Russian Formalism

Russian Formalism is the name for a group of literary scholars and linguists who between 1916 and 1929, while most were still in their twenties, developed a series of innovative theoretical concepts, claims, models, and methodological norms concerning various aspects of the literary system and its study. The group had two centers: the Moscow Linguistic Circle and OPOYAZ (the Society for the Study of Poetic Language) in St. Petersburg, oriented more toward literary history. The leading members were Osip Brik, Boris Eikhenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovskii, Boris Tomashevskii, and Jurii Tynianov. Two major scholars associated with the group were the linguist and stylistician V. V. Vinogradov and the literary historian V. Zhirmunskii. There were in addition numerous coworkers and students whose essays were published in the 1920s in about a dozen collections, such as Eikhenbaum and Tynianov’s Russian Prose (1926). The intense intellectual activity of Russian Formalism ended in the late 1920s, after which Formalist scholarship dispersed and branched out into such varied activities as literary history, fiction writing, biography, textology, pedagogy, and film script writing.

Russian Formalism was never a school with a uniform doctrine, whether theoretical, historical, or methodological. (The Formalists intensely disliked the label "formal school," a term initially applied to them pejoratively, and they tried to bury it on several occasions. In 1922, for example, Tomashevskii delivered a lecture entitled "Formal School [Instead of an Obituary]," which he published as an article in 1925.) Rather, it was a group of closely interacting people who shared basic assumptions, goals, and areas of interest but who otherwise did their individual work and often polemicized with one another. Russian Formalism was a constantly evolving and changing enterprise in which concepts, hypotheses, and models were formulated, intensely discussed, and modified or replaced as soon as inadequacies were discovered or new questions arose that the Formalists could not handle. It was more an ongoing process of self-conscious theorizing than a finished theory. Moreover, the Formalists seldom engaged in theorizing per se, and most of their theoretical pronouncements were formulated in the course of studying specific authors or trends in Russian literature from 1750 onwards and on the basis of this corpus.

Russian Formalism’s major contributions can be approached in terms of basic perspectives and major research areas. The initial perspective was aestheticist, ahistorical, reductive, and mechanistic and is associated with the early Shklovskii. The work of literature is seen as consisting of material, whether linguistic or representational (i.e., events, characters, or ideas), that lacks aesthetic value, and of stylistic and compositional devices (i.e., procedures and techniques) that possess such value. The literariness or artfulness of a work of literature, that which makes it an aesthetic object, resides entirely in its devices, which should also form the sole object of literary studies. The aesthetic value or purpose of art, embodied in the devices, consists in creating in readers or viewers a heightened awareness, making them see things anew (Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s freshness of sensation, Ezra Pound’s making it new). This is achieved through disrupting or radically modifying the familiar, automatic perception habits as regards literature, language, or reality and (re)creating instead novelty, surprise, strangeness, and unfamiliarity with regard to one or more of them.

Defamiliarization of that which is or has become familiar or taken for granted, hence automatically perceived, is the basic function of all devices. And with defamiliarization come both the slowing down and the increased difficulty (impeding) of the process of reading and comprehending and an awareness of the artistic procedures (devices) causing them. These are all desirable effects, since perceptibility of the medium and its patterns, of the artfulness of the artistic object, is a major goal of art. During this phase the Formalists assumed that some artistic procedures were inherently and permanently capable of creating the defamiliarizing effect and hence of permanent aesthetic effectiveness and value. Natural language is defamiliarized through figures of sound and sense, such as meter and wordplay, and worn-out literary conventions through depriving them of their motivation, "laying them bare," so to speak, and parodying them. Our habitual perception of reality is disrupted through distorting the temporal and causal order of events and the logical order of information and by seeing the familiar from a nonstandard perspective such as that of an outsider, a child, or a deranged person. Works of art are assemblages of materials and devices, writers are craftsmen using devices to create certain effects, and scholars should single out the devices and explain their structure and aesthetic functioning.

