The Broken Frame: The Destabilization of Representation in Literature

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Abstract

The monograph "The Broken Frame: The Destabilization of Representation in Literature" (Sofia: New Bulgarian University Publishing House, 2025) consists of introductory remarks, two parts, and a bibliography. The total volume of the text is 220 pages.

In the introductory remarks, titled "The End of Literary Theory, the End of Representation," the text traces the trend in literary thought to conceive literature as destabilizing representation in language. Through examples from various literary scholars and schools of thought, the text attempts to demonstrate that since its early formative years, literary studies has sought within literature the problematization not only of the language-world connection, but also of the very capacity of language to produce a representable world.

Galin Tihanov's book *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (California: Stanford University Press, 2019) provides us with the direction to examine literary theory from the perspective of its "death." This "death" is preceded by another—the lengthy debate surrounding Hegel's claim that art belongs to the past. Paul de Man, in his article "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*," interprets this assertion as insisting not so much on the end of art as on the end of representation[1]. If the end of art is the end of representation, then we find ourselves at the beginning of literary theory, which has in fact constantly sought the destabilization of representation in literature. In other words, what we ought to preserve and develop from literary theory after its "death" is precisely the impulse to question representation. This impulse outlives all of theory's attempts to establish itself as a system of well-founded assertions—that is, as a theory. It expresses a theoretically conscious attitude toward literature which, however, does not become a theory.

Such is the approach applied in this monograph. It examines the problematization of representation, but nowhere in an abstractly theoretical manner. This does not mean that literary theory and its achievements are neglected. Rather, they are organized around resolving specific issues in the interpretation of the work, while their claim to establishing universally valid propositions is deliberately constrained.

Some of the individual chapters in the book attempt to address a problem that has been focused on indirectly rather than directly: literature's resistance to signhood. This problem carries far-reaching theoretical implications. Literature is conventionally conceptualized as a linguistic

[1] De Man, P., Sign and Symbol in Hegel's "Aesthetics". *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 1982, Vol. 8, No. 4, 761–775.

construct. Insofar as its linguistic features cannot be disputed—whereas all other elements, such as the author, the identity of the work, and the contexts in which it is situated, can—formalism appears irrefutable in elevating literature's relationship to language, defining it as intrinsic to its nature. Yet, in some of these interpretations, we discern a different trajectory: literature resists not only language, but also semiosis itself—it resists its own putatively sign-based nature. It is precisely to this problem that the first part of the monograph, titled "Against Language," is dedicated.

This resistance to language renders literature more than merely anti-mimetic. It undermines not just the function of representing reality (whatever that may mean), and not only the attempt to represent phantasmic states and objects, but also the performative dimension that opposes representation. The performative does not represent; it constitutes. Nonetheless, a degree of representativeness remains inherent within it, insofar as the constitution itself is linguistically expressed and possesses a sign character.

There is a standard, invalidating argument against literature's resistance to language: that this resistance is carried out by means of language itself. However, the analysis of Yovkov's animal stories in the chapter "Telepathy and Understanding" suggests that the literary text can evade this paradox. In Yovkov's work, understanding occurs without the mediating reality of the sign, yet the author's texts do not problematize this textually; they simply pass over it in silence, leaving it beyond language, accessible only through interpretation. The narrator not only refrains from explaining how Mokanina understands that "the unfamiliar peasant" "had not turned aside to him just by chance, but was pursued by some misfortune," but also omits stating that this involves a specific kind of "non-sign" understanding—a form of "telepathy." All of this unfolds outside the text: the non-linguistic event is not linguistically represented, which leads us to conclude that a semiotic, and consequently a linguistic, analysis of Yovkov's texts will not take us very far.

Representation implies adherence to certain rules. Representation is only representation when it occurs according to a specific schema or template. Mandelstam's poem *Silentium*, discussed in the chapter "Mute Beauty," attempts to access the situation prior to form, prior to the consolidation of the rule, before representation can take place. Ostensibly constructed from linguistic signs, it actually strives to avoid freezing into signhood, seeking instead to confront us with an attribute of beauty that renders it irreducible to any templates we might attempt to confine it within: surprise.

