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Introduction

Formalism, and especially Russian Formalism, was more interested in analysis of form, the structure of a text and its use of language, than in the content. Formalists wanted to establish a scientific basis for the study of literature. The credo of the early Russian Formalists was an extreme one: they believed that the human emotions and ideas expressed in a work of literature were of secondary concern and provided the context only for the implementation of literary devices. Unlike the New Criticism in America, they were not interested in the cultural and moral significance of literature, but wished to explore how various literary devices produced certain aesthetic effects.

Russian formalism is distinctive for its emphasis on the functional role of literary devices and its original conception of literary history. **Russian** Formalists advocated a "scientific" method for studying poetic language, to the exclusion of traditional psychological and cultural-historical approaches.

• **Background**

Both American and Russian Formalists were concerned to examine what was specifically literary about a text. AS has been noted in the Introduction to the present volume, defining 'literariness 'has proved to be virtually impossible, both because its attributes are not unique and because statements which are true about all literary works are not, on the whole, very useful. Early Formalism developed quite independently in America and Russia but it was Russian Formalism,which flourished during the pre- and post-revolutionary period in Russia, that had the more far-reaching effects.

• **Beginning**

Russian formalism was a school of literary criticism in Russia from the 1910s to the 1930s. It includes the work of a number of highly influential Russian and Soviet scholars such as Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov, Vladimir Propp, Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky, Grigory Gukovsky who revolutionised literary criticism between 1914 and the 1930s by establishing the specificity and autonomy of poetic language and literature. Russian formalism exerted a major influence on thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman, and on structuralism as a whole. The movement's members had a relevant influence on modern literary criticism, as it developed in the structuralist and post-structuralist periods. Under Stalin it became a pejorative term for elitist art.

Russian formalism was a diverse movement, producing no unified doctrine, and no consensus amongst its proponents on a central aim to their endeavours. In fact,

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"Russian Formalism" describes two distinct movements:
the OPOJAZ (*Obshchestvo Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Yazyka*, Society for the Study of Poetic Language) in St. Petersburg and the Moscow Linguistic Circle
 Therefore, it is more precise to refer to the "Russian Formalists", rather than to use the more encompassing and abstract term of "Formalism".
The term "formalism" was first used by the adversaries of the movement, and as such it conveys a meaning explicitly rejected by the Formalists themselves. In the words of one of the foremost Formalists, Boris Eichenbaum: "It is difficult to recall who coined this name, but it was not a very felicitous coinage. It might have been convenient as a simplified battle cry but it fails, as an objective term, to delimit the activities of the "Society for the Study of Poetic Language."

- **Ideas**

Russian formalism is distinctive for its emphasis on the functional role of literary devices and its original conception of literary history. Russian Formalists advocated a "scientific" method for studying poetic language, to the exclusion of traditional psychological and cultural-historical approaches. As Erlich points out, "It was intent upon delimiting literary scholarship from contiguous disciplines such as psychology, sociology, intellectual history, and the list theoreticians focused on the 'distinguishing features' of literature, on the artistic devices peculiar to imaginative writing" (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia* 1101).

Two general principles underlie the Formalist study of literature: first, literature itself, or rather, those of its features that distinguish it from other human activities, must constitute the object of inquiry of literary theory; second, "literary facts" have to be prioritized over the metaphysical commitments of literary criticism, whether philosophical, aesthetic or psychological (Steiner, "Russian Formalism" 16). To achieve these objectives several models were developed.

The formalists agreed on the autonomous nature of poetic language and its specificity as an object of study for literary criticism. Their main endeavor consisted in defining a set of properties specific to poetic language, be it poetry or prose, recognizable by their "artfulness" and consequently analyzing them as such.

• **Three Phases**
It has been argued that there are three distinct phases in the development of Russian Formalism which can be characterised by three metaphors. The first phase regarded literature as a kind of machine with various devices and functioning parts; the second phase considered it to be more like an 'organism'; and the third phase

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saw literary texts as 'systems.' Particularly influential in the early phase of Russian Formalism was Viktor Shklovsky.

