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Maximal Tensions and Minimal Conditions: Tynianov as Genre Theorist

David Duff

The appearance in this special issue of the first English translation of Yuri Tynianov's essay “The Ode as an Oratorical Genre” (1922) provides an opportunity to reconsider the work of one of the most gifted genre theorists of the twentieth century, whose distinctive approach to genre profoundly influenced subsequent work in the formalist-structuralist tradition, and also opened up some still largely unexplored areas of inquiry. Tynianov’s status as one of the key figures in the Russian formalist movement is undisputed, but his work has received little of the attention in the English-speaking world accorded to Viktor Shklovsky, founder of Опоэаз (the St. Petersburg “Society for the Study of Poetic Language”) and inventor of the master-concept of defamiliarization, or to Roman Jakobson, chairman of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and pioneer in several major fields of linguistics and poetics, or even to Boris Eikhenbaum, another original voice, who ensured the acclaim of posterity by writing what is still the best short synopsis of Russian formalist theory.1 Although Tynianov, who joined Опоэаз around 1921, five years after its formation, contributed as much if not more than any of these to the elaboration of formalist ideas about literature, he did so mostly in dense, technical writings which, even when available in English, have not attracted a wide readership. With significant exceptions, detailed discussion of his work has been largely confined to specialist Slavicist circles, and key texts remain untranslated or hard to locate.2 Meanwhile, interest in Russian formalism as a whole has declined since its rediscovery in the 1960s and early ’70s. Often misleadingly equated with New Criticism (to which it is in many respects antithetical), Russian formalism is now regarded by many as part of the prehistory of theory, not as an active point of reference. The formalist project has found few defenders against the sociological critiques of Bakhtin/Medvedev and more recently of Fredric Jameson, John Frow, and others. What Raman Selden somewhat euphemistically referred to in 1977 as the “unconcluded dialogue” between formalism and Marxism would appear to be over.3

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The two areas of genre theory in which Tynianov’s achievements are most salient are the study of literary evolution and of generic hierarchies, both central concerns of Russian formalism in its later phase. In the early years of the formalist movement, critics like Shklovsky had suspended discussion of the diachronic aspects of literature in order to explore basic mechanisms of “literariness” such as defamiliarization, retardation, and linguistic “roughening.” Genres were understood simply as repertoires of such devices. Around 1921, a more holistic approach emerged, and historical considerations were readmitted. It was recognized that artistic devices work not separately but in combination, and that the elements of a literary work are organized hierarchically, with one element (“the dominant”) governing and modifying the rest. Genres, too, were seen as hierarchical constructions, their repertoire of devices subject to relations of dominance and subordination. Those relations, though, are not fixed: across time, genres “evolve” through alterations in the distribution of forces within them. Dominant elements lose their potency, and minor features acquire new strength and structural significance. This constant shifting of the balance of power within each genre is mirrored in the relations between genres: genres compete with one another, vying for positions of dominance within an ever-changing hierarchy of genres, and transforming, absorbing, or displacing one another in the process.

To the development of this dynamic, evolutionary theory of literature, Tynianov made a number of vital contributions. The first was to clarify the role of parody as an agent of change, a topic addressed in his first publication, on Dostoevsky and Gogol (1921). Shklovsky, in his now famous essay on Sterne published in the same year, argues that the comic “laying bare of the device” on which parody rests is merely an extreme instance of the way in which all literature works—by rendering palpable the means of expression. Proceeding along similar lines, Tynianov draws the further conclusion that parody is thus a catalyst of literary change, which accelerates the evolution of forms by automatizing outworn devices while simultaneously promoting a new organization of material. His conception of the dual effect, destructive and reconstructive, of parody becomes an integral part of formalist explanations of the “dialectic” of literary evolution. So too does the connected idea of literary evolution as “struggle,” a principle adumbrated in Tynianov’s essay and stated more emphatically in Shklovsky’s “Rozanov” (1921), both of which highlight the discontinuity of literary tradition—the periodic uprisings and reversals that disrupt the lines of succession, and the inherently agonistic nature of literary evolution, based as it is on a logic of differentiation and displacement. Both critics, though, insist that what happens when new forms supersede old ones is neither
creation *ex nihilo* nor permanent annihilation, but rather a rearrangement and revaluation of existing elements. Opposing schools coexist, new genres are mutations or combinations of old ones, and, as Shklovsky puts it, “The vanquished line is not obliterated, it does not cease to exist. It is only knocked down from its crest; it lies dormant and may again arise as a perennial pretender to the throne.”\(^7\) It was Tynianov rather than Shklovsky who was to pursue the full implications of these insights.