In Bagryana's translation of a poem by Akhmatova, analyzed in the chapter "Women's Poetry and Translation," we encounter another strategy for dealing with language and representation. There, we witness resistance to language as a generator of meaning. Formalism, and subsequently structuralism, examine the sonic organization of the work. However, this acoustic dimension of the text is most frequently analyzed to show how it mirrors the text's broader messages. Yet, in interpreting Bagryana's translation, we confront something different: here, meaning is entirely ignored, and consequently language as a whole is bypassed, because language is ultimately more than mere sound—it is signification and meaning. This elimination of meaning prompts us to reconsider the nature of poetry, if such a nature exists: is it not precisely a triumph of the materiality of sound, given that it triggers not the "meaning-generating" and "meaning-constructing" memory of interpretation, but rather the mechanics of learning by heart?

Another way of problematizing meaning is outlined in the commentary on Ani Ilkov's poetry collection *Love for Nature*. The commentary, titled "Love for Nature and Politics," points out that *Love for Nature* seeks not the utterance—that is, meaningful speech—but rather its medium, the underlying ground upon which an assertion rests and without which it cannot exist: the act of "saying." Precisely to elevate "saying" over the "utterance," Ilkov's poems turn to a phenomenon rarely discussed in relation to Bulgarian literature: "senseless" speech, or foolishness.

In Pushkin's "little tragedy" *Don Juan, or The Stone Guest*, another possibility for resisting language is presented. As the chapter "Don Juan and the Sublime" argues, Don Juan is punished not by the Commander, but by his statue. The statue is not part of any sign system or myth, as Roman Jakobson treats it in his study "The Statue in Pushkin's Poetic Mythology," because the statue "operates" in the play as an object outside the very thing that shapes myth—language[2]. Its "behavior" is not clearly explained. Since it is the statue, rather than the Commander, that takes revenge on the seducer Don Juan, it remains unclear what motives guide it during its fatal handshake with the famous "conqueror of women's hearts." Excluded from the logic of cause and effect determined by language, the statue is not even represented—that is, described—but merely denoted or named: it simply is, and it does things.

The word "language" in dictionaries of literary studies does not refer solely to the so-called "natural language" we primarily use in communication, but also to the various formal and thematic codes that govern the creation and reception of a literary work. One such code is genre. It is a constellation of inherited rules that determine representation within an individual literary text. The commentary on one of the most conservative genres—the fable—which we offer in the chapter "Narrative and Meaning," brings us face to face with a difficulty that concerns not just certain works within this genre, but the texts of the author who serves as the foundational model for the fable: La Fontaine. It turns out that precisely in this author's work (and thus, perhaps, in the overall development of the genre as a whole), discrepancies arise between the story and the meaning embedded within it—between what is represented and what the represented is supposed to signify.

The second part of the monograph, titled "In Spite of Language," deals with the resistance to representation that is driven not by a desire to question language itself, but rather by an effort to counteract representation using the "means" of language itself. The analysis of Dalchev's poem "Stone," titled "Protocol Sentences," focuses on the text's attempt to break out of the Saussurean isolation of language from the world and to speak of reality exactly as it is. Here, we encounter not merely a referential function of language—which is simply one of its various functions and a manifestation of representation—but an aspiration for the utterance to "adhere" to what it speaks of, becoming indistinguishable from it. However, insofar as even this radical referentiality retains an element of representation, Dalchev goes further, following his understanding that "all poetry ultimately denies reality," toward the performative dimension of language, which seeks to escape representation altogether.

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[2] Якобсон, Р. *Статуя в поетической мифологи Пушкина* [online], http://sobolev.franklang.ru/index.php/pushkin-i-ego-vremya/212-r-o-yakobson-statuya-v-poeticheskoj-mifologii-pushkina [30. 07. 2025].

In the chapter dedicated to representation and power, the self and the soul in Yavorov's poetry—titled "Representation and Power in Yavorov"—the picture becomes more complex. Power in/of language and its performative capacity do not merely go beyond representation, but actually require it. The self in Yavorov—a negative category that undermines any possibility of description and schematization—requires the participation of representation in order to be identified. In Yavorov's case, we encounter the difficulty of overcoming representation. Many literary works may strive toward this, yet representation emerges precisely where it is least expected. Just as its defeat is being declared, it makes its presence known. Exactly when the power of/in language triumphs in Yavorov, it turns out that the services of representation are necessary to achieve this very triumph.