By 1924 Russian Formalism had adopted a systemic, functional, and dynamic perspective associated primarily with Tynianov. Works of literature, genres, and literature as a whole are now seen as systems of interrelated elements, not mechanical assemblages. Any element of style and composition may or may not function as a device in a given system, and no element does so universally. All depends on its interrelations.
with the other elements and with the specific whole. Works, genres, and the literary system are hierarchical systems with a dominant or constructive principle that subordinates and deforms all the rest. Over time, everything in literature changes; it is a thoroughly dynamic system. Individual genres and the literary system as a whole undergo successive rehierarchizations, hence changes in the function of elements in them, as well as modifications of their boundaries and interrelations. At each historical moment individual works are perceived relative to their genre model, genres relative to each other, and literature relative to other kinds of discourse. Over time, though, each phase of a genre’s history or that of the literary system as a whole is perceived relative to the preceding one, and a similar manner of diachronic perception, relative and contrasting, applies to devices. While one can still recognize an inherited stylistic or compositional procedure, its ability to function as a device varies over time. Once it has been widely used it becomes familiar, is perceived easily and automatically, and consequently loses its aesthetic effectiveness. New artistic procedures must therefore be found to fulfill this function. Literary scholars should provide morphological as well as functional descriptions of individual system states and of their changes over time, that is, of the literary-historical process or diachrony.

Another major perspective that had emerged by 1924 had to do with the mechanisms of literary change and with literature as a communicative institution and is associated primarily with Boris Tomashevskii. The literary-historical process is seen here as a constant struggle for dominance among coexisting schools or generations, each with its own aesthetic and artistic norms and hence preferred artistic procedures. Genres and literature as a whole thus change because of shifts in the dominant artistic school. But artistic schools are more than abstract sets of norms. They imply human agents and institutions vying for recognition, acceptance, and dissemination. The interaction of writers, critics, reviewers, reader groups, publishers, journals, and book series, as well as the sociocultural role and image of the writer, now becomes a focus of attention. By the mid-1920s Russian Formalism has moved from an isolating study of devices to a comprehensive vision of literature as both a dynamic, complex sign system and a sociocultural action system.

A review of the major research areas of Russian Formalism should begin with its methodological norms. The Formalists’ ambition was to establish an autonomous science of literature as verbal art, that is, to have a unique and specific object of inquiry for their discipline: literariness, or that which makes a text a work of verbal art (at least for a given period), and, by extension, the factors that influence it. To this end, one should develop specific, explicitly defined concepts and formulate general hypotheses and models based on and tested against empirical evidence. Specificity, precision, and quest for generalizations are key. The most relevant other disciplines are those dealing with language and with general artistic principles, that is, with the verbal and the artistic aspects of the literary work. Since literariness resides in the "how" and not the "what," content elements are marginalized, admissible only as motifs. Science, including the science of literature, is understood as a permanently changing, self-correcting trial-and-error activity. It is purely a cognitive instrument set up to describe and/or explain actual literary-historical phenomena and is modified or replaced when it fails to do so. Theories are hypotheses formulated to help discover and interpret facts, and their validity is always provisional and conditional. Science is a collective enterprise and requires a high degree of metatheoretical awareness from its practitioners. Some key methodological principles embodied in the practice of Russian Formalism are as follows: (1) defining phenomena not inherently but in a relative contrastive manner: practical versus poetic language, verse versus prose, and so on; (2) adopting a functional, or means-end, approach to explain the specific nature and regularities of phenomena: what is their role and intended effect in the system in which they occur?; (3) describing and explaining the nature and change of literary phenomena in specifically literary terms for as long and as far as possible; (4) proceeding in concentric circles from literature to other kinds of discourse and only then to broader cultural and social series. Once changes in the literary system have been described, they can be correlated to changes in other cultural series, but they cannot be reduced to them.

The specificity of literature, as we have seen, is embodied in special formal procedures, techniques, and patterns of organizing the text’s linguistic and representational material. These patterns are perceived as different from ordinary forms of textual organization, as deformimg them for the sake of maximal perceptibility. Material is subordinated to device and invariably serves as a motivation for it; content is the result of the transformation of the material under the pressure of higher-order imperatives, issuing from the logic of the chosen device and from the state of literary system. Literary texts are multilevel systems—constructions of sound, constructions of sense, and so on—and are highly and specifically patterned on each level. The text as a whole is a system of interrelated systems, a pattern of patterns, with one of them serving as the dominant of the whole. But the interlevel relations vary in the course of the text to avoid automatization of the dominant textual pattern. This can be seen, for example, in the variable relations between metric and natural stresses and pauses in a verse text.

