*, a collection of seventeen of Tynianov's articles of the 1920s: 'O literaturnom fakte', *Lef*, 2 [6] (1924), 101-16; 'Literaturnyi fakt', *Arkhaisty i novatory* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929), pp. 5-29. All quotations from the article in this paper are from the English translation by Ann Shukman, 'The Literary Fact', in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. by David Duff (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 30-46.

<sup>2</sup> For a broader context in which to situate the second of these two theoretical articles, an account of the 'crisis' that eventually led to the 'rout' of Formalism in 1930, see Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine*, 4th ed. (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980), pp. 118-39. See also Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 99-137.

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The title of the article, ‘The Literary Fact’, refers to a concept that Tynianov introduces to model the instability of the boundaries of literature: the same genre can be considered a literary fact in one era, but not in the next. The familiar letter, for example, was a fact of everyday life [*byt*] at the beginning of the eighteenth century, briefly becoming a ‘literary fact’ only later. In the same article, Tynianov also considers the position of literary genres relative to other literary genres. It is possible to trace the theorization of this inequality as far back as Aristotle, since it is explained in the *Poetics* that some ‘forms’ [*schemata*] are ‘more esteemed’ [*entimotera*] than others.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Tynianov explains that some genres enjoy greater prominence, prestige, or popularity than others at any given time. But, he argues, the position of a genre relative to others changes. He thus follows Viktor Shklovskii, another leading member of OPOIAZ, who had often made reference to the instability of the ‘canon’ in his early work on prose, arguing that literature ‘canonizes’ some genres, only to ‘decanonize’ them at a later stage.<sup>4</sup> Shklovskii deemed ‘The Literary Fact’ ‘a very important article, perhaps even decisive in its significance’.<sup>5</sup>

Several commentators have demonstrated, often with direct reference to ‘The Literary Fact’, that it is difficult to assimilate Tynianov’s account of literary evolution into a broader theory of history. In his 1928 critique of Formalism, for example, Pavel Medvedev claimed that, though Tynianov attempts to provide an account of literary evolution in the article, he in fact ‘strives to show that there is no evolution in literature and that another type of succession dominates’.<sup>6</sup> More recently, intellectual historian Galin Tihanov has argued that Tynianov’s ‘somewhat melodramatic’ account of the changing hierarchy of literary genres ‘almost assumes the tone of a fairytale’ in ‘The Literary Fact’: ‘Literary forms are not born and do not disappear’, concludes Tihanov, ‘they only change their resonance and their place on the map of literature.’<sup>7</sup> These readings of ‘The Literary Fact’ make it clear that the description given in the article of literary evolution does not provide

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, ‘Poetics’, trans. by Stephen Halliwell, in *Aristotle, ‘Poetics’, Longinus, ‘On the Sublime’, Demetrius, ‘On Style’*, Loeb Classical Library, 199 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 1-141 (pp. 40-41).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Shklovskii, *Rožanov* (Petrograd: OPOIAZ, 1921), included, as ‘Literatura vne siuzheta’, in *O teorii prozy*, expanded ed. (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929), pp. 226-45. Shklovskii uses the term ‘canonization’ ambiguously, implying both that the process transforms extra-literary genres into literary ones and that it occurs among already literary genres.

<sup>5</sup> V.B. Shklovskii, ‘Pis’mo Tynianovu’, *Tret’ia fabrika* (Moscow: Krug, 1926), pp. 98-100 (p. 98). My translation.

<sup>6</sup> M.M. Bakhtin / P.N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, trans. by Albert J. Wehrle (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 159-73 (p. 165).

<sup>7</sup> Galin Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave: Bakhtin, Lukács and the Ideas of their Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 128-40 (all quotations p. 132).

a satisfactory theory of historical development in literature. Literary genres, for Tynianov, simply swap places, endlessly.

Nevertheless, more can be garnered from his descriptions of individual moments in this process. Tynianov uses several different metaphors to model examples of this shifting inequality, each of which is bound up with a different way of thinking about change.<sup>8</sup> Three examples are examined in this paper: ‘high’ genres and ‘low’ genres; those at the ‘centre’ of literature and those at its ‘periphery’; and those in the ‘canon’ as opposed to ‘mistakes’. The immediate context in which each of these metaphors is used can be shown to evoke, however subtly, more sophisticated theories of historical development.

