

## **When a Russian Formalist meets his individual history**

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**Abstract.** The present paper is devoted to the relation between changing historical identity of Russian Formalists in the second half of the 1920s and their individual evolution — as writers, members of society, figures of culture. Formalists with their aggressive inclination to modernity are opposed here to structuralists, the bearers of a conservative, traditional ideology (relating to the idea of Revolution). It could be explained by the specific “*romantic*” identity of Russian Formalists whose purpose was to appropriate cultural values renamed and renewed by their revolutionary theory. As a revolutionary ideology, formalism was imported from the West. But the Stalinist “Renaissance” made the idea of Revolution both in mind and society senseless at the end of the 1920s. That is why Russian Formalism lost its mainstream positions and began to work out a new, adapted form of intellectual resistance (private life, domestic literature) in the next decade.

**Rhetorical temptation.** Of course, the given title is vulnerable to criticism. First of all, it traditionally discriminates against women in Russian literary theory, because the very usage of the grammatical masculine is repressive and ignorant of the names of Lydia Ginzburg or Olga Freidenberg. But at the same time we have to admit that Russian Formalism as a kind of avant-garde theory hardened by revolution had a masculine consciousness par excellence. We cannot find any feminine traits in either early machine-oriented or in late organism-inspired formalism<sup>1</sup>. And we have not been surprised by the

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<sup>1</sup> Being oriented towards a scientific utopia, the Russian Formalist School functioned as a surrogate of literary practice. From the diachronical standpoint the development of Russian Formalism as a trend of knowledge passed through three stages of subject understanding — *machine*, *system*, *organism*. These basic

fact that the formalists treated an obviously feminine notion of “history” as gentlemen. It means history as oppressed and glorified, as a most indispensable, but also most uncomfortable and uncertain theoretical notion. The early formalism rejects history, the latest returns and takes its oath. Remembering the polemic article of Nikolay Chernyshevsky “Russian *man* on rendez-vous”<sup>2</sup> devoted to the weakness of Russian noble intelligentsia, one can signify my theoretical issue as “Le formaliste Russe au rendez-vous avec l’histoire”, also devoted to formalist weakness “on the trial” (in specified historical terms of Arnold Toynbee<sup>3</sup>).

**Toward the subject.** The present notes do not claim to comprehend the topic, which could be conventionally called as “Russian Formalism and its relation to History”. Here I emphasize a single aspect of this field and to specify the issue of scholarship as a form of intellectual management, a powerful practice oriented to explanation of things. Of course, Formalists were the first in Russian scholarship who demonstrated a possibility to analyze literature in a strong and consistent way; their methods remain very influential and productive for the 20th century philology. But they also constructed a kind of community that had its own ideology, policy, and, last but not least, history. Their way in literature and scholarship is a fascinating subject itself. Using the term “scholarship” I deliberately separate it from “science” although formalists just aspired to turn literary theory and history into a scientific discipline. But both “science” and “scholarship” have been shaping a specific type of secular mentality inherent in the Enlightenment (in terms of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer) in which Person, or active subject, assimilates cognition as alienation (in Marxist terms, *Verfremdung*). Science and scholarship are ways of organizing and managing social space, especially if

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metaphors while working as theoretical mediums are described and interpreted in Steiner 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis is mine — *J. L.*

<sup>3</sup> Trial of history blames European civilization for inability to comprehend its *widest historical horizon*. The European intellect is quietly satisfied with *narrow historical vision*, which could be compared with horse’s sight between its blinkers (Toynbee 1948: 150, *passim*). Unlike unfortunate Europeans Russian Formalists were active participants in this judicial process, who became its victims very soon. They successfully described a kind of historical logic that means suicidal results to them. Perhaps this is the destiny of any judge.

we talk about humanities, a sphere of word production. Researchers have been affirming this view on formalist doctrine during the last two decades, although Pavel Medvedev, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, already in 1928 performed an original ideological deconstruction of the formalist doctrine as a social phenomenon. The elaboration began with a gradual slowing down of the structuralist project, when the idea of social determination of the literary and cultural process became leading again. Here I have to emphasize that the question lies in the Russian version of structuralism, which is quite different from its Western namesake. Whereas structuralism was most fashionable in scholarship, the legacy of formalism was interpreted otherwise.