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• **Major Theorists**
• **Viktor Shklovsky.**

Shklovsky was the leading light in a group of literary critics based in St Petersburg and known as 'Opayaz'.They encouraged experimental literature and art.Shklovsky's essay Art as Technique, published in 1917, served as a manifesto for the group.In this essay several concepts were formulated which are crucial to understanding the philosophical premises of Russian Formalism.The first of these is 'habitualisation. 'This refers to the fact that,as we become familiar with things, we no longer really perceive them:'…as perception becomes habitual,it becomes automatic. Related to this idea is what Shklovsky called the 'algebraic 'method of thought.Through 'habitualisation'we come to think of things in only the most general way and conceive of them only in ways akin to algebraic symbols. And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone story. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. 'He then proceeds to demonstrate how some great writers (Tolstoy and Pushkin) have consciously used the technique of 'defamiliarisation. 'It is also in this essay that we find the famous formulation which makes clear the priorities of Russian Formalist aesthetics: 'the object is not important.'

Theories of Narrative

Theories of narrative featured prominently in Russian Formalist thought, especially distinctions between 'story' and 'plot. This was not, of course, new in the theory of literature. Th distinction goes back at least to Aristotle, for whom plot (mythos) or 'the arrangement of the incidents' was clearly different to the story on which it was based. The time sequence of events in a Greek tragedy,for example,is clearly different to that of the events it relates.

• **Boris Tomas**

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- Boris Tomashevski developed further a concept that Shklovsky had first formulated in his essay on the English author Lawrence Sterne's Tristram Shandy. The basic material of the story was termed fabula. Tomashevski contrasted this with suzhet, the story as it is actually told. One fabula can provide material for many suzhet, a notion which was taken up by later formalists and was also to provide a link with structuralism. These formalist distinctions are not essentially a reformulation of Aristotelian concepts because the Russian Formalists conceived the effects and purposes of suzhet differently to those of Aristotle's mythos. For Aristotle, plot had to be plausible, have a degree of inevitability and provide insight into the human condition. For the Russian Formalists, on the other hand,the function of plot was to defamiliarise what we are observing, to make us aware of the artificiality of the process of literary creation.

The Russian Formalists also had an idiosyncratic notion of 'motivation', using the concept not with the meaning of 'intention, or purpose', but in relation to the structural concept of a 'motif'.Tomashevski was the one to elucidate the distinction. It is a unit of construction: the smallest unit of a plot, a single statement, or action, for example.Tomashevski distinguished between 'bound' and 'free' motifs. A 'bound' motif is necessitated by the original story (for example, the pact with Mephistopheles in Goethe's Faust) but a 'free' motif is not necessary in the same way. It is part of the artifice of the work (for example, Goethe's decision to set the scene with a 'Prologue in Heaven' at the beginning of his play).The term 'motif' came about because the Russian Formalists perceived the ideas and themes of a work as secondary, as motivations (in the more usual sense) for the literary devices. They argued that a constant awareness of the distinction between 'bound' and 'free' motifs is necessary because, when an unfamiliar device or 'free' motif is included, it serves for a while to make us aware of the artificiality of the text but eventually it too becomes familiar or conventional. For example,when playing with the time sequence became the norm, both in literature and in the cinema, then that device could no longer have a defamiliarising effect.

- **The Bakhtin School**

The attribution of several important works to Mikhail Bakhtin is disputed. Three theorists worked closely together and precise attribution may never be obtained. The three associates were Mikhail Bakhtin, Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Volosinov.As a student and teacher in the 1920s, Bakhtin began to take a critical stance against Russian Formalism but the ideas of the three may be considered

formalist in their interest in the linguistic structure of literary works.Also,the three men believed in the social nature of language and reveal clear influence of Marxist thought. But they differed from orthodox Marxists in their assumptions about the relationship between language and ideology.For them,ideology is not a reflex of socio-economic conditions but is conditioned by the medium through which it manifests itself: language. And language is a material reality.The meanings of words change according to the different social and historical situations in which they are used. Multiple meanings are in fact the normal condition of language ('heteroglossia').The reflection of social interaction (in the novel, for instance) reveals this 'heteroglossia'.The novel which embodies a single authorial voice is, in fact, a distortion of natural language, imposing unity of vision where naturally there is none.The monologue has always been an unnatural genre.