### **The high and the low**

The most frequently used metaphor for the inequality among genres in ‘The Literary Fact’ is that of ‘high’ and ‘low’ genres. This common metaphor has a long history in Russia. In the eighteenth century, a period from which Tynianov draws many of his examples, Lomonosov had codified the division of literature into ‘high’ and ‘low’ genres, the position of a genre being determined by its corresponding lexical ‘style’. These ‘styles’ were modelled on the division of society into ‘high’ and ‘low’ classes.<sup>9</sup> Tynianov thus appropriates an eighteenth-century categorization, reworking it into a tool for twentieth-century literary analysis.

But the account of the alternations of these ‘high’ and ‘low’ genres acquires a revolutionary fervour in certain passages of ‘The Literary Fact’. Consider the following:

Poetry was predominant in literature [*Glavenstvuiushchei v oblasti literatury byla poeziia*]; and in poetry the high genres held sway [*glavenstvovali*]. There was no opening, no crack, through which the letter could become a literary fact. But then this trend wore itself out; interest in prose and the lesser genres pushed out the lofty [*vysokii*] ode.

The ode, the predominant genre, began to sink to the level of sycophantic verses [*v oblast’ “shinel’ nykh stikhov”*], that is, doggerel addressed by petty clerks to their superiors; it sank into everyday life. The constructive principle of a new tendency began to be felt dialectically. (‘The Literary Fact’, p. 40).

The high-low metaphor is extended in this passage in line with its connotations of class struggle: the higher genre ‘wore itself out’ and was ‘pushed out’ by the lower order. These

<sup>8</sup> L.D. Gudkov has attempted to classify the many metaphors for change used by the members of OPOIAZ, with no focus on a specific text, in ‘Poniatie i metafory istorii u Tynianova i opoiazovtsev’, *Tynianovskii sbornik*, 3 (Riga: 1988), pp. 91-108.

<sup>9</sup> For a classic study of the fate of this categorization, see Iu. M. Lotman and B.A. Uspenskii, ‘Spory o iazyke v nachale XIX v. kak fakt russkoi kul’tury’, in Uspenskii, *Izbrannye trudy*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Gnozis, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 331-467.

details combine to evoke narratives of revolution, which, it goes without saying, were not uncommon in the period that followed the events of 1917 in Russia. Tynianov does not begin the passage with an explanation of the fact that he is establishing an analogy between change in the hierarchy of genres and revolution in the social order. Rather, one term simply leads to another, and the analogy suggests itself.

More revealing, however, is the final word of the passage, ‘dialectically’, which, coming immediately after a series of revolutionary metaphors, represents an attempt to associate this narrative with Marxist theories of social development, driven by the dialectical movements of history. Tynianov uses the term ‘dialectically’ six times in the article, all of them to describe the emergence of a new ‘constructive principle’.<sup>10</sup> But in fact, as Medvedev argued in 1928, dialectical thinking is integrated into his account of literary evolution somewhat superficially: Tynianov often seems to present a given ‘constructive principle’, for example, simply as one of two alternately dominant candidates.<sup>11</sup> His use of the word is therefore better understood as an appeal to the authority attached to a particular discourse on social change.

### **The centre and the periphery**

A second metaphor for the inequality among literary genres in ‘The Literary Fact’ is that of their respective positions relative to a ‘centre’: some genres are positioned at the ‘centre’ of literature, others at its ‘periphery’. It is not clear what determines the position of a genre in this model, but what is significant is that literature evolves when peripheral genres displace central ones.

At a period when a genre is disintegrating, it shifts from the centre to the periphery, and a new phenomenon floats in to take its place in the centre, coming up from among the trivia, out of the backyards and low haunts of literature. (This is the phenomenon of the ‘canonization of the younger genres’ which Viktor Shklovsky has written about.) This is how the adventure novel became cheap reading matter [*stal bul’varnym*], and how the same thing is happening now to the psychological tale. (‘The Literary Fact’, p. 33)

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<sup>10</sup> The literary text results from the application of a ‘constructive principle’ to the ‘material’. Tynianov’s account of this process has been examined by Alastair Renfrew, *Towards a New Material Aesthetics: Bakhtin, Genre and the Fates of Literary Theory* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006), pp. 26-31.

