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THE AIMS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE RUSSIAN FORMALISTS IN THE YEARS 1913-1925

1. Introduction

The formalist groups which were active in Russia between the years 1913 and 1925 initiated the formalist method. This method has been shown to have had very significant consequences for the development of the humanities and to a certain degree also for the social sciences in the twentieth century. Although formalism was originally intended only as a method of research, it gave rise - even if indirectly and over many decades - to new conceptions in art and science as a whole. We will now examine the chief basic principles of Russian formalism as revealed in the sources of the period and we will look at its achievements from the vantage-point of more than a hundred years after it began.

2. The Situation in the Study of Literature in Russia before the Appearance of the Formalists

The main question which scholars of art and literature would ask before the appearance of the formalist method at the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century was, what is the aesthetic value of such-and-such an artistic or literary work? One of the chief scholars of literature in Russia, Alexander Veselovsky¹ asked questions in their works such as: what aesthetic elements does a work contain and how do they give rise to an aesthetic experience of the work discussed? Or, otherwise stated, how can one distinguish between the aesthetic elements in a work and those which are not aesthetic? How do all the aesthetic elements combine in such a way that finally a full, impressive aesthetic effect is produced?²

In order to try to answer these questions, the scholars in the period before formalism would analyze the content of a work in the belief that it expressed the most essential aspect of the inspiration of a writer or artist. At that time, the search for aesthetic principles was only at its beginnings, and these elements were described in an imprecise and empirical manner. Scholars would describe works of literature in general, emotive terms such as "beautiful", "picturesque", "impressive".

From the eighteenth century until the second decade of the twentieth, literature was seen as part of a "Total Art Works"³ which also included other arts such as music and painting. The scholars believed that the artist or writer had special faculties not given to the

ordinary man, by means of which he was able to rise above common humanity, and gained his creative inspiration through contact with some lofty superhuman spirit that is far above all that is commonplace and routine. This symbolist approach to art made works of literature into something beyond the comprehension of ordinary people, something mysterious, originating in other worlds, lofty, divine.

This approach was the result of a view of art and literature as being chiefly philosophical in nature. It led to the inclusion of a mass of concepts, ideas and criteria drawn from the study of philosophy to the study of the arts as well. Moreover, scholars of literature also needed a knowledge of other related areas - psychology, history, ethics, religion, mythology, music, logic. This method of study blurred distinctions and lacked any theoretical basis. A scholar in art or literature had to equip himself with concepts and knowledge drawn from areas in which he was not expert, and on the other hand did not possess the concepts or knowledge necessary to study art and literature themselves.

At the same time, the formalists felt that it was obvious that the study of literature required knowledge, concepts and criteria proper to itself and developed for its own sake. They thought that the study of literature should be a science like all the other sciences - philosophy, psychology, ethics, history- all of which have characteristics and methods of their own, and whose scholars have no need of scientific tools taken from other disciplines. The scholars of literature had used all the investigative tools with which they were acquainted in an unprofessional manner from other spheres, but they lacked tested, reliable and scientific tools of investigation of their own. The study of literature was not developed in a professional way until the formalist circle began their activities. Previously to that, it had not been analytical but primarily descriptive, and scholars used to describe the works they studied in a highly emotional style and in a way that was subjective, inexact and not based on any accepted principles.

According to Roman Jakobson⁴, before the appearance of the formalist method the scholars of literature were like policemen who, wishing to arrest a

¹ Alexander Nicolaevitch Veselovsky (1838-1906), scholar of Russian literature and folklore, used a comparative historical method in his work.

²Engelhardt, p. 9, and in this connection see also Zholkovsky, Scheglov, "On the Possibilities of Constructing a Structural Poetics", p. 56.

³"Total art" is a concept derived from the German concept of "Gesamtkunstwerk", frequently translated as

"ideal work of art", "synthesis of the arts", or "all-embracing art form", meaning a work of art that makes use of all or many art forms.