In the context of verse, the Formalists studied poetic language, the poetic function, verse texts (poetry), and poetry as a variable cultural category. Poetic language consists in breaking the norms and patterns of standard language, both in sound and in sense, and replacing them with different ones. Verse itself is an organized violation perpetrated on ordinary language (Jakobson, Questions 53–54). All of these patterns draw attention to the signifier and are carriers of the poetic function, defined by Jakobson in 1921 as a message with a set on its linguistic structure. Poetry is language in its aesthetic function, while
ordinary language is governed by the communicative function. The verse text reveals numerous patterns of organization on all levels that need to be described in isolation as well as in their interrelations, such as rhyme and sense or syntax and rhythm. For Tynianov, the line is the basic unit of the verse text. It is a distinct, unified, and tight rhythmic unit that serves as the text’s constructive principle. The division of the text into equivalent rhythmic units (lines) and the dominance of this rhythmic equivalence bring about a radical reorganization and regrouping of the text’s syntactic and semantic levels. The resultant semantic contour of a verse text is different from the meaning of this very text when rewritten as prose. Reading a verse text, we are aware of the constant struggle and tension between its underlying standard modes of sound and sense organization and the superimposed poetic ones. Finally, while the verse-prose opposition —defined by the dominance of sound patterns over sense patterns, or vice versa—is abiding, the specific sound pattern serving as the distinctive feature of verse changes over time. It may be rhyme, stress pattern, syllable count, or a given intonational pattern, as in vers libre.

In narrative—the Formalists preferred the term "theory of prose " —the material-device opposition translates into that between the representational elements of action and event in their natural chronological and causal order (fabula) and the rearranged manner of their textual presentation created by artistic compositional patterns Russian Formalism (sujet). The deforming, hence artful, element of narrative thus consists in the particular manner of its unfolding, and content (character and action) may often serve as mere material or motivation for deformation for the sake of some aesthetic goals. Shklovskii pointed out that the same architectonic principles are often at work in both small-scale stylistic devices and large-scale devices of sujet construction. These include positive and negative parallelism, simple repetition, three-stage intensified repetition, riddle, reversal of logical order, circular construction, transposition and rearrangement of parts, digressions, and variant renderings of the same content. Other compositional devices are concerned with the combination of elementary narratives into more complex ones, as in threading together, or frame and embedding. Shklovskii notes that most of these devices recur throughout time and space and serve as invariants, associated with endless specific content elements over time. Sujet- construction devices have the same function as verse patterns, impeding and slowing the reading process and drawing attention to the way, or "how, " rather than to the goal, or "what, " for in art the way itself is the goal. An extreme form of narrative artfulness is the "bare device, " or self-reflexivity, where the text points, often humorously, to its contrived nature by disclosing or playing with a technique for its own sake, without any mimetic motivation. The Formalists were also interested in short narrative forms and the differences in construction and effect creation between them and the novel. The other focus of Formalist narrative studies was skaz, a literary (written) short story in which the overall manner of narration is characterized by stylistic and intonational forms supposedly associated with impromptu oral storytelling addressed by an uneducated speaker to a similar audience. This led to an examination of the ways in which an image or illusion of extraliterary dialects or registers is created in literary narrative, the figure of the narrator as the author’s puppet, the nonstandard perspective on the told events adopted by this narrator, and the overall effect of this form.

Genre is understood as a particular selection and combination of stylistic, thematic, and compositional elements. It is a text model that, like the individual text, is multileveled and hierarchically structured with a dominant. It is additionally a historical dynamic entity whose makeup, internal configuration, dominant element, and matching of forms and functions change radically over time. And so do its relations to other genres and its place and role in the literary system as a whole. Sometimes only secondary features, such as length, endure. The genre concept is necessary as a foil—it permits the observer to perceive the specificity of individual works falling under it—and as a basic category for the study of literary-historical changes. One can study synchronically a genre’s form, function, and place in the genre system at a given period or trace diachronically its traditions and transformations. A genre’s specific nature at any one time is the product of the interplay between its inherited features and the poetic norms of a given period or school. Finally, one ought to distinguish clearly between genre (e.g., romantic elegy) as a descriptive tool constructed post factum by the scholar and (sometimes the same) genre as a normative idea in the consciousness of a given generation of readers and writers. Only the latter concept of genre can explain how and why the Formalists relegated works to a particular genre. The Formalists made the genre a variable in a larger equation, and in doing this they transformed genre from a classificatory category into a heuristic premise. The discovery of a genre’s concrete historical shape thus became one of the tasks of literary scholarship, not an afterthought.