In doing so, he developed the “systemo-functional” model of genre with which his name is most associated.\(^8\) In one sense, its terminology is potentially misleading. Though influenced by structuralist linguistics,\(^9\) some of whose terms it adopts, this model was explicitly intended to overcome the disjunction between synchronic and diachronic approaches that was, in Tynianov and Jakobson’s eyes, the principal limitation of structuralist methodology, and of early formalism. For Saussure, “system” is a synchronic concept, contradistinguished from the diachronic concept of “evolution”: his object of study is *langue*, the language system at a given moment in time, as distinct from the evolving history of language studied by historical linguistics. Tynianov, however, uses the notion of system to precisely opposite effect: to investigate the interaction of diachronic and synchronic phenomena, and to model the idea of evolution itself. “Pure synchronism,” he and Jakobson declare, is “an illusion: every synchronic system has its past and its future as inseparable structural elements of the system”; “every system necessarily exists as an evolution,” and evolution itself “is inescapably of a systemic nature.”\(^10\) In applying the metaphor of system to literature, whether it be the total “literary system” of a given epoch, the “genre-system” which subdivides it, the subsystem of an individual genre, or the microsystem of an individual work, Tynianov in each case calls attention to the coexistence of past, present, and future elements within it, and to the crucial fact that the system is perpetually changing. Unlike Saussure’s essentially static model of the language system, “The main concept for literary evolution is the *mutation* of systems.”\(^11\)

In other respects, though, Tynianov’s notion of system accords closely with Saussure’s insofar as it is:

(a) a *relational* concept, which sees the elements of a literary work or genre as interlinked and interdependent (the notion of *function* is thus integral to the model: literary devices, treated in isolation by early formalism, are redefined by Tynianov as functions in relation to a whole);\(^12\)

(b) a *differential* concept, which sees literature as a system of differences (individual elements are perceived against one another, an idea already
contained in the theory of defamiliarization, and extended by Tynianov
to genres, schools, and epochs);

(c) a hierarchical concept, which sees the elements of the system as
unequally valued (hence the notion of the dominant, originally applied
to the governing element within a work but extended by Tynianov to the
presiding genre within a genre-system and to the controlling feature
within a genre: his preferred term for the latter is the constructive factor).

Each of these strands has important implications for Tynianov’s theori-
zation of generic change, and for his understanding of genre itself.

It is, for instance, by adopting a functionalist point of view that
Tynianov is able to pose what he claims is “a completely uninvestigated
problem,” the “evolutionary interrelationship of function and formal
elements” in a genre (LE 71). The two variables, form and function, may
evolve together, change of form resulting in change of function.
Alternatively, the two may evolve separately: a genre that is formally the
same may serve a different function in different periods, whereas
formally distinct genres may, at different times, serve the same function.
This applies to the function of particular elements as well as to that of a
genre as a whole. The evolution of a genre need not entail alterations of
form: it may involve instead the assignment of new functions to its
formal elements—or simply a reordering of the relations between them.
In other words, a genre may look the same but behave differently. For
Gérard Genette, the concept of change of function was one of Russian
formalism’s best and most characteristic insights.

A third variable in Tynianov’s model is orientation (ustanovka), a term
he borrows from Jakobson and uses to open up further the idea of
generic evolution. As Tynianov defines it in the essay translated for this
issue of New Literary History, orientation has two aspects, internal and
external (these are not his exact terms). The internal orientation of a
work or genre is synonymous with its “constructive factor” or dominant,
the factor “which functionally masters and colours the rest.” Its
external orientation, or what he calls “speech orientation,” is “the
function of the work (or the genre) in relation to the extra-literary
speech series which is closest to it” (OG 566). Again, part of Tynianov’s
argument is that the orientation of a genre may evolve independently of
its form—a type of evolution that no one had examined before. Change
of orientation is another vital insight of formalist genre theory, one
whose importance is yet to be acknowledged.