**The Formalist Riot.** Traditional description of formalism in terms of “pure” poetics has resulted in an aberration of the historical picture. Supporters of structuralist views ascribed to Formalism the role of a slightly mistaken predecessor, which prepared a birth of “the only scientific method” in humanities (that is the way how structuralism positioned itself).<sup>4</sup> But the declared independence from world outlook of the structuralist method was no more than inevitable abstraction. Being generalized it could be easily converted into indifference to the subject. The subject is the only bearer of the method that is one of the functions of cultural consciousness. The border of historical reflection is an invisible point where structuralist competence of synchronic description is over. This border presupposes attention to the category of “self” in principle ignored by structuralists. Consequently, their personal view on Formalism as a school of scholarship was shaped by their implicit ideology. Structural theorists were demonstratively distant from politics; they formed a more or less silent opposition to the ruling power and followed a mission preservation of true cultural values. Speaking in very rough terms, Formalism was oriented to breaking the rules of the cultural tradition and towards coordination with the Revolution in its general reorganizing sense<sup>5</sup>. Russian

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<sup>4</sup> One can find the symptomatic kind of Soviet structuralist discourse in the Introduction of Lotman 1968. Oppositely, Vyacheslav Ivanov, who has always been “the only consistent semiotician” (defined by Alexander Pyatigorsky) calls members of OPOYAZ “our forerunners” (Ivanov 1991: 11). There is no reason to develop the thought that “semiotics” is not a synonym of “structuralism”, and vice versa.

<sup>5</sup> For example, see the memoirs of Viktor Shklovsky: in particular, the first chapter titled “Revolution and front” in Shklovsky 1970.

structuralists could not be nice to the Revolution and its aftermath, but they could perceive its contemporaries in the corresponding context. That is the way they did not follow.

While formalists were very sensitive to modernity, structuralists intended to shun any its manifestations. In other words, the iconoclastic origin of Russian Formalism caused quite a reserved attitude from structuralists who had often been oriented towards restoration of the culture ruined by the Revolution. The very distinctive difference between formalist and structuralist types of consciousness is the anti-conservatism of formalists and its conflict with the philological tradition constituted by conservative values. Nevertheless, structuralists borrowed some theoretical ideas from formalism in order to arrange them as their own achievements (for example, talks on “device” and “conventionality” in Lotmanian *Lectures on Structuralist Poetics*). They actualized the theoretical legacy of Formalism out of touch with its revolutionary context. This circumstance is important to a great extent. The specific formalist outlook was determined by cultural changes of the period. In addition, formalists were much closer to living literature, while structuralists intended only to research cultural practices, not to take an active part in them<sup>6</sup>. They were ready to excuse formalists as victims of power (in part this was actually right). But the willing capitulation of the formal method at the turn of the 1920–1930s was perceived as renegade and considered a manifestation of conformist behavior. Thus, ideological hostility determined conceptual mistrust. When structuralism started to realize its limits from the inside, its leaders applied to revise the former explanatory models. Even if they did not turn to modernity, the revision in a whole could be interpreted as “a search for the Other” (Gasparov 1995). Also, it was a way to change the reputation of Russian Formalism. Starting from the second half of the 1970s reading formalists and rewriting their place in Russian culture had begun.

**Romantic identity.** In fact, Russian formalists were inspired by the formal theories of arts originated from the ideas Hans von Marees and Dietrich von Hildebrand. It is difficult to separate the thoughts of a painter from the concepts of a critic. Although academic masters (e. g.

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<sup>6</sup> The brightest picture of the structuralist creative sublimation was reconstructed in: Uspensky 1992; Uspensky 1995.