The literary-historical process, or "literary evolution, " is a key concern for the Russian Formalists. Literature is seen as a thoroughly dynamic, incessantly changing macrosystem, a process and not an essence. Hence most generalizations about literature are time bound. The focus of literary-historical research is naturally literariness or devices, that is, artistic procedures and techniques. What is considered literature or a literary genre and on the basis of which distinctive features, the main functions of literature, and its relations with other series—all change over time. This also holds for the makeup, internal boundaries, and distribution of functions inside the genre system and inside each genre individually. The same formal procedure may have different significances, functions, and effects in different times and may possess aesthetic value to begin with in some periods but not in others. Conversely, what is considered an effective literary device, even on the level of sound patterning (meter, rhyme), changes over time.
Until 1924 the Formalists saw the task of the literary historian as describing system states at different points in time, tracing the changes in them with respect to the factors under study, seeking to define regularities in this process, and, finally, trying to explain literary change immanently, viewing literature as a self-referring and self-fashioning system. (In the second, post-1924 period they speak of the inadequacy of the "immanent" explanation of literary phenomena and call for a development of a sociology of literature on the Formalist base.) The main reason for literary change is the automatization or loss of aesthetic effectiveness of an inherited artistic procedure (or whole genre) for a given generation. A procedure that has lost its effectiveness is replaced by an opposite one, for example, the elevated by the sentimental, lyrical by prosaic, and so on.

Following Tynianov, each constructive principle has four stages. An old constructive principle is automated, and a new, opposing one emerges; the new principle gains initial acceptance; it then expands as far as it can; and finally, it becomes itself automatized. Parody is a major indicator of artistic exhaustion and a decisive stage in literary change. In it, a worn-out device is discredited, deprived of its motivation, presented as purely arbitrary, and inserted into a context governed by an antagonistic constructive principle. After 1924 it is used as mere material for new opposing aesthetic goals and effects. Parody is a pure example of the general nature of literary change: destruction of the old followed by the establishment of the new, the reconfiguring of forms and functions alike, a reconstruction and reorganization of the system.

The literary-historical process manifests a series of radical breaks with immediately preceding practices and not a peaceful, continuous handing down of a tradition or the building upon the achievements of the past. It is mere change, and not progress, since it has no inherent goal and old forms can be revived when they reacquire effectiveness when seen against the current background. Change as struggle is the main feature of literary dynamics. But struggle implies a clash between different schools or groups of writers embracing antagonistic norms. Following Shklovskii, the literary system at each point consists of three coexisting, opposing generations: the old-timers, the central trend, and the avant-garde. Some artistic styles are at the center of the canon, while others are at its periphery. Over time, and as a result of the struggle between schools and generations for hegemony, styles are pushed from center to periphery, only to be replaced by peripheral ones. But from the periphery these styles may later reclaim a central position once more. In addition to being demoted from center to periphery, some styles or genres may be expelled from the canon altogether to mass, sub-, or oral literature. Innovators may, however, find their innovative devices precisely in these areas, leading to their ultimate canonization. Cultural transfer is thus a two-way process. Within the literary system itself innovators look for inspiration from their grandfathers, not from the fathers whom they reject. Second- and third-rate authors play an important role in literary change and should be studied by the literary historian because they are often the first to introduce innovations that are later given their canonic form by leading authors. Analogously, it is imitators and epigones of a leading artist who create the school or tradition linked to that artist and the clichés that enable us to see clearly the most typical features of what might seem like the individual’s artistic method. The historist views of the Formalists also imply that scholars must reconstruct the significance, effect, and function of any individual work or stylistic formation against the background of its contemporaries, not their own, since only in this way can they understand how and why the work was accepted, rejected, or revised. This in turn requires a reconstruction of the whole literary-critical ambience or horizon of a period as embodied in its literature, criticism, programmatic declarations, and normative poetics.