A fourth variable is status: the cultural prestige or canonicity of a
genre. The idea that genres can be qualitatively ranked is, of course, an
ancient one: critics from Aristotle onwards have constructed generic
hierarchies, and much of the history of genre theory has consisted of debates as to the relative merits of different genres. The Russian formalists, however, approach this question differently insofar as they presuppose that generic hierarchies are mobile rather than fixed, and seek instead to explain how and why the status of genres alters. Tynianov, as we shall see, had much to say on this matter; the point to make here is simply that status is one of the parameters in his theoretical model of the evolutionary process, and that it can operate independently or in conjunction with other factors. Change of status need not involve change of form, and change of function or of orientation may or may not accompany change of status. A genre may look the same and behave the same but be valued differently.

All these variables are illustrated by the case of the ode, Tynianov’s essay on which opens with a definition of orientation and a summary of his systemic model. The historical focus of the essay is the Russian ode in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the beginning of this period, Tynianov claims, the orientation of the ode is towards oratory, the “extra-literary speech series” that it most closely resembles. In terms of the genre’s internal organization, this means that the “elements of poetic discourse”—its language and form—“are used, constructed as if it were an act of oratory” (OG 567). Everything is geared towards oral delivery and rhetorical effect. The special use of language and special principles of construction involved are described by Tynianov with extreme care, making this a rich illustration of his ideas about how a particular constructive factor—in this case, the orientation to declamatory speech—transforms each and every element, determining the entire structure of the poetry. The discussion is further enriched by Tynianov’s references to the lively theoretical debates among Russian poets of the time about poetic language and how odes should be written: his particular interest is the poet-critic Lomonosov (1711–65), whom he credits with a “‘systemic,’ functional attitude to each element in the work of art” (OG 574) which anticipates his own approach.

During the period in question, however, the orientation of the ode alters. Enormously influential at first, the oratorical ode (of which Lomonosov is the great exponent and theorist) loses favor, and its techniques become automatized and exhausted. Lomonosov’s ideas about poetic language and rhetoric are challenged by his contemporaries and successors. Rival variants of the ode develop, partly through the separate development of tendencies already present, but combined, in the oratorical ode. Lomonosov’s odes, their distinctive features and techniques, are subjected to parody. By the early nineteenth century, the oratorical function previously performed by the ode is now performed by other genres. The ode, meanwhile, has acquired a new speech orientation: towards conver-
sational speech, with its completely different intonational principles, or, in another separate development, towards music. The ode begins to merge with elegy and romance. Other genres supersede it.

This complex series of developments, traced in illuminating detail, is explained by Tynianov through reference to the theoretical model I have outlined. Primarily, the case of the ode is presented as an evolution of genre involving change of orientation. Other changes are involved but they are secondary, and the evolutionary process in this case is led and dominated by change of orientation. This follows logically from Tynianov’s definition of oratory as the constructive factor or dominant of the genre. If his analysis is correct, the development of the Russian ode, or of Russian lyrical poetry in general, during this period could not be explained without the concept of change of orientation. There may be lessons here too for scholars of English poetry of this period.

The importance of Tynianov’s work on the ode (first published in 1927 but seemingly written in 1922) for the development of his ideas about generic evolution is suggested by the fact that he summarizes his findings in the two more general essays he wrote on the subject of genre and literary evolution, “The Literary Fact” (1924) and “On Literary Evolution” (1927), and subsequently chose these three seminal articles to open his collection *Archaizers and Innovators* [*Arkhaisty i novatory*] (1929). The ode essay remains his most detailed case study of a single genre, but the other two essays enlarge on some of the theoretical issues it raises, and address attendant methodological concerns. The latter is particularly true of “On Literary Evolution,” which is essentially a methodological statement, and in this sense a prelude to the declaration on “Problems in the Study of Literature and Language” that Tynianov and Jakobson issued in 1928 in a vain attempt to relaunch *Opoiaz* and counteract the makeshift sociologism to which some of its former members had succumbed (it served instead as an agenda for the Prague structuralists, among whom Jakobson was now working).17