<sup>11</sup> Medvedev, p. 166. For a discussion of the revolutionary language in Tynianov, see Klaas-Hinrich Ehlers, *Das dynamische System: Zur Entwicklung von Begriff und Metaphorik des Systems bei Jurij N. Tynjanov* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 223-31. For a different interpretation, of the term ‘struggle’ [*bor’ba*] as a borrowing from early twentieth-century psychology, see Ilona Svetlikova, *Istoki russkogo formalizma* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005), pp. 99-124.

The centre-periphery metaphor is extended in the above passage in accordance with its connotations of geographical space. Over time, a genre ‘shifts’ from the centre to allow others to ‘float in’ from its ‘backyards’. This extended metaphor at first seems to be no more than a transposition of the high-low metaphor, but there is a significant difference between the two: the notion of a periphery implies a border. It therefore allows Tynianov to model, simultaneously, the evolving position of one literary genre relative to others and its entry into literature in the first place.

In a later passage in the article, however, Tynianov takes this spatial metaphor in a different direction. He argues that the dominant genre, as defined by its constructive principle, spreads over other genres, colonizing them.

*Once a constructive principle is applied to any one field it strives to enlarge itself [rasshirit' sia] and to spread [rasprostranit' sia] over as wide an area as possible.*

We might call this the ‘imperialism’ of the constructive principle. One can observe this imperialism, this urge to take over [*stremlenie k zakhvatu*] the widest area, in any sector. An example pointed out by Veselovsky is how an epithet may become generalized: if one day poets write ‘golden sun’, ‘golden hair’, then on the next they will have ‘golden sky’, ‘golden land’ and ‘golden blood’. A fact of a similar kind is the tendency of a victorious order [*pobedivshii stroi*] or genre to affect other fields: thus periods when rhythmic prose is common coincide with periods when poetry predominates over prose. (‘The Literary Fact’, p. 43; emphasis by Tynianov)

Here, the dominant constructive principle seeks to expand over ‘the widest area’, ‘as wide an area as possible’ (a similar construction is later used again). Military metaphors are added to this narrative of expansion: the ‘victorious order’ experiences ‘the urge to take over’ the rest of literature. The loaded terminology seems to proliferate, as if one term were provoking the next in a game of associations. The result is that a very different mechanism of change is suggested: genres do not simply swap places over time, some floating into the centre and others floating out into the periphery; instead, the dominant genre functions as a point from which all others are restructured. Mikhail Bakhtin would later interpret the novel in a similar way.<sup>12</sup>

Marxist theorists began to write about imperialism, by which they meant the ‘struggle for dominance’ among advanced capitalist countries, in the early decades of the twentieth century. The earliest Marxist authorities on the concept were Rudolf Hilferding, who had introduced the concept of ‘finance capital’ in his comprehensive study of 1910,

<sup>12</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Epic and Novel’, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 3-40: ‘In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness. It draws them ineluctably into its orbit precisely because this orbit coincides with the basic direction of the development of literature as a whole.’ (p. 7)

Nikolai Bukharin and, most prominently, Vladimir Lenin, whose pamphlet, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), was the best-known and most authoritative work on the subject in early Soviet Russia. According to Bukharin, for example, in the era of ‘finance capital’, national economies come to function as massive enterprises, exploiting various protectionist policies, including military aggression, in order to enlarge their markets.<sup>13</sup>

It is possible to make sense of Tynianov’s military narrative of exhaustive expansion in the context of these writings. The dominant literary genre, like a dominant imperialist nation, expands over the rest of the territory of literature. Furthermore, the example that Tynianov gives from Veselovskii (the expansion of the epithet ‘golden’) can be seen as a nod to the economic forces that drive such theories. Nevertheless, Tynianov makes no attempt to follow his borrowed language to its expected conclusion; once again, he merely alludes, through apposite lexical choices, to a particular theory of historical development.