• **Jan Mukar˘ovsky´**

Jan Mukar˘ovsky´ is usually categorised among the structuralists but his roots are in Russian Formalist thought and he is certainly a significant transitional figure. He was a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle, founded in 1926. He developed Shklovsky's concept of 'defamiliarisation' more systematically, using the term 'foregrounding' instead. He defines this as 'the aesthetically intentional distortion of the literary components'. For Mukar˘ovsky´, 'foregrounding' has the effect of 'automatizing' other aspects of the text in close proximity to it.That is to say, it makes us no longer sensitive to them.

Mukar˘ovsky´, unlike earlier Russian Formalists, did not consider the object, of which a literary work was a treatment, to be of secondary interest. Indeed, he emphasized the dynamic tension between literature and society in the creation of literature. He argued also that an object can have several functions. Often the aesthetic function is just one of many.A simple and obvious example is that a church can be both a place of worship and a work of art.A speech can be political or legal rhetoric and also a work of art. (Arguably, this is the case with many of Winston Churchill's and certainly it is so with several in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.

- **Roman Jakobson**
  Roman Jakobson was a bridge between Russian Formalism and Structuralism. He was a founder member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and all his writings reveal the centrality of linguistic theory in his thought and especially the influence of Saussure (see chapter 3). He was also an

enthusiastic supporter of experimental poets. In 1920, he moved to Czechoslovakia and helped to found the influential Prague Linguistic Circle.With the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, he left the country and finally settled in the USA in 1941.

Apart from his linguistic research Jakobson gained respect for his very precise linguistic analyses of classic works of literature. He and Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist, were also colleagues at the New School of Social Research in New York from 1941.They collaborated on an analysis of Baudelaire's poem Les Chats, which not only became famous as a typical structuralist analysis but also drew much negative criticism. Jakobson attempted the daunting task of trying to define 'literariness' in linguistic terms. His paper Linguistics and Poetics,delivered at a conference in 1958 and published as Style in Language in 1960, provides the clearest expression of his ideas on the topic.Even when we transpose a work of literature, he argues, from one medium to another (eg a novel into a film, an epic into a comic book) certain structural features are preserved, 'despite the disappearance of their verbal shape'. Many features of a work are not limited to the language in which it is expressed.The 'truth value'of a work,for example,or its significance as a myth are obviously 'extralinguistic entities'. Such aspects 'exceed the bounds of poetics and of linguistics in general'.

It would seem that Jakobson is here going beyond a purely formalist approach but, while revealing his awareness of such dimensions, he is firm in restricting himself to the purely linguistic:'…no manifesto, foisting a critic's own tastes and opinions on creative literature, may act as substitute for an objective scholarly analysis of verbal art.' Another idea of his which proved to be especially relevant to modern literary theory was the postulation of two fundamental poles of organising discourse that can be traced in every kind of cultural product: metaphor and metonymy.This idea was developed as a result of investigating the mental disorder of aphasia (expounded at length in Fundamentals of Language, 1956, which he published together with Morris Halle). In the sentence 'The ship crossed the sea', the sentence can be made metaphorical by selecting a different verb,for example by comparing the motion of the ship to that of a plough ('The ship ploughed the sea'). Metonymy is the use of an attribute of something to suggest the whole thing. For example, deepness can suggest the sea ('The ship crossed the deep'). Metaphor depends on the combination of things not

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necessarily associated or contiguous, whereas metonymy utilises closely associated attributes.

This led Jakobson to make some interesting characterizations of different literary schools according to their positions on the metaphor-metonymy axis: 'The primacy of the metaphoric process in the literary schools of romanticism and symbolism has been repeatedly acknowledged, but it is still insufficiently realized that it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so-called "realistic" trend, which belongs to an intermediary stage between the decline of romanticism and the rise of symbolism and is opposed to both.'