One of the most controversial features of “The Literary Fact” is Tynianov’s attempt to clarify, in more general terms, the evolutionary process which led to the break-up of the oratorical ode and the development of rival forms. The four-stage process he delineates brings out clearly the agonistic aspect to the formalist theory of literary evolution: “(1) an opposing constructive principle takes shape in dialectical relationship to an automatized principle of construction; (2) it is then applied—the constructive principle seeks out the readiest field of application; (3) it spreads over the greatest mass of phenomena; (4) it becomes automatized and gives rise to opposing principles of construction.”18 Quoting this passage in his critique of the formalist school, Bakhtin/Medvedev objects to Tynianov’s use of the word “dialectical,”
claiming that there is nothing dialectical about the process described, since the stages Tynianov enumerates “are neither stages of evolution in general, nor stages of literary evolution” (FM 166). According to Bakhtin/Medvedev, who writes here with a Marxist conception of historical evolution, in order to reveal an evolitional connection “it is necessary to show that the two phenomena are connected in substance and that the first one essentially and necessarily determines the one that follows it” (FM 165). This, he says, Tynianov patently fails to do and indeed does not attempt to do. The formalist model is a pseudo-theory of evolution based on a pseudo-theory of artistic perception—the principle of perceptibility versus automatization. Notwithstanding their claims to objectivity, the formalists’ theory of literature is thus subjective and psychological.

There is some force to this last objection. In the final analysis, Russian formalism could perhaps best be described as a psychopoetics, for all its justifiable impatience with reductive psychologism. Medvedev/Bakhtin, however, ignores the explicit and complex link Tynianov makes earlier in the same essay between his theory of evolution, the principle of automatization-perceptibility, and his idea of literature as “a dynamic speech construction.” Rejecting all static definitions of literature, Tynianov proposes: “The constant factor is something that has all along been taken for granted, namely that literature is a speech construction, perceived precisely as a construction, i.e. literature is a dynamic speech construction. The need for ceaseless dynamism is what gives rise to evolution, because every dynamic system inevitably becomes automatized, and dialectically delineates the opposite constructive principle” (LF 36–37). What Tynianov means by “a dynamic speech construction” is explained only briefly in “The Literary Fact,” but written about at length in his book The Problem of Verse Language, published in the same year (1924). One of the central themes of the book is what he calls the dynamization of the vocal material in verse (PVL 57). “Dynamization” is his own coinage, denoting the process by which language is modified under the conditions of verse. The modification, which is both phonetic and semantic, is effected by means of the constructive factor of verse, namely rhythm. Tynianov’s book studies this process and its effects, looking at the manifold ways in which the structural properties of verse determine the organization of sound and meaning.

It is, in other words, an expansion of the inquiry Tynianov had begun in “The Ode as an Oratorical Genre,” some of whose examples he once again cites. Not least of the remarkable features of the book is Tynianov’s new definition of form, which reformulates the early formalist notion of perceptibility as a dynamic energy concept: “The sensation of form is always the sensation of the flow (and, consequently of the alteration) of
correlation between the subordinating, constructive factor and the subordinated factors.” “Art,” he adds, “lives by means of this interaction and struggle,” and without the sensation of it, “the fact of art is obliterated. It becomes automatized” (PVL 33). The book is an attempt to identify, in as precise a way as possible, the objective characteristics of versified language that generate this sensation. Parts of the ode essay attempt to do the same in the particular case of the ode: for instance, the discussion in the second section of the tension between “two interacting principles” in oratorical odes, “the principle of maximum action at each given moment, and the principle of the development, the unfolding of the discourse”; and of the two opposing factors that shape the “lyric plot” (OG 568). Tynianov’s description of how these competing constructive factors subsequently separate, creating plot-heavy “dry odes” on the one hand and decorative “senseless odes” on the other, is a perfect illustration of the first and second stages of evolution theorized in “The Literary Fact.” His account of the proliferation of further generic variants, and the struggle for dominance between them, illustrates later stages.

His most radical speculations, though, are about what happens when the genre is disintegrating. Since the ode is defined not primarily by its formal properties (far less by its subject matter, which Tynianov scarcely mentions) but by its constructive factor, the ode can, as it were, survive its own death. Though automatized by parody, eroded by hybridization, and eclipsed by rival genres, the ode “as a tendency, if not as a genre did not disappear. Though doomed to a secret underground life, in disgrace, it flared up in the revolt of the archaizers” (OG 591). Tynianov had already hinted at a similar idea at the close of his essay on Dostoevsky and Gogol, when, speaking of parody, he breaks the genre down into its comic and parodic aspects, pointing out that in some works the parodistic tenor may fade away while the comic thrust endures. Indeed, such is the essential relativity of genre concepts, “If a parody of tragedy results in a comedy, a comedy parodied may turn out to be a tragedy” (DG 116).