### **The canon and the mistake**

A third concept introduced to model the inequality among literary genres is the notion of a ‘canon’. Although this term or derivations of it are used only three times in ‘The Literary Fact’, Tynianov nevertheless develops the idea to describe an exclusive body of genres that enjoy some sort of special status. He is thereby able to identify as ‘mistakes’ those works that fall beyond its reach. Thus, the 1820 publication of ‘Ruslan and Ludmila’ by Aleksandr Pushkin was a decisive event in the history of Russian literature, according to Tynianov, because the work did not meet the then accepted criteria for the genre of the narrative poem [*poema*]; it was consequently perceived by the contemporary reader as a mistake. It follows that literature ‘evolves’ when the mistake is subsequently incorporated into the canon, becoming the index of ‘correctness’ by which a new mistake can be identified, and so on.

Tynianov borrows the idea of a mistake-driven process of evolution from evolutionary biology, a very turbulent discipline in the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, he follows in a long line of thinkers who had sought to expand the application of

<sup>13</sup> This and the previous two sentences paraphrase Anthony Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 88-135.

<sup>14</sup> It is suggested in the commentary to Iu. N. Tynianov, *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino*, ed. by E.A. Toddes, A.P. Chudakov and M.O. Chudakova (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), pp. 510-11, that Tynianov’s interest in biology bears the influence of Lev Zilber, his brother-in-law and a prominent immunologist. The terms ‘evolution’ and ‘mistake’ are briefly discussed here.

theories of biological evolution to other fields. The French literary scholar Ferdinand Brunetière, for example, had developed a ‘Darwinist’ theory of literary evolution in the 1890s, envisaging a struggle for survival among competing literary genres.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, several prominent Russian Marxists had attempted to demonstrate that Darwinism could enrich Marxist theory, an endeavour discouraged by Lenin.<sup>16</sup> Tynianov, however, equates literary genre and biological species less self-consciously, choosing not to theorize the implications of his borrowing.

But, in order to dissect further the ideas of biological origin in ‘The Literary Fact’, it is necessary to take into account the stage that evolutionary biology had reached by the early 1920s. Below is the relevant passage from Tynianov’s article:

All the revolutionary essence of Pushkin’s *poema* ‘Ruslan i Lyudmila’ lay in the fact that it was a non-*poema* (the same can be said of his ‘Prisoner in the Caucasus’). [...] *And again the critics perceived it as an exception to the system, a mistake, and again this was a dislocation of the system.* [...] *Not a regular evolution, but a leap [skachok]; not development, but a dislocation.* The genre became unrecognisable, and yet sufficient was preserved in it so that this non-*poema* was still a *poema*. (‘The Literary Fact’, p. 31; emphasis by Tynianov)

In the space of only a few sentences, Tynianov makes the following three comments: an imagined reader (‘the critics perceived’) judges literary works according to historically dependent criteria; some literary works are perceived as mistakes in relation to the genres in the canon; and the resulting evolution of literature occurs not gradually but in ‘leaps’. These three points can be traced to distinct currents in early twentieth-century evolutionary biology: evolution by natural selection, mutationism, and saltationism.

The latter two terms require some explanation. Until the Evolutionary Synthesis in the late 1930s, many different theories of biological evolution effectively competed with one another. The ‘rediscovery’ of Mendelian inheritance at the beginning of the twentieth century had led to rapid advances in evolutionary thought, transforming the nineteenth-century battle of Lamarckism and Darwinism. Indeed, the development of genetics had given rise to theories that appeared to undermine Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection. Thus, in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Dutch botanist Hugo de Vries proposed a theory of mutationism according to which genetic mutations override the principle of natural selection. Saltationism is a very closely related theory according to

<sup>15</sup> S.L. Kozlov has examined the idea of ‘evolution’ in Tynianov, with reference to Brunetière, in ‘Literaturnaia evoliutsiia i literaturnaia revoliutsiia: k istorii idei’, *Tynianovskii sbornik*, 4 (Riga, 1990), 112-19.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 330-69.

which evolution occurs not gradually, as Darwin had argued, but as the result of very large changes from one generation to the next.<sup>17</sup>

The points of convergence and divergence between these and other theories of evolution and the manner in which they have since been synthesized cannot be explored here.<sup>18</sup> But this very short sketch suffices to show that Tynianov assimilated some of the most contentious concepts in the contemporary debate in evolutionary biology, however superficially. The article thus bears the imprint of a particular historical debate within that discipline.

