

The Dynamic Aspect of the Dominant

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In 1935 Roman Jakobson presented the scholarly public at the Masaryk University of Brno with a comprehensive definition of the concept of dominant: ¹ "It is the focusing component of a work of art; it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure. The dominant specifies the work." ² He goes on pointing out that verse (or a whole literature in a given period, or the art in a given period) is a system of values possessing its own hierarchy in which there are superior and inferior values and one leading value -the dominant- without which verse in a given poetry (a genre in literature, a particular art form at a given time) cannot be evaluated. The history of a literary style can be conceived as a change in the hierarchy of values including the replacement of a canonized dominant by another innovating one. The concept of dominant as well as the whole hierarchical approach has been an organic part of the structuralist method in general and of the Prague school in particular. ³

The dominant, as defined by Jakobson, is the highest organizing and therefore the chief stabilizing component of a given structure. From the above quoted characterization follows at least implicitly, that it comprises also the chief dynamic constituent of the structure. The examples given by Jakobson reinforce this implication:

Jakobson shows first the importance of the concept of dominant for an adequate description and differentiation of verses in their different forms. He compares the Czech verse of the 14th century with Czech verse of the Realist period and with what at that time was the contemporary verse, the verse of the thirties. In all three the same elements can be observed- rhyme, a syllabic scheme and intonational unity; but there is a different hierarchy of values, each has a different dominant, for the first rhyme was the dominant, for the second it was the syllabic scheme, while for the third the intonational integrity fulfilled this role.

Jakobson goes on to apply the concept of dominant at a higher level of generality; a poetic work is defined by him thus: "It is a verbal message whose dominant is the aesthetic function." ⁴ He stresses the fact that the marks disclosing the implementation of the aesthetic function are changeable. Having established the aesthetic function as the dominant of the poetic work we can also establish the hierarchy of diverse linguistic functions within the poetic work.

Jakobson ascribes to the dominant particular importance for the study of literary evolution. Evolution, says Jakobson, is not so much a question of the disappearance

of certain elements and the emergence of others as it is the question of shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system, it is a question of the shifting of dominant which brings along shifts in evaluation. That which from the point of view of the old system was regarded as worthless may be adopted by the new system as a positive value.⁵ As an example he brings the verse of the Russian late-Romantic lyricists Tjucev and Fet whose verse was criticized by the Realist critics for the errors and alleged carelessness. Turgenev, who published these poems, corrected their rhythm and style according to the values prevalent in his time. Only much later were the original texts reinstated and recognized as an initial step toward a new concept of poetic form.

The final point made by Jakobson is that the shift is also a directly experienced synchronic phenomenon: "The reader of a poem or a viewer of a painting has a vivid awareness of the two orders the traditional canon and the artistic novelty as a deviation from the canon."⁶

The nature as well as the function of the dominant will become clearer and more definite when we look at the highest organizing constituent together with its inner dynamic counterpart, while separating at the same time the dynamic aspect from the stabilizing one. For this purpose I shall use the theory of music.

In the theory of music every tonal composition is defined by its tonality, i.e., by the scale in which it is written. The tonality is given by the *tonic* the key tone i.e., the first tone on the scale. The tonality defines the relations of all the tones to the tonic and gives the composition its stable framework.⁷ It is important to note that in order to create the effect of completeness, a composer has to end his (tonal) composition on the tonic. Otherwise the composition gives the impression of something unfinished, something open which demands a further movement for its completion. It is the tonic that determines the relations between the tones on the scale as well as in the composition. It determines the whole hierarchy, the possible variations in these relations and thus the character and the integrity of the work. It gives it its stable basis, its fixed point of orientation. I suggest, therefore to call the fixing, focusing constituent of a work of art *the tonic*.

The other most important tone on the scale is the *quinta*, the fifth tone called *the dominant*. On the dominant the scale which follows on the circle of quintas is constructed. It is the dynamic, the productive constituent of the structure. Of course, I use the theory of music metaphorically as Mikhail Bakhtin does when he speaks about the "Polyphonic novel" and "intonating". By calling Dostoevsky's novels "polyphonic" Bakhtin stresses the organized coexistence of several cognitive voices or consciousness, within the framework of the literary text.⁸ In our case the theory

of music enables us to represent in an adequate way the simultaneous existence of the two aspects of the Jakobsonian dominant.