⁴ Roman Osipovich Jakobson (1896-1982) was a pioneer of formalism and structuralism, one of the most celebrated and influential linguists of the twentieth century. He proposed new methods for the investigation of poetry, music, visual arts, and cinema.

certain person, arrested all those around him and his friends and neighbors as well, and even the people passing by his house, and all were under suspicion to the same degree. In this way, said Jakobson, scholars of literature included in their studies everything that came to hand: psychology, psychoanalysis, politics, reflections, everyday occurrences, historical details. Instead of treating the study of literature as a science, there was a mishmash of scraps of information, concepts and approaches drawn from a variety of spheres, when those who drew upon them - the scholars of literature - lacked a basic knowledge of those areas. The scholars of literature disregarded the fact that in reality all these areas belonged to different disciplines⁵. As against to that, the scholars of psychology, history, sociology or philosophy do not borrow their knowledge or scientific tools from literature.

This situation existed in the study of the arts in general and the study of literature in particular in Russia until the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, but it changed as a result of the activities of the first formalist circles such as that of Roman Jakobson and Victor Shklovsky in Moscow in 1913.

The breakup of the symbolist camp in the year 1910-1911 also contributed to the rise of the formalists. Moreover, dissatisfaction with the poor achievements of the "unscientific" methods which had been prevalent for a long time in the study of literature, namely ones that relied on other disciplines instead of developing their own professional tools, prepared the way for the appearance and success of the Russian formalists from the year 1913 onwards. After that Russian Formalism paved the way for the appearance of Russian Structuralism as well.

3. Functional Language as against Literary Language

In 1913 a circle of scholars of literature started its activity in Moscow under the name "*Opoiaz*" - The Society for the Study of Poetic Language. The aim of the society can be seen in its name: "*Opoiaz*" is an abbreviation in Russian meaning "A Society for Poetic Language". Its activities began as a reaction to the symbolism, which had previously been dominant. The members of the society wanted first and foremost to break away from the related disciplines, which in their opinion had been added on to the study of literature. They also to make the study of literature a "science of art" corresponding to the German concept *Kunstwissenschaft*.⁶ They wished to develop the study of literature as a separate, independent phenomenon,

worthy of being studied as an entity in itself with its own characteristics and methods.

In order to do this, the formalists believed that one had first of all to learn about the concrete "material" under investigation - that is, literature, and especially poetry, which has a greater concentration than prose of aesthetic elements. They declared that language was to literature as stone or wood was to sculpture: the raw material from which the artist fashions his creation. Like sculptors who begin by learning the qualities of stone or wood, the scholars of literature have to learn the qualities of poetic language. Only then can they decide on the means suitable for literary research, and extract from poetic language rules and principles for developing methods of study of a scientific nature analogous to those used in the exact sciences.⁷

The smallest unit of poetic language is the word. In order to study the quality of the poetic word, one must first get rid of information or concepts added on to literary research from other sciences, or, that is to say, one must liberate it from the accretion of commentaries influenced by current ideas and concepts in philosophy, the study of religions, ideologies, sociology, history, etc. In their desire to "cleanse" the study of literature from these additions, the formalists avoided any reference to these things when they analyzed the poetic word as an artistic phenomenon.⁸ In accordance with the artistic theory of A.A. Potebnia,⁹ the formalists believed that the purpose of the artistic word was to express the inner world, the feelings and emotions of the writer. The writer does not as a rule include in his work precise references to his personal experiences, but presents them through verbal descriptions, artistic verbal pictures as it were, artistic images through which the message is conveyed that he wishes to transmit to his readers.

These artistic images not only exist in literature but also in other arts, and there too the artist depicts his experiences, feelings and ideas by their means, but in these other arts they are not verbal images but take forms characteristic of those particular arts. Each art has its own medium of communication, and in literature the medium is language.

The poetic word possesses aesthetic value if the writer has so intended. In other words, if the writer of the text so desires, he can shape the text in such a way that an aesthetic quality will also be part of it, although of course the writer's intention cannot ensure that its aesthetic value will be a high one. But even if the text is not on a high aesthetic level, at least the writer's desire to produce something of aesthetic value will be

⁵ Eikhenbaum, 1927, p.122 ff..