Jakobson developed the concepts of 'defamiliarisation' and 'foregrounding' further to characterize whole schools of critical and literary thought. In the dynamic system of a work of literature elements are structured in relation to each other as foreground and background. A foregrounded element was referred to by the later Russian Formalists as 'the dominant. 'Jakobson regarded 'the dominant 'as one of the most important late formalist concepts. He defined it as 'the focusing component of a work of art; it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components'. Literary forms change and develop as a result of a 'shifting dominant'. He believed that the literary theory (or poetics) of a particular period might be governed by a 'dominant' which derives from a non-literary system. For example, the theory of Renaissance poetry was derived from the visual arts and that of Realism from verbal art. The basic elements of the system do not change (plot, diction, syntax etc) but the functions of the elements do.

• **Practical Application**

Russian formalists saw poetry as something that can be mechanically taken in order to reveal devices that make it up. Russian formalists saw poetry as something that can be mechanically taken in order to reveal devices that make it up. The formalists believed that poetry was made up of several different devices purposely placed to increase length of perception. As Erlich points out, " It was intent upon delimiting literary scholarship from contiguous disciplines such as psychology, sociology, intellectual history, and the list theoreticians focused on the 'distinguishing features' of literature, on the artistic devices peculiar to imaginative writing" (Shlovsky believed that in life we take general signs for granted, And he

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believed that poetic language played with form and content to make the receiver think more purposely about what they were reading. Shlovskys argument, briefly stated, "is that the habitual way of thinking is to make the unfamiliar as easily digestible as possible. Normally our perceptions are "automatic," which is another way of saying that they are minimal" (Russian formalist criticism four essays page 4).

Thus according to Russian formalism "The role of art in general is to remove this veil of familiarity , to re-alert us to the objects , ideas and events which no longer make an impression (class handout , part one, formal introduction). Wordsworth's 'The thorn' can be seen to draw on several Russian formalist theories. Firstly, throughout the poem there are several uses of imagery. In the first stanza when describing the thorn, it is said to be 'old', 'grey' with 'thorny points' and 'knotted joints'. This is just a brief example of imagery used in poem.

It seems to set the tone very early on by giving the reader a dreary mental image. Alexander Potebnya believed that imagery was key to the function of poetry. He claimed that it was a way of thinking in images and once said "without imagery there is no art and in particular no poetry" (Russian formalist criticism four essays page 5). Potebnya writes "Poetry, as well as prose, is first and foremost a special way of thinking and knowing – thinking in images" (Russian formalist criticism four essays page 4).

The poem contains certain conventional symbols, such as the semi- colon, colon commas and dashes. The symbols create gaps in the poem and seem to be a device in which the reader is prompted to pause and think of whats been said. For example-again in the first stanza, the opening half (of first stanza) is describing the 'old' thorn. It seems that the content of this section allows the poem to flow at moderate pace, I. e. words such as 'grey' and 'say 'allow for a slower pace in the way that they sound. This slow pace can be linked to the idea of the thorn being old and weary.

The use of the semi-colon seems to break up the stanza by giving it a more stressed and roughened rhythm, for example the thorn is being described in a more unpleasant way. Words such as 'knotted' (knot-ted) and 'wretched' (wretch-ed) give a more aggressive tone. This could be seen as nature's aggressive and more dangerous side. The use of metaphor is very apparent in the poem. A formalistic approach would suggest that metaphor is a device used in poetic language to demystify, thus stimulating and provoking thought and perception.

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An example of metaphor used in 'The thon' reads; 'Up from the earth these mosses creep, And this poor thorn! They clasp it round so close; you'd say that they were bent with plain and manifest intent, To drag it to the ground'. To look at this extract in a metaphorical sense, it could be suggested that the thorn is the baby and the mosses are representing Martha or the evils in the world killing and burying the baby. This is an example of defamiliarisation, with the use of metaphor making understanding more complicated.

Shlovsky defines a field of literary activity in which linguistically based devices (such as metaphor and metonymy) create an experience more complex and possibly less coherent, than the examination of images can suggest. (Contemporary literary criticism, second edition page 54). There are a few examples were it would seem the narrator is talking to or addressing the reader personally. For example the eleventh stanza (first line) reads "I'll give you the best help I can:" That's followed by instructions to get to the "dreary mountain top".

A few lines on it goes on to tell of her situation with 'Stephen Hill' and wedding plans etc, this seems to me to be purposely done to mimic gossiping (locals who say she killed her baby) – gossiping that is within the content of the poem. The third stanza has an unexpected change how the narrator is talking to the reader. The narrator is describing a muddy pond of water, using cold and windy descriptions as part of the imagery. Then the last two lines of the stanza read "I've measured it from side to side: 'tis three feet long, and two feet wide".