Heinrich Wölfflin) adopted some versions of German artistic theory, it was created by the romantic mind. Being originally dealt with Avant-garde, Formalism in Russia was also a form of romantic outlook. Formalists (especially Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum) considered literature as a way of existence, but tried to describe it in abstract terms. This paradox resulted in *conceptual* (not ideological) nearness with Western scholars, which can only emphasize the total split with academic tradition in Russia. Traditional literary historians from Petersburg University and impolite formalists that began to revise their habitual field here confronted from the very beginnings of the school. Formalists were oriented towards creation of new knowledge and new culture, not towards preservation and protection of the old one. They declared estrangement as a basic principle of art: Shklovsky referred to the authority of Aristotle and quoted that poetic language has to be strange, astonishing, it has to be actually strange one as compared with language of everyday life<sup>7</sup>. The very difference from something clear and habitual became the content of cultural message. During the period of revolutionary changes in Russia the declarative “otherness” of Formalists played an important role in their actualization on the market of symbolical production. They could argue with distant German academics, but they ignored close opponents in Russia on principle, being turned to a radical reconstruction of art (not only its notion). Their purpose was to appropriate cultural values renamed and consequently renewed by their new theory. The essential feature of the Formalist consciousness is the absence of gap between art, history and life itself. Reflecting on the primary results of the Revolution, Boris Eikhenbaum wrote that his generation has had to survive in this new world to reach the “moment of consciousness”

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<sup>7</sup> It means that things were being described just like for the very first time. “This key role of time in Shklovsky’s theory (a first time, an aesthetic expansion of duration) is later complemented by his concept of device as the “rotation” of an object in its semantic space (like “turning a log on the fire”), the shifting of the object out of its typical association into radically different ones, thus presenting a fresh and uneffaced side in a sort of textual space for our perception” (Crawford 1984: 210). The device of “estrangement” (“making strange”) encountered a critical attitude because of its “pure” perceptual nature. Insensibly for himself, Shklovsky represented more “reflexological” than proper “formal” approach. Thus, from the point of view of “New Criticism”, “Shklovsky accepts the view that art is to restore the feeling for life. [...] The process of apprehension becomes an art, becomes its aim, and art is a means, to experience the making of a thing, that which is made being an important in art (Wellek 1991: 328).

(Eikhenbaum 1921: 10–11). It means that History is here, and they are historical people that have to live and write the history of their days, essentially the history of the self, not *private*, but *individual* history. The idea of self as a subject of historical process essentially separates Formalism from the so-called “pure study”. Its frankly conquering policy demonstrates a high resemblance to revolutionary politics. Practices of Russian revolution stimulated to a high degree the artistic practices of the Avant-garde the theoretical basis of which was essentially supported by Formalism.

In this respect, the Western bias of Russian Avant-garde criticism corresponds with the ideology of the Revolution imported from the West. Hence the Avant-garde goes through a short triumph after 1917, when outsiders and marginal brawlers find themselves in the center of official art made sacred by the new state. The rejection of the Avant-garde coincides with a return to bourgeois forms of art that could be seen at the end of the 1920s. The Russian revolution realized the theoretical identity of real and symbolic values and abolished itself by removal of innovation. The fact of the revolution itself was the most radical innovation after which nobody could pretend to surpass it. Destruction of cultural borders between Russia and Europe turned out to be their fortification, including intellectual xenophobia.

**After the storm.** From the beginning of the 1920s formalists won the leading positions in the new establishment following the masters of the avant-garde (V. Mayakovsky, V. Tatlin, A. Rodchenko, etc.). The short age of “Combat Communism” (1918–21) was the most productive period when Formalist theory was completely shaped. A little bit later most of the formalists actively participated in the projects of the Russian Institute of Art History formed by Earl Viktor Zubov just before World War I. It was a brilliant and successful rival to the nearly dead university (Shapovaloff 1972). When the bourgeois restoration (New Economic Policy) began, they could choose between two different ways. The first way assumed they would stay on the path taken by the Revolution and to continue revision of scholarship. The second one was to merge with the former intelligentsia and its idea of neutral learning. Formalists were no artists in a whole sense; they created a field of art service. They could not supply themselves with an inner creative energy, because literary theory is, so to speak, a parasite on artistic value (like practical language relating to poetry in

early Formalism).<sup>8</sup> Realizing the crisis of identity, formalists begin to break the circle. So, Roman Jakobson leaves Russia for Prague, Viktor Shklovsky escapes to Finland, then finds himself in Berlin and in the end returns to Russia. Boris Eikhenbaum works on his important book *The Young Tolstoy* (published in 1922) in which he strives to overcome his age crisis and academic temptations. At least, Juri Tynyanov begins collecting materials for his first historical novel. At the same time, Formalism had a very powerful initial impulse and effectively succeeded on the background of pre-revolutionary culture. By the middle of the 1920s, formalism as a school represented a bright example of a pop-science, the fashionable way of thinking. In other words, it was in demand as a way of cultural production and remained the most influential style in constituting the modern “literary field” (in terms of Pierre Bourdieu). Formalists have found resources to reconstruct their doctrine from the inside and have confirmed their abilities to remain against conservatism.