⁶*Kunstwissenschaft* is a German concept meaning the science of the fine arts of every kind, such as paint, music and literature. and their iconographic, iconological and material determination. It also examines and describes the cultural function of art in terms of its artistic and illustrative conditions as well as the creative process of artists.

⁷ Lotman, p. 92 ff.

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Eikhenbaum, 1927, p. 120 ff.; Engelgardt, pp. 64-65.

⁹Alexander Afanasievitch Potebnia (1835-1891), a scholar of literature and of the Russian and Ukrainian languages, was an innovator in literary research and the study of thought, poetry, folklore and ethnography. Here we refer to his novel idea that the meaning of a word is not fixed, but that each speaker gives it his own individual meaning. In formulating his theories, Potebnia was much influenced by the German philosophers.

discernible in the work. Artistic images can be a clear indication of the desire or lack of desire of the writer to produce an aesthetic text. In a text intended to be aesthetic there will be such images, and in a text where there is no such intention there will not be any such images, or only a minimal number. The content of the non-aesthetic text will be presented in a clear language, precise and to-the-point, with a minimum use of poetic or rhetorical figures of speech.

The existence of aesthetic value in a work depends on the intention of its creator, or in other words it is a matter of his treatment of the literary "raw material". This assertion assumes that such a "raw material" existed before it received the required aesthetic treatment, and that it existed as a fact independent of the creator. This "raw material" is language drawn from daily existence, which the writer works on. The study of this raw material requires help from the disciplines capable of providing information about it, and in the case of language the discipline in question is linguistics.

Accordingly, the formalists were drawn to linguistics and included in their investigations many matters relating to the linguistic aspect of works of literature, with the aim of studying the aesthetic treatment of the basic linguistic raw material which transformed it into a work of literature. Thus, they would compare the literary text to the original mundane, non-literary text, the text before it underwent aesthetic treatment. The main difference between the two, according to the formalists, was the objective, which the writer, who had shaped the text and worked on it, had set himself. He could use dry and precise language, and then one would get a non-literary text intended to convey information in the most accurate and reliable way possible, or he could use picturesque language and imagery, and then one would get a literary text not intended to convey information but to produce aesthetic and emotional impressions.¹⁰ To the degree that the creator of the text aims at something practical, communicative, informative, he will try to make everything he says correspond to the reality, or at any rate his words will seek to convey the reality and he will attempt to communicate his message in the most accurate way. In forming his text he will be sparing of figures of speech such as metaphors and metonyms which could blur the precision of what he is saying, and he will certainly avoid irony or sarcasm or anything which could lend itself to misinterpretation and thus lead his readers towards the opposite of the equivalent of the reality he really intended. In this informative and practical language the major principle is the exact significance of the word, of the language, and other aspects of the word - such as its morphological or phonetic aspects - which do not express its meaning, have no significance whatsoever.¹¹

The main task of informative language is to serve as a communicative medium and to transmit the required information in the most well-phrased, practical and succinct manner possible. Any intrusion of other factors, which could frustrate this objective - and these also include aesthetic principles - would be a defect and an unnecessary interference. For instance, instructions on medicines or legal contracts are only meant to correspond to their equivalent in the reality, and they have to be formulated in the most exact and meticulous way possible. They should not include things, which would distort their meaning, nor should they contain poetic figures of speech. On the other hand, if the writer of the text intended it to have a poetic character, the informative aspect becomes marginal and secondary, as an artistic creation is not meant to convey information but impressions, experiences, feelings. In an artistic text it is advisable, precisely, to include poetic figures of speech and imagery in order to embellish the text and make it more palatable to the reader. The absence of poetic figures of speech in a poetic text would be considered a defect, while their inclusion in an informative text would be regarded as a defect.