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It has been demonstrated that, in ‘The Literary Fact’, Tynianov uses at least three distinct metaphors to represent the inequality among literary genres. Furthermore, it has been shown that each of these metaphors implies a different mechanism of change and can be traced to a theory of historical development highly prevalent in early Soviet Russia. Tynianov does not provide a sustained exposition of any of these theories as applied to the history of literature. He merely alludes to them, developing his metaphors in line with their contemporary usage in the social or natural sciences: the immediate context in which each metaphor is used functions as a sort of catalyst, imbuing it with the associations required to conjure forth the edifice of an entire grand narrative. There are thus glimpses in the article of change in the genre system as revolution, imperialist expansion, and genetic mutation.

What is to be made of the coexistence of these narratives, however allusively present, within a single theoretical article? On the one hand, it allows Tynianov to present the turning points of literary history as those at which multiple independent grand narratives coincide, the decisive moments in the history of Russian literature emerging as the points of alignment among their respective trajectories. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a symptom of the fundamental ambiguity of the process of literary evolution as Tynianov understands it. If he does not identify precisely *why* some literary genres are ‘higher’ or more ‘central’ than others, or *why* some genres are included in a ‘canon’ to the

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<sup>17</sup> For an introduction to the various schools in the early twentieth-century debate, see Ernst Mayr, ‘Prologue’, in *The Evolutionary Synthesis: Perspectives on the Unification of Biology*, ed. by Ernst Mayr and William B. Provine (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 1-48. For an evaluation of these theories in the light of later advances in the biological sciences, see Richard Dawkins, ‘Universal Darwinism’, in *The Philosophy of Biology*, ed. by D. Hull and M. Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 15-35.

<sup>18</sup> For an account of the development of evolutionary biology in early Soviet Russia, see Theodosius Dobzhansky, ‘The Birth of the Genetic Theory of Evolution in the Soviet Union in the 1920s’, in *The Evolutionary Synthesis*, pp. 229-41.



exclusion of others, – questions that are inescapably social in nature – how can he then present their changing position relative to one another as the principal mechanism of literary evolution? By embedding multiple theories of historical development in the article, and, effectively, suggesting several different principles of genre stratification simultaneously, he fudges the question entirely.

It is productive to examine this ambiguity in the wider context of the development of Russian Formalism in the 1920s. ‘The Literary Fact’ was published on the eve of a period of great change for the Formalists, when, ‘harassed by outside pressures and plagued by an internal sense of inadequacy’, they attempted to refashion Formalism as an intellectual project.<sup>19</sup> During this period of crisis, they explored several new methodological avenues, but their efforts to move on from their early focus on immanent ‘literariness’ ultimately failed to convince their opponents. One of the charges levelled against the Formalists in these years was that their adoption of the terminology of other fields, particularly socioeconomics, constituted an opportunistic strategy of self-representation rather than the result of the logical development of their earlier ideas.<sup>20</sup> In the light of these later developments, ‘The Literary Fact’ can be seen as an early attempt on Tynianov’s part to borrow from discourses that were highly prevalent in the wake of the Russian Revolution, particularly those associated with Marxism. He thus experiments with different theories of historical development by alternating between various masks throughout the article.

In summary, the presence of multiple theories of historical development in ‘The Literary Fact’ is evidence of the ambiguity of Tynianov’s theory of literary evolution in 1924. The patchwork of historical narratives in the article prevents any single principle of genre stratification from predominating, thus obscuring the cause of any change in a genre’s position relative to others. It can be concluded that literary phenomena can be hierarchized, and the inequalities among them expressed, according to any number of principles – such as social prestige, commercial success, and popularity, to name only three – but that any such principle will ultimately have been imposed from without. Literature, an arena for the struggles of other orders, does not assign positions in the various hierarchies that constitute it.

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<sup>19</sup> Erlich, p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> Galin Tihanov, ‘Zametki o dispute formalistov i marksistov 1927-ogo goda’, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 50 (2001), 279-86 (trans. by M. Poliakova).