This seems like an odd digression, with the narrator clearly going off the point of the story. This is maybe done as a bit of humour to knock the reader off track, which links back to delaying of meaning. Uncanny I am going to look at aspects The uncanny within the 'The thorn'. The uncanny has to do with a sense of strangeness, mystery or eeriness. More particular it concerns a sense of unfamiliarity which appears at the very heart of the familiar, or else a sense of familiarity which appears at the heart of the unfamiliar (class handout, The uncanny page 36).

The Uncanny is a Freudian concept, it often creates cognitive dissonance within the experiencing subject due to the paradoxical nature of being attracted to, yet repulsed by an object at the same time. This cognitive dissonance often leads to an outright rejection of the object, as one would rather reject than rationalize () There are seemingly several aspects of Wordsworth 'The thorn' that fall into aspects of the uncanny. The first example I am going to extract from the poem is in the fifth stanza.

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The line that reads "is like an infant's grave in size". This is immediately linked to death, but how it ties into the uncanny is the unthinkable notion of it being a Childs grave. Another example of death is on stanza twelve "And if 'twas born alive or dead", linked to the notion 'all that lives must die'. There are references to animism within the content, in the sixteenth stanza, "were voices of the dead". This could be seen as Martha's dead baby playing her conscience. Also in the same stanza on the line that says "cries coming from the mountain – head", this is linked to Anthropomorphism.

This because the mountain is said to be crying also there is the idea within the content of the mountain having a human form (head). The line that reads "And for the little infants bones with spades they would have sought", this has an eerie feel about it. The idea of infant's bones would fall into the uncanny category. For example the idea of infant is familiar to you or I but when you pair the idea of infant with bones it becomes unfamiliar. Reader response Wordsworth's the thorn is a poem that I particularly enjoyed. I think it is an easy read in terms of understanding what it's about.

I do think that it has some contradictory elements within it that make it an appealing read. Going back to first stanza where it describes the thorn bush as "old and grey" then describes it as "not higher than a two years child". I think this is saying that the thorn is old but then likening it to something that is young. On the forth stanza the first line is says "and close beside this aged thorn, there is a fresh and lovely sight. Again this is the concept of old and young together. Further more the woman of the story, Martha Ray is seen as a bad person who is described as "wretched" early on in the poem.

But as the story progresses and the reader becomes more familiar with Martha Ray(you get an insight into the Martha's past- in particular her partner ran off with another woman), a shift in the narrators thoughts towards Martha becomes more sympathetic –"Poor Martha! On that woful day A cruel, cruel fire, they say, into her bones was sent". The use of nature to set the scene is a really good aspect of the poem, in the third stanza the weather is described as "stormy winter cloud"; this is fitting imagery that I think mirrors the emotion that comes from the issue of a Childs death.

I think that the poem is intending to reflect society (which I think is evident now a days). I believe that Wordsworth wanted to show how cruel society can be. No one knows how Martha lost her baby but there are all gossiping and speculating that she has indeed killed her baby. As a result Martha has ended up on the fringe of

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society. She mourns alone, no one comforts her. Instead, they speculate about what might have happened to the child. – "but some will say She hanged her baby on the tree, Some say she drowned it in the pond".

In this poem he appears to be illustrating not only a mother's sorrow at losing her child, but also the often unsympathetic nature of society. Overall I do think that this poem is entertaining and has a very good morale to it. An interesting aspect of the poem is the poem starts with describing the thorn and it ends with thorn. To start with, the thorn is just seen as a thorn. As the story is unfolding the reader begins to see different ways in which the thorn is described, the thorn seems to come alive and takes on new meaning within the narrative.

Towards the end of the poem the thorn seems to go back to becoming just a thorn in the ground, "with heavy tufts of moss".

• **Conclusion**
Russian formalism is distinctive for its emphasis on the functional role of literary devices and its original conception of literary history. Russian Formalists advocated a "scientific" method for studying poetic language, to the exclusion of traditional psychological and cultural-historical approaches.