The formalists held that when we study a work of literature, we must study the factors such as imagery, which give the text its aesthetic quality. One must ask questions such as: what is there in the images which gives the text its aesthetic value? According to Jakobson¹², the scholar of literature must not study a work for its own sake but its "literariness": that is to say, he must look for the factors which turn the text into an artistic creation.

The formalists distinguished between practical language and artistic language in which the content is not of primary importance, but what is important is the poetic and rhetorical treatment. In artistic language there is an importance in the things which contribute to the aesthetic and emotive character of the text and which can be extraneous to the content of the text: e.g. acoustic effects, tone, rhyming, metre, syntax etc. These elements have special validity in an artistic text and can even become the decisive factors in it. For instance, there are poems with a negative and pessimistic content and a happy and joyful rhyme and metre. In such cases, the poetic treatment will overrule the content, and the poem will sound ironic and sarcastic. Moreover, it can happen that the poetic aspect of the poem is the only important aspect, and the reader does not trouble to investigate its contents and only relates to the poetic or phonetic aspects of the poem. We all know of poems or songs which are obscure and not clear to us at all, but whose poetic or phonetic aspects have so great an effect on us that we are moved to tears on hearing these poems or songs.

One of the enthusiastic advocates of this idea was Victor Shklovsky.¹³ In his article "On Poetry and

¹⁰ Tynianov, "The Literary Fact"; Eikhenbaum, 1927, pp. 121-122; Engelgardt, pp. 57, 58-59, 64-65.

¹¹ Zhirmunsky, Shklovsky, On Poetry and Sophisticated Language.

¹² Jakobson, pp. 71-73.

¹³ Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky (1893-1984) was a Russian and Soviet literary theorist, critic, and

Sophisticated Language,” first published in 1919, he developed the idea of the great importance of the phonetic and formal aspects of literary texts and laid great emphasis on the decisive importance of the general atmosphere evoked by the text. This applies mainly to poetry, but in prose also, in certain cases the importance of the formal aspect of the text is greater than that of its content. In this article, Shklovsky claimed that we need special words to fully express our feelings, emotions and sensations rather than a content, which does not truly reflect our non-intellectual universe. In fact, in Shklovsky’s opinion it would be worthwhile to create a special language, an alternative to the existing language, whose purpose would be to express the variety of our emotional universe. The words found in the existing language only relate to the content of things and do not adequately express emotions. Even the words which are apparently intended to express emotions do not do so as they should, as there is no connection between the words “love” and “hate” and their content, and one can even substitute one for the other and endow the word “hate” with the meaning of love, and vice versa. The word relating to love must express this emotional reality in its form as well, and perhaps its sound will be softer and more delicate, and the sound of the word relating to hatred will be harder and more grating. The phonetic form of the poetic word should express its meaning even at the expense of its lexicographical meaning. The word relating to love must express this emotion in a phonetic form even if it is not to be found in the dictionary at all. It is permissible for the writer to invent words, which express emotions and aesthetic values even if they have no significance in the accepted informative language. We all know of special nicknames, which lovers give each other, and it seems to them that these words express their feelings, even if in the dictionary these words have no significance or are even terms of insult.

In Shklovsky’s opinion, people use words and expressions with the feeling that using them or even the mere physical action of saying these words and idioms gives them satisfaction or expresses their feelings, without any connection with their lexicographical significance. People often make various sounds even when they have no meaning at all, only because of the fascination of these sounds or because they are gratifying to the mouths or ears of the speakers and listeners. Shklovsky supported his claim with an incident he witnessed when people very emotionally uttered prayers and sounds of various kinds from the Russian prayerbook, and even wept with enthusiasm and excitement, without having any understanding of the meaning of the words. The phonetic aspect of language has an independent and by no means insignificant value, which is especially pronounced in poetry.

writer. He is one of the founders of the Russian Formalism.

¹⁴On this, see Zholkovsky, Scheglov, “Structural Poetics is a Giving Birth Poetics”.