Let us see now how the binary concept of "tonic and dominant" functions when applied in an actual analysis. As we are dealing with the heritage of the Prague school and of Czech literary scholarship let us look also at a Czech literary text-Jaroslav Hasek's "The Good Soldier Svejk and his Fortunes in the World War." It has been the generally accepted view that the figure of the Good Soldier is the highest organizing principle of the novel, that it is Svejk who fixes the text and thus he is the tonic of the novel. According to Jakobson's conception of the dominant Svejk indeed seems to fulfill this role, at least to a certain extent. But we are still left with a very basic question, namely, how can Svejk be the chief organizing principle when he is the chief disorganizing element who disrupts repeatedly the plot by his unpredictable behaviour, who keeps intruding his interminable humorous anecdotes and turns the great game of war into a series of Svejkian games. The binary concept which relates the tonic to the dominant enables us to look at the novel differently: Svejk is indeed the dominant in the musical sense. He is the dynamic aspect, the productive constituent of the novel. We may say that he creates the text. The fixed organizing principle is the game of the war. It is a game played according to generally accepted and rigid rules. It is played in a very definite time and very definite space. Within this universal game Svejk carries out his own games according to his own rules creating enough space for invention and improvisation.⁹

Our next example is concerned with the problems of evaluation. The famous unfinished Svejk-novel had two earlier predecessors, a series of short stories written in 1911¹⁰ and a novella written in Kiev in 1916-1917 during Hasek's Patriotic journalistic activities in the periodical "Czechoslovakia". It is called "The Good Soldier Svejk in Captivity"¹¹ and like the stories was never translated into English. The short stories belong to Hasek's masterpieces in this genre. But the novella has caused quite a lot of confusion among Hasek's scholars. They have agreed that from the literary point of view it is significantly inferior to the novel but the reason for this inferiority has never been stated. This is particularly puzzling since most of the novel's ingredients can be found already in the novella: There is the war, there are the officers and the soldiers, there are many of the episodes and there is Svejk. When we apply the "tonic-dominant" concept one reason for this inferiority emerges very clearly. It is found in the very figure of Svejk. In the novella he is a static, passive, mostly non-productive puppet. He is completely subdued to the tonic which is the anti-Austrian propaganda represented by the narrator. This quality becomes particularly striking when we compare the amount of Svejk's direct speech and story-telling in the novel with that in the novella. In the novel Svejk is undoubtedly

the chief speaker, but in the novella it is the narrator who speaks most of the time. There is no dynamic aspect to the novella, the dominant is missing.

In the same way can this binary model be used for clarifying and explicating at least one aspect of the inferiority of such works like the so called "Robinsoniads" or "Quijotias", but I shall not undertake this analysis here.

In the study of literary evolution the original dominant has been applied quite fruitfully both by the Russian formalists and the Czech structuralists¹². As I said earlier the synchronic existence of the fixed (canonized) of the changing (the new) has been recognized and described quite clearly already by Jakobson. But even in Jakobson's presentation of the synchronic experience -the simultaneous "existence of the foregrounded new on the background of the canonized" makes this phenomenon a chain of discrete occurrences. The fact that the canonized art is just about to be passed and the new art is just about to be canonized, the fact that it is a matter of constant movement is missing in this presentation. The use of the theory of music and of the binary concept of tonic and dominant provides us with an adequate description of the graduality, the almost fluidity of the evolutive process which has not been captured by the earlier models.

For the sake of clarity we have to introduce another term from the theory of music: the interval. It is the relation created by the difference of height between two tones. Now, the relation between the tonic and the dominant is constant, that of quinta. Thus the number of vibrations of the dominant is always higher than that of the tonic and the ratio between the smaller and the higher number is constant, namely- 2:3. Looking at the circle of quintas we can observe another interesting feature. The distance between the tonics of any two consecutive scales is quite big-- five tones. At the same time any two consecutive scales on this circle are the most similar in that they share half of the scale. The scales follow each other thus:

C major c d e f g a h c
 G major g a h c d e f # g
 D major d e f # g a h c # d
 A major a h c # d e f # g # a e.t.c

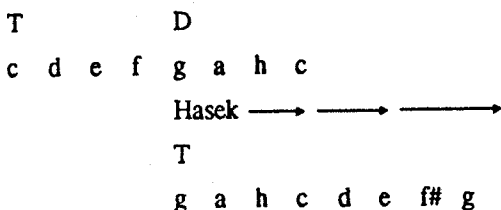
From this part of the circle of quintas we can see already that this model brings out nicely some basic aspects of the movement of literary evolution. We can see quite clearly what might be called "the altered return to the before last style". For example, the passage from the Renaissance style to the Neo-classic style of the 17th century in Italy with the Baroque in between is paralleled to the movement from C major to D major, via G major. Like the return from C major to D major, the

Neo-classicism is on the surface level a come-back to the Renaissance; at the same time it is basically different from it.