It could be claimed that Formalism was such a popular trend in the middle of the 1920s, that the fact of being taught by Tynyanov, Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum was enough to make one feel oneself at the top of “high” scholarship. As it is displayed in memoirs and evidences from the period, their personal charisma was exceptional.<sup>9</sup> Thus formalists turned to be victims of historical logic. On the one hand, they refused to be academics. On the other hand, they could not resist this phenomenon governed by natural laws. Searching for new fields and contexts, formalists elaborated the contradictory and short-lived strategy of “second profession”.<sup>10</sup> It means that in order to survive formalist has to choose something different from literary theory as a field of theoretical and practical efforts. Thus, formalists have been occupied within film production (especially in screenwriting), journalism and literary fiction. In spite of the traditional notion of literature as an object of

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<sup>8</sup> Cf.: “Not symbolists, but the symbolist and futurist contemporaries created our new scholarship. They are bad poets, amateurs who combined their poor poetic experience, which is necessary to be joined to conventional magic of poetic profession, with psychological possibility to repress this experience and to place it under pure research and generalization” (Ginzburg 2002: 35; my transl. – J. L.).

<sup>9</sup> “Our life would be another if there were no Eikhenbaum and Tynyanov. That is to say I would be another one, I would have another ways of thinking, feeling, working, acting with people and seeing entities” (Ginzburg 2002: 56).

<sup>10</sup> The complete version of this idea, see Shklovsky (1978: 84–85). The most detailed research on this subject is presented in Dohn (1987).

study, formalists have understood it as a subject, or a way of world construction. Borderlines between scholarship and invention are constructed pragmatically — nobody can say where the first one is over and the second one starts. In particular, Eikhbaum does not analyze poetics anymore, he is interested in the social and historical identity of a person (studies on Leo Tolstoy's diaries); Shklovsky writes "I dance by my studies" (Shklovsky 1978: 68) and prefers an interpretation of his own poetics in a semi-artistic, semi-analytical manner. Indeed, this professional trick of a tail could not be long-lived. Representing one of the latest versions of romantic outlook and romantic behavior, formalists aspired to work out an ideal positive method. They were bearers of a romantic consciousness, but they also believed in historical determination (Hegel's influence and Marxist reference<sup>11</sup>) and preserved illusions of modernist idea of progress. At the same time they could not realize these illusions with reference to their private life. The school of revolutionary science turned to be a school of existential philosophy.

In order to fill the gap between historical and biographical realities, formalists have decided to imitate the school's institutional revival. At the end of 1928 Tynyanov and Jakobson published their famous manifesto in *Novyi LEF*, the journal of leftist arts founded by V. Majakovsky. Not only did this short abstract represent an intellectual power in new cultural conditions, but it was also notified as a theoretical medium between Russian and European humanities (at the moment Jakobson was already known as founder of the Prague school). Everything was done to declare an opposition to the social climate. I do not reject the conceptual components of "Theses", but consider its ideological message as a very important gesture at the end of the 1920s. This publication combines two tendencies. Firstly, theoretical reflection on the literary field remains real and the same for formalists, who are not afraid of free competition of ideas, which was typical of the ideology of the middle 1920s, during the second rise of the formalist school. Each following theory appeared within the community to abolish its predecessor, but formalists did not refuse the very principle of theoretical innovation associated with a category of success. Secondly, every formalist's private biography testifies that he is a bearer of culture and in this quality he projects against the state. This situation unintentionally groups the formalists together with the

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<sup>11</sup> The topic of convergence with the main ideology of the period is discussed in Mitchell 1976.



Russian intellectual tradition. In this respect, the title of the conclusive collection of articles published by Juri Tynyanov in 1929 “Archaists and innovators”<sup>12</sup> becomes surrounded by the social and political context of the period. History proves to be stronger than modern innovative intentions. Besides its conceptual content, “Theses” reveal a kind of provocative opposite posing. It could be interpreted as a paradoxical reminder of formalist revolutionary strategy. Social defeat correlates here with intellectual success: “Theses” appeared not *for* something but rather *against* it.