Shklovsky believed that language in literature is fashioned according to immanent rules and principles which are not intended to convey information or facilitate communication between people. Things are said in order to give vent to the emotions of the speaker and to give him positive experiences - satisfaction, pleasure or entertainment. The function of language as a conveyor of information and as an agent of communication is minimal in such cases¹⁴. In a work of literature and especially poetry there is hardly any importance in the content of what is said, but the general significance of the poem is conveyed by the way things are expressed.

According to Shklovsky, language in literature and especially poetry is created for its own sake and not for purposes of content, information or communication. He calls this “sophisticated language” and claims that through a methodical use of it one may write whole poems. There is the possibility that many readers would fail to understand such a poem because it would be expressed in the individual language of the poet. Yet such a poem would express the poet’s feelings in the most authentic way, and there is also the possibility that such a poem would be well-understood precisely by the members of the poet’s own circle, who would give the sounds of the poems meanings similar to those given to them by the poet because the poet and his audience come from the same social, cultural and religious background.

There are poets who complain that they are unable to express in words the feelings of their heart. The reason for this, according to Shklovsky, is that the accepted vocabulary is not sufficient to express the entire spiritual universe of the poet. Moreover, the existing words of the language are commonplace to its speakers, who use them every day. Even assuming hypothetically that the word “love” was able to express that emotion among the first humans that invented language, in the course of hundreds of years of use it became commonplace and clichéd and it was no longer able to express that strong and stormy emotion.

As against this, “sophisticated language” is able to express the power of the poet’s emotions, not only in his own eyes but also, perhaps, in those of the members of his cultural circle. Poetic language is not only a combination of images but also a certain phonetic combination, and this has a definite significance, especially in poetry.¹⁵

4. The “Dominant” in the Formation of Language: The Interrelationship of Form and Content

In the course of their discussions about “sophisticated” language, the formalists developed a new concept, namely, the “dominant”. A work of literature can be described as a conglomeration of primary linguistic materials, which are molded and worked on for emotive and aesthetic purposes as against the communicative and practical aims of an

¹⁵On this, see Engelhardt, p. 67; Eikhenbaum, 1927, pp. 123-125.

informative text. Every text belonging to these two kinds of writing is fashioned in accordance with a certain purpose that the writer strives towards in writing the text, and this was called its “dominant”. Thus, the dominant in the creation of artistic works is its aesthetic and emotional quality. When we assess the quality and character of the aesthetic dominant in works of literature, we need to be assisted by knowledge of aesthetics in other arts as well.

The formalists also re-examined the idea of the interrelationship of form and content. The symbolists, previous to the formalists, had already rejected the division between form and content and especially maintained the unity of form and content. Thus, according to the symbolists, each new content is concretized in a new form, and every new form creates a new content. The formalists took this idea a stage further. They opposed the idea that the form was a vessel into which the content was poured when one was suitable for the other. They held that in literature, unlike in informative and practical language, form had an independent significance and an aesthetic value of its own. The content only has the value of a subject, a motif or a certain image or protagonist: that is to say, it is one of the elements of the artistic work in the same way as style or composition. The importance of content in a work of literature as a whole is not greater than that of other elements, whether it is action or style in a narrative or rhyme or metre in poetry. Just as rhyme and metre have their own significance, so the form of a work of literature has a significance of its own.¹⁶

Since the form of a work of literature has its own significance, its form must be visible, carefully crafted and conspicuous. In this there is an essential difference between informative language and artistic language: in informative language, the language is only the medium of communication and has to convey a content, and this process must not be interfered with through the use of extravagant or exotic forms. That is to say, in informative language the form must be as inconspicuous and unobtrusive as possible and must be subordinated to the content. But this is not the case in artistic language in which the form of the language has the main role in fashioning the work as a whole. Here the form of the work must be innovative, striking, fascinating and capable of arousing interest. It is the form of a work of literature that fashions the work and not its content.¹⁷

¹⁶Zhirmunsky.

¹⁷ Shklovsky, “Art as Device”, and cf. also Zholkovsky, Scheglov, “Structural Poetics is a Giving Birth Poetics”.

¹⁸ “Motif” means here the most simple and basic unit in the construction of the plot. And cf. Shklovsky’s article *supra*, p.38.