In Yavorov's poem "Homeland," analyzed in the chapter "Yavorov's Homeland," we witness an argument against representation that is closely aligned with the one found in Mandelstam's *Silentium*. In both texts, there is an aspiration to dismantle the models through which the homeland and beauty are perceived. Yet, while Mandelstam exhibits a desire to project the idea of beauty outside of language into a pure, non-conceptual or pre-conceptual intuition manifested in the unexpectedness of the encounter with the beautiful, in Yavorov, the "game" is relocated inside language. Without resorting to the "ambiguity" favored by New Criticism—where, despite the divergence of meanings, an element of representation, "shapedness," or configuration remains because a structure of relations is built between the non-coinciding senses—the homeland in Yavorov evades this possibility. It is an encounter between two meanings—the homeland as word and as time—without arriving at an opposition or a connection between them. The concept of the homeland remains "formless."

The loss of form is also intrinsic to Konstantin Pavlov's understanding of art, discussed in the chapter "Art and Evil." The demythologizing pathos of his texts regarding conventional notions of art proves perilous to their own status. What does Konstantin Pavlov's writing communicate about itself? If it cannot be defined as art, then what is it? Autorepresentation—the capacity of the literary text to tell us something not only about the world but also about its own essence—is thus problematized.

A similar profound destabilization can be detected in Geo Milev's poem *September*, analyzed in the chapter "The Barbarian, the Slave, the Executioner." It creates the impression of—and is conventionally interpreted as—glorifying the uprising of the slaves, yet at the very beginning we read that "the age-old malice of the slave" was born in the "dead womb" of the night. Subsequently, the "depiction" of the slaves becomes suspiciously similar to that of the executioners, prompting questions regarding the ultimate meaning and ideological undertones of this work.

Such destabilization can also be found in the chapters dedicated to the future in Penyo Penev and old age in Aleksandar Gerov. The future is a stable value in the literature of the People's Republic of Bulgaria (PRB); it is meant to be the era of the realized ideal, of communism achieved. For this reason, a writer in this epoch must express no doubt in it. Yet, this is precisely what Penyo Penev—celebrated as the canonical poet of socialism—does. In Gerov's case, old age turns out to be illegibly interlaced with youth and childhood.

Tropes are inherently linked to representation. Figurative meaning represents the literal. Irony can also be viewed as a figure of representation. Similar to allegory, its literal and figurative

meanings are severed, their connection conditioned solely by the speaker's intonation. However, as Paul de Man emphasizes, irony possesses another distinctive feature: it may go unrecognized—that is, it does not represent itself. This very characteristic is unveiled in the poetry of Liliev, analyzed in the chapter "Irony in Liliev." Liliev's poetry appears entirely unironic, governed by identity, identification, and harmony, yet the possibility remains to question whether this is truly the case.

The connection between tropes and representation is conditioned by the ideas of depth and absence. We do not speak of what is around us. We discuss what is missing: the fulfillment of goals, the future, the past. The present—the pure present—is not an object of representation, much like that which is "on the surface," the visible, the pointable. Tropes are impossible without representation because the figurative meaning is not present. It is elsewhere, substituted by the literal. Tropes engender a sensation of depth: allegories and symbols are "deep," laden with invisible meaning.

To question representation, it is necessary to step outside the ideas of depth and absence—outside of figurativeness altogether. An attempt at this is made in the poetry of Ekaterina Josifova (the chapter "Mere Transparency") and Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones* (the chapter "Truth as Shock and Boredom"). In Littell, there is yet another aspect to the problematization of representation. All representation in art conforms to specific rules. In so-called "classical literature," these are clearly discernable: lovers embrace and kiss but go no further; the character's body is "drawn" so as not to breach the standards of beauty, and so forth. Modern literature also has rules of representation, but they are more "flexible" and less easily generalized. In depicting violence in Littell's novel, an explicit effort is made to go even beyond those modern rules.

The problematization of representation is not a criterion for good literature. The chapter "Concrete and Innumerable"—which discusses the leader's figure in the literature of the PRB, concrete to the point of objecthood and simultaneously dissolving in its infinite multiplication—is included in this book but deals with works that are ideologically "correct" yet do not merit high aesthetic evaluation.