**Toward the formalist tradition.** Formalists demonstrate a similar same readiness to different ways of self-identification in history. If their ignorance towards social climate would not reflect on their everyday work, the further development comes as logically successful. The present case means periodical changes between conceptual revolutions and “normal science” (in terms of Thomas Kuhn), which stabilize reputation of scholarship as one of the most authorized arbiters of cultural industry. If this direction were not realized, the social climate itself would be much more repressive than anybody can foresee, the formalists remain in history and prepare a mixture for posterity. That is the text of “Theses” which formulates the latest formalist (or early structuralist) ideas without any unnecessary words. “Theses” formulate the model of evolution as a struggle and change, and we cannot argue with Peter Steiner’s statement that the evolutionary model forced structuralism to be a conflicting successor of the formalist method.

As we know, the second scenario was realized. As the formalist expulsion from intellectual power, it could be understood as “the end of history” in its formalist interpretation. The problem is that history itself means free ideological and conceptual competition. The absence of the latter demonstrates a delay of historical mechanism. During the 1930s the former formalists continued unofficially, or, so to speak, “domestic” communication. It takes off any claims to symbolical power and intellectual management. There was no need of cultural legitimacy of the school. Only when ideological pressure had grown weak by the end of 1950s, and symbolic capital had been redistributed

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<sup>12</sup> Shklovsky inclined both to sharpen and to dynamize this dichotomy: “archaists — innovators“. He thought it would be “clearer” (see Comments by A. Chudakov, M. Chudakova and E. Toddes in Tynyanov 1977: 568). Actually, the presence of the dash represents an endless swing of pendulum, in which synonyms turn to opposite poles, and vice versa.

again, the formalist doctrine was salvaged from oblivion not only because its usefulness for scholarship, but also because of its reputation of prohibited knowledge.

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## **Русский формалист на rendez-vous со своей историей**

Настоящая работа посвящена взаимоотношениям между изменяющейся исторической идентичностью русских формалистов во второй половине 1920-х гг. и их индивидуальной эволюцией в качестве писателей, членов общества, деятелей культуры. Формалисты с их агрессивным тяготением к современности противопоставлены здесь структуралистам, носителям консервативной, традиционной идеологии (которая является таковой в отношении революционных идей). Это можно объяснить специфически “романтической” идентичностью формалистов, в намерение которых входило присвоить культурные ценности, переименованные и обновленные горнилом их революционной теории. Она, как и революционная идеология, была результатом Европейского импорта. Однако сталинский “ренессанс” обесмыслил идею Революции как в сознании людей, так и в самом обществе. Именно поэтому русский формализм отошел в маргинальный культурный поток и начал разрабатывать новые, адаптированные формы интеллектуального сопротивления (частная жизнь, домашняя литература), ставшие актуальными в следующем десятилетии.

## **Vene formalist *rendez-vous*’l oma ajalooa**

Artiklis käsitletakse seoseid vene formalistide muutuva ajaloolise identiteedi ja nende individuaalse evolutsiooni (kirjanike, ühiskonna liikmete, kultuuritegelastena) vahel 1920ndate aastate teisel poolel. Formalistid oma agressiivse suunitlusega kaasajale on siin vastandatud strukturalistidele, konservatiivse, traditsioonilise ideoloogia (mis on selline revolutsiooniliste ideede suhtes) kandjatele. Seda võib seletada formalistide, kelle eesmärgiks oli omastada kultuuriväärtused, mis on ümber nimetatud ja uuendatud nende revolutsioonilise teooria sulatusahjus, spetsiifilise “romantilise” identiteediga. See identiteet, nagu ka nende revolutsiooniline ideoloogia, oli imporditud Euroopast. Kuid stalinlik “renessanss” muutis mõttetuks Revolutsiooni idee nii inimeste teadvuses kui ka ühiskonnas endas. Just seetõttu suubus vene vormikoolkond marginaalsusse ja hakkas välja töötama uusi, adapteeritud intellektuaalse vastupanu vorme (eraelu, kodukirjandus), mis muutusid aktuaalseks järgmisel aastakümnel.