¹⁹ Shklovsky, “Art as Device”.

²⁰ Akiba Ben Yosef, known also as Rabbi Akiba (50 CE?-136CE), was a leading Jewish scholar and sage, of the latter part of the first century and the beginning of the second century. He was a leading He is referred to

5. The Use of Artistic Devices in Constructing the Plot (*Sujet*)

In attempting to produce a work, which is as memorable and special, as possible, writers and poets use what the formalists called “artistic devices”. The addition of various devices to the linguistic “raw material” helps to transform the work into something “artistic”. In Shklovsky’s article, “The Relationship between Devices of Plot Construction and General Devices of Style”, written in 1919, the existence of artistic devices used in constructing a plot (*sujet*) was considered for the first time. This changed the traditional view of the plot as a stringing together and joining of different motifs.¹⁸ He noticed that in a work of literature the same motifs are repeated with a certain change of meaning and with different intensities. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in folk-tales.¹⁹ For instance, in fairytales, Goldilocks meets each of the three bears in turn and engages in the same dialogue with each one; each of the seven dwarfs has the same relationship with Snow-White, and she too passes through the same process of testing with three male figures until she is finally married to a prince; the dumb sister knits shirts for her twelve brothers who have had a spell cast upon them and been turned into ravens, and Little Red Riding-Hood asks the wolf exactly the same questions about the different measurements of his body. Here one can also mention Jesus’ twelve disciples who preceded the twelve thousand disciples of Rabbi Akiva²⁰ and who may have been modeled on the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob.

Likewise, in artistic literature the same elements are repeated with different shades of meaning and usually with increasing intensity. For instance, each of the four sons of Feodor Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s celebrated novel *Brothers Karamazov* one after the other develops a world-view, which largely corresponds to that of Rodion Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*.²¹ In Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, the heroine looks twice at the burning candle, the first time at the moment of the awakening of her burning desire, and the second time when she is brokenhearted at her separation from her lover.²² In the same way as this motif, that of being run over by a train occurs twice in this novel: the first time as a horrific vision of things-to-come and the second time as a judgement from heaven. One can add any number of examples to this list, and the conclusion to be drawn from all of them is that in the overwhelming majority of works motifs,

in the Talmud as Chief of the Sages”. He was executed by the Romans in the aftermath of the Bar-Kokhba revolt.

²¹ Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821-1881) was a Russian novelist and philosopher. His most acclaimed works include *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

²² Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1828-1910) was one of the greatest Russian authors of all times. Tolstoy is best known for the novels *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878).

subjects, points of style, descriptions and all the other elements of the work are repeated with a different degree of intensity and with changes of meaning. Moreover, a work in which no elements recurred would be considered insufficiently structured or elaborated, defective in its artistic treatment.²³

In Shklovsky's opinion, the whole plot of a work of literature is constructed out of repeated elements of this kind, with changes of order, of development, of presentation, of intensity and other changes. The whole work is a kind of chain on which the writer threads the repeated elements like coloured beads. From what we have said, it may be seen that the plot of a work of literature does not depend on content but is structural, a matter of the different constructions, which the writer builds out of a small number of basic elements and which are repeated again and again in his work in different variations. This structure of the work simultaneously satisfies two basic and contradictory requirements of the reader: on the one hand it is something with which the reader is familiar, but at the same time it is new and innovative. Moreover, a progressive structure of this kind enables the writer to build up dramatic tension in a progressive, consistent and credible manner, and in this way one of the major aims of the work is achieved.²⁴

The formalists enumerated a number of ways in which variations of the repeated motifs are created. For example, it can be a simple linear connection, the fragmentation of a single motif into a number of motifs connected in a parallel manner, the expansion or contraction of motifs through the insertion of dialogues and changes of times and places, etc., piling up one motif upon another a number of times, and so on. The plot ("suzhet") gains a significance which is not identical to that of the content ("fabula"), for the content can be contained in a single motif, but in the process of its construction a plot will be worked on, expanded and added to. A "plot" is essentially a matter of form, a phenomenon unique to the art of literature. This formalist structural approach emphasized the gap between the question of structure and the actual materials such as the content, the main characters and the philosophical and ideological ideas contained in the work.²⁵