Returning to Hasek for the third time we shall examine the validity of the model by applying it to the concrete example of a rising style and its relation to the canonized style of the time. In his life time Hasek's literary style was anything but canonized, in fact, it seemed to be very distant from what at that time was the canonized high literary style. Hasek's short stories were however extremely popular not only among the general reading public but also among the editors of the various journals for which he used to write. His way of writing was part of the light journalistic canon, but not of the high literary one. As late as 1938 Rene Wellek, a prominent member of the Prague Linguistic Circle appraised Hasek's unfinished novel in the following words : "The book is not much of a work of art, as it is full of low humour..."¹³ The second part of Wellek's phrase is true to an extent. Hasek's artistic language comprises the Prague pub jargon, the armyjargon, jargons of various profession, but mainly journalistic jargon, and of course, low language which was not necessarily part of any of the jargons. Behind this low language many literary subtexts and transformations are hidden . Hasek's literary texts are strongly oriented to works of other authors and to foreign literature. At that time the canonized style demanded correct and quite high language. The orientation towards foreign literatures (as a part of poetic language and not as object of imitation) was relatively small. For one of the main objects of that literature was self-affirmation. Hasek's style was gradually recognized and became by 1947 (the year of the first scientific publication about Hasek) a legitimate object of scholarly study. His style became an integral part of the literary canon. His influence upon Czech literature can be discerned in the works of many important prose writers like Kundera, Hirabal, Kohout, Vaculik and Others.

The manner in which Hasek's style enters into the history of modern Czech prose and moves towards canonization can be represented as a tonic - dominant move:

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His style was quite distant from the tonic but already part of the literary system. One might say that it was the dominant of the time, the dynamic, the changing

element in the system. There is no doubt that Hasek's art possessed the "vitality" or "productivity" necessary for a rising style to assert itself.

Of course we cannot speak here of a constant ratio of 2:3 but there is a constant pattern of relationships between a canonized style and a rising style or between any tonic and any dominant. The various forms of this pattern demand a detail analysis and I shall have to leave it for a separate study.

In conclusion I would like to point out that I am aware of the fact that the choice of the tonic + dominant principle and of the circle of quintas might seem somewhat arbitrary as there are many other regular relations and kinships between tonalities and intervals. Each of the kinships between tonalities might possibly render some interesting insights into literary structures and processes. But for our purposes—the study of the two aspects of dominance in a constantly dynamic process—our choice seems to be the most apt one.

Notes and References

1. The concept of dominant was introduced into the theory of literature by J. Tynjanov in his *Problema stichotvornoqoo jazyka* [The Problem of verse Language], Leningrad 1924. Jakobson introduces a concept which by then was known also to the Prague scholars. Thus, for example, in an interview in *Rozpravy Aventina* [Aventin's discourse] Jan Mukarovsky uses the term dominant as a well established concept. *Rozpravy Aventina* VII, n.28, 1932.
2. Roman Jakobson, *The Dominant*; in: L. Matejka, K. Pomorska(eds), *Readings in Russian Poetics*. Michigan Slavic Publications, 8, Ann Arbor 1978, p.82.
3. See for ex. Felix Vodicka; *Pocatky krasne prozy novoceske* [The Beginnings of Modern Czech Belles-Letters] Prague 1948, or Lubomir Dolezel, *Narrative Modes in Czech Literature*, Toronto 1973, p.72, as well as many others.
4. *The Dominant*, p. 84
5. *Ibid.*p.86 (I do not quote word for word, but I am not changing Jakobson's claim)
6. *Ibid.*p.87.
7. Frantisek Picha, *Vseobecna hudebni nauka* [Theory of Music] Statni nakladatelstvi krasne literatury, hudby a umeni, Praha 1955,p.179.
8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problemy tvorcestva dostoevskogo* [Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics], Leningrad, 1929.

9. The importance of plays and games in "The Fortunes" is shown in : H. Arie Gaifman, Svej- the Homo Ludens, in L. Dolez, B. stolz, I.R. Titunik (eds), Studies in Honour of Ladislav Matejka, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1984, pp.1-16.
10. The stories appeared first separately in a humoristic journal called "Karikatury" and then in 1912 in a book form under the title *Dobry vojak Svej- k a jine podivne historky* [The Good Soldier Svej- k and other Strange Stories]
11. Jaroslav Hasek, *Dobry vojak Svej- k v zajeti* [The Good Soldier Svej- k in Capivity], Slovanske nak- ladatelstvi, Kyjev, 1917.
12. See for example Juri Tynanov, *O literaturnoj evolucii* [On literary evolution] in *Arkahaisty i novatory*, Leningard 1929, pp 30 - 47, or the earlier mentioned study by Felix Vodicka, *Pocatky krasne prozy novoceske*.
13. Rene Wellek, *Essays on Czech Litera- ture* ,Mouton & co., The Hague, 1963, p.41.