He takes these ideas further in The Problem of Verse Language in his discussion of the “minimal conditions” of a genre. Not only when it is “dying” but when—perhaps especially when—it is vibrant and healthy can a genre, or work, reduce temporarily to its “minimal conditions”: that is, to a state where the constructive factor alone is operative. To explain this intriguing thought, Tynianov introduces the concept of the equivalent, which he defines as “anything which substitutes extra-verbal features for the text, above all its partial omissions, such as a partial substitution with graphic features” (PVL 42). He gives examples from Pushkin, where whole lines or stanzas are omitted and replaced with
blank spaces and dots. Tynianov’s point is that, at these moments, the constructive factor alone is visible, working as it were upon “zero speech material.” Equivalents, though, “do not signify a weakening, but . . . on the contrary, signify pressure and amplification” (*PVL* 47). They reveal the strength of the constructive factor: so powerful is its control of subsidiary elements, that something is needed to relieve the monotony of the flow from subordinator to subordinated. An alteration, if only temporary, of the balance of forces is precisely what is necessary to renew the dynamism of form.

Such acute insights and daring lines of thought do not accord well with customary perceptions of Tynianov as the rigid system-builder among the Russian formalists. Though committed to systematic explanation and capable of feats of abstraction that exceed those of most of his readers, he is anything but the arid theorist as which he is sometimes portrayed. His vision of literature as a vast, evolving “system of systems” in which every part is in dynamic tension with other parts is not a misguided attempt to impose artificial unity on the chaotic diversity of creative experience, but an inspired effort to uncover some of the hidden laws about how literature works. He brought to his theoretical work a sensitivity to literary history unmatched by most literary historians, and his writing is animated by a wealth of unpedantic scholarship and an eye for unexpected detail. The fact that his literary tastes embraced what some would regard as the no-go area of eighteenth-century oratorical odes may shed light on the description he once gave of his work as “a kind of dynamic archaeology” (*PVL* 37)—that is, an investigation of earlier manifestations of the literary dynamic—and may even recommend him to readers of this journal.

**University of Aberdeen**

**NOTES**


Michael Sosa and Brent Harvey (Ann Arbor, 1981), pp. 141–43; hereafter cited in text as PVL.


Tynianov returns to the subject of parody in his introduction to a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century verse parodies, Imaginary Poetry (1931), where he defines the most effective parody as that which preserves the greatest formal similarity while at the same time introducing the greatest functional differences—a brilliant application of Tynianov’s form/function distinction and of the principle of maximal dynamic tension. See Sandra Rosengrant, “The Theoretical Criticism of Jurij Tynjanov,” Comparative Literature, 32 (1980), 378.


9 The extent and timing of this influence are disputed; I have accepted Steiner’s conclusions (Russian Formalism, pp. 102–3).


12 Tynianov also distinguishes between syn-function, the relation of an element to different elements within the same work, and auto-function, its relation to similar elements in other works (“On Literary Evolution,” Readings in Russian Poetics, p. 68).


15 Yuri Tynianov, “The Ode as an Oratorical Genre” [1927], tr. Ann Shukman, *New Literary History*, 34 (2003), 565; hereafter cited in text as OG. The connection between the concepts of “orientation” and “dominant” is explained by Sergej Davydov, “From ‘Domi-
nant’ to ‘Semantic Gesture’: A Link Between Russian Formalism and Czech Structural-

16 Tynianov’s concept of speech orientation draws on Lev Jakubinsky’s linguistic work on
dialogue, which also influenced Bakhtin. In his *Melodics of Verse* (1922), Eikhenbaum
makes an analogous distinction to Tynianov’s when he discriminates between three
fundamental styles of Russian lyrical poetry: oratoricial, conversational, and “singable.”

17 For links between the two schools, see Jurij Striedter, *Literary Structure, Evolution and

Duff (Harlow, 2000), p. 38; hereafter cited in text as LF.

19 I have explored this idea in relation to the English ode of the Romantic period in
“The Ode and Its Afterlife,” in *Paradoksy humanistyki: Księga pamiątkowa ku czci Profesora

20 For a suggestive discussion and application of this concept, see Andrzej Zgorzelski,

21 Tynianov uses this term rather than “the equivalent” in his brief discussion of the