This revolutionary concept of the plot as a structural element made up of artistic devices led to a further conclusion: in place of the former belief that "a new form reflects a new content", Shklovsky put forward another idea: artistic works are crystallized, judged and accepted on the basis of other, previous artistic works, and in comparison with them. The form

of an artistic work is through a close relationship with former artistic works. The new form does not appear in order to reflect a new content but in order to replace the former one which was antiquated, had become commonplace and no longer made an impression or was innovative. Like the genre and the plot, the use of devices helped to change the structural composition of the form, and by so doing contributed to refreshing and reviving it.²⁶

In the course of their activities, the formalists considered also the question of motivation. The writer interweaves structural devices into his work, one after the other, with a certain intention, which is the motivation. He attempts to produce a certain effect through constructions made up of devices. Shklovsky discussed the matter of motivation in his article on Lawrence Sterne's²⁷ *Tristram Shandy*.²⁸ In this novel various literary motifs and different kinds of constructions, such as repetitions or extensive descriptions of marginal details, are piled up next to each other and many devices are used without any purpose or explanation on the part of the author. The novel becomes a collection of essentially technical literary resources without any explanation of why the author does it, and as a result the work loses any significance. The work becomes a sort of ridiculous junkyard of meaningless literary constructions, creating an effect of parody and absurdity.²⁹

Shklovsky remarks on the way in which structural devices appear in this novel without any motivation on the author's part. That is to say, the reader is unable to understand the conceptual ideas behind the construction of the work, and the construction is made in a technical manner. The total absence of motivation turns the whole novel into a parody. The parody mocks the way in which works of literature and art are created, namely by an excessive and pointless use of various technical devices.

6. The Formalist Method and Historical Research

In the years 1923-1924, the question of changing forms came up among the formalists. They asked questions such as, what could the history of literature be in terms of the development of literary forms? How does it happen that one genre is expelled from the centre of the literary "map" and ceases to be popular, and its place is taken by another genre, which had not previously been accepted or popular? The search for the answer to these questions required relating to the question of literary forms not only from the present point of view but also from the point of view of historical development. As a result, formalism developed a dual perspective: theoretical research

²³ Shklovsky, "Art as Device".

²⁴ Shklovsky, "Art as Device".

²⁵ Eikhenbaum, 1927, p. 131 ff., and see also Zholkovsky and Scheglov, "Description of the Expression Device of Verbiage".

²⁶ Shklovsky, "The Relationship between Plot Construction and General Devices of Style".

²⁷ Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) was an Irish-born English novelist and humorist, author of *Tristram*

Shandy (1759-1767), an early novel in which story is subordinate to the free associations and digressions of its narrator.

²⁸ *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, experimental novel by Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), published in nine volumes from 1759 to 1767.

²⁹ Shklovsky, "The Novel as Parody: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*".

dealing with theoretical matters and historical research dealing with the development of literary forms.

The juxtaposition of these two perspectives raised new questions. The initial aim of the formalists was to examine and document artistic devices and constructions through an analysis of various literary works from different cultures and periods, and on the basis of the findings to establish the universal and generally applicable character of these devices. And if in view of the historical perspective the need arose to examine the task of each device and its contribution to the work of literature in which it was used, there was a similar need to examine each device in the context of the literature of the time. Literary development was now seen in terms of the development of devices and artistic structural forms.

The development of literature, including that of devices and forms, was not viewed as a legacy from the past to the present but as a break with the past and a rebellion against it. According to the formalists, each new literary form is first and foremost the result of a new writer's struggle against the old literary tradition; it is a protest against the things that, according to the accepted and confining tradition, are expected of him.³⁰ In every period in which there was literary activity, there existed side by side a number of schools of literature, and if one of them became dominant and authoritative and gave the direction, the others became marginal on the "literary map". Younger schools, which were initially marginal, began to encroach upon the leading school with the aim of taking its place in the centre of the "literary map". The "defeated" school did not disappear from the "map" but was only cast to one side and was liable to "recover" and return to the centre of literary activity. To the degree that some literary form came back into use, it was a revival with an absorption of influences from the other literary schools and forms which were at their peak when it was marginal. Thus, in its second rise to the centre of the "literary map", it was different - simultaneously old and new, familiar and surprising at one and the same time - and that was one of the reasons for its success with readers.

In their historical literary research, the formalists were looking for fixed phenomena, motifs that recurred twice or more in history, and disregarded forms that were incidental or once-only. Their aim was to discern the historical laws of literature and decide on their universal application. In this they in practice denied the possibility of an individual and original literary production and declared that in their opinion a work of literature was a standardized phenomenon.

In the second half of the nineteen-twenties, the Society for the Study of Poetic Language ("*Opoiiaz*") became less active. In the nineteen-thirties, the Soviet authorities began a campaign of criticism and defamation of the society and its members. The campaign was due, among other things, to the formalists' disregard of ideological matters at a time

when the Soviet line was that art itself and consequently the study of art and literature had to promote ideological interests, which meant those of communism. Many members of the society were harmed because of their scholarly activities in the period of the great Stalinist terror which reached its peak from the mid nineteen-thirties onwards.

7. The Achievements of the Formalist Method

The formalist method was operative in Russia for twelve years, from 1913 to 1925, and in this period effected revolutionary changes, which may be summarized as follows:

1. From their initial position of contrasting functional language and poetic language, the formalists proceeded to the second stage: distinguishing between the aim of functional language, which is communication, and that of poetic language, which is the production of artistic effects.

2. From a concept of form in which each new form appeared to embody a new content, the formalists proceeded to a new concept - the artistic structural device - and to an investigation of the possible uses of the device, one of which was to create parody in literature.

3. In contrast to the former understanding of the plot ("*sujet*") as a combination of certain elements, such as motifs, the formalists had a new understanding of the plot as a structural concept in which the "dominant" - the intention of the author - determines its final form.

4. The formalists believed that devices also played a role in the chronological sphere - the history of literature - and hence in the history of the development of forms, or, in other words, the study of the history of literature becomes the study of the development of forms.

8. Postscript: a Century after the Formalism

Looking at the formalist school in Russia nearly a century after it began, we can only be surprised at the naïvety and revolutionary boldness of their methods of research. Of course formalism looks naïve in the perspective of a hundred years of very intensive research in the humanities.

But perhaps the achievements of the formalists are even more striking, being almost beyond the scope of the imagination. The formalist method laid the groundwork for many other schools and methods on which research in the humanities is based today, and this is largely true in the social sciences as well. The formalists paved the way for the brilliant work of Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Fairy Tale*³¹, and laid the basis for the Russian structuralist school and for the Russo-German structuralist-linguistic school.

Both the work of Propp and the two schools we have mentioned gave birth to offspring and further offspring, on whom today's scholarship is based. For instance, Russian structuralism contributed much to the French structuralism of the school of Claude Lévi-Strauss³², and, as a result, to American structuralism as

³⁰ Tynianov, "The Literary Fact".

³¹ See: Propp.

well. American structuralism gave rise to reactions in the form of Deconstruction and to a certain degree also of modernism and postmodernism, and also influenced the development of Hermeneutics. Russian structuralism also left its mark on the development of twentieth-century psychology, and its influence is particularly noticeable in the contribution of Jean Piaget³³.

But perhaps more than Russian formalism left its mark on the development of the humanities and social sciences in the twentieth century, it made a significant contribution to the existence of an outstanding scientific atmosphere through its scientific approach to the humanities and especially to research in literature and linguistics which were previously regarded as unworthy of scientific investigation.

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Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) was a French anthropologist and ethnologist whose work was key in the development of the theory of structuralism and structural anthropology.

³³Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss psychologist known for his works on child development.