The literary milieu—individual authors and their creative biographies, schools and groups, the author’s public image and role, critics, publishers, reviewers, and readers—became a central object of study for Russian Formalism in its middle and final years. Eikhenbaum wrote monographs on Leo Tolstoy and Mikhail Lermontov in which he focused on the author’s "literary consciousness," that is, the author as locus of artistic choices and decisions, including sometimes radical changes of poetic principles (e.g., Tolstoy’s three phases). He sought to reconstruct the inner logic of a writer’s artistic choices and changes, using for this purpose diaries and letters. A literary school is understood as a self-demarcated, self-determined group of writers who share to a significant degree the same artistic self-consciousness and self-image. In addition to its public life in print, literature also exists in small, intimate circles, where it actually comes into being and is first presented. Such circles include salons, coteries, and groups of friends. Authors are cultural figures and as such tend to project a certain public image of themselves, which may be highly stylized and may sometimes make them look like the heroes of their works, such as the dandy or suffering artist. Authors also entertain notions of their sociocultural role: high priest of art or social reformer, amateur or professional. Conversely, generations of readers form a historically variable image of a given author, a combination of the author’s creative personality, literary production, projected self-image, and the critical mediation. Such images may significantly influence the reception of an author’s work. There is finally the wider literary milieu as a whole, a communicative, social, and economic complex including critics and reviewers, publishers, outlets (journals, book series), advertising, and the like. This complex institution needs to be studied insofar as the nature of the literary system proper may be conditioned by it.

The Russian Formalists also wrote studies on film theory and Russian literary history since 1750. They were intensely involved in contemporary literary life, making numerous journal contributions. They also wrote on many contemporary innovative writers, with whom they were often closely associated personally. They continually urged that the study of contemporary literature be an integral part of their investigation of
literary history, insisting in particular on the dialectical interplay of the analogies between contemporary
and past problems of the generational self-assertion within a given literary tradition.

The Formalist group dispersed in Russia, but in compensation a reverse process of dissemination and
impact occurred in other Slavic countries. Roman Jakobson, who moved to Prague in 1920, served as a
living bridge between Formalism and Czech structuralism and was one of the founders in 1929 of the
Prague Linguistic Circle (see PRAGUE SCHOOL STRUCTURALISM). The circle translated numerous Formalist works
into Czech and initiated a sustained dialogue with the Formalists in which many of their tenets were
incorporated, others modified, and still others used for the development of the group’s own semiotically
oriented theories (see SEMIOTICS). A few translations were also published in Poland in the late 1930s, and
several young Polish scholars, especially in the areas of versification and stylistics, published works heavily
indebted to the Formalists. World War II and Stalinism created a generational hiatus, and the Formalists’
work seemed to be doomed to oblivion.

Starting about 1960, however, the work began to be resuscitated and to serve as one of the
mainsprings of a new theoretical current in Russia, the MOSCOW-TARTU SCHOOL. Members of the school
republished many of the Formalist works with extensive commentary and explicitly recognized the
Formalists as the main precursors of their own theories on literature and film (that is, they defined
themselves as their heirs or successors). Polish structuralism of the 1960s and 1970s did much the same. In
Western Europe, Formalism was discovered by literary theorists with the publication of Tzvetan Todorov’s,
Jurij Striedter’s, and Wolf-Dieter Stempel’s anthologies, along with similar ones in Italian and Spanish.
This belated discovery coincided with the stormy growth of STRUCTURALISM, and numerous Formalist theses
were the subject of structuralist borrowing or intense discussion. The American discovery came later still,
in the 1970s. The Formalists’ most widespread impact, though, was on the incipient discipline of
NARRATOLOGY, where numerous formalist distinctions, such as fabula versus sujet, became a cornerstone of
all narratological models. Formalist theses on the literary-historical process and its factors were also widely
discussed. The pioneering, challenging, and even revolutionary contribution of the Russian Formalists to
twentieth-century literary theory is universally acknowledged, and their work is often viewed as the first
modern attempt at systematic, comprehensive, and scientifically oriented literary theorizing.

Uri Margolin

Bibliography

See also MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, ROMAN JAKOBSON, MOSCOW-TARTU SCHOOL, NARRATOLOGY, PRAGUE SCHOOL STRUCTURALISM, RUSSIAN
THEORY AND CRITICISM: NINETEENTH CENTURY, SEMIOTICS, and STRUCTURALISM.

Primary Sources

Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt, eds., Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation (1973)
Herbert Eagle, ed., Russian Formalist Film Theory (1981)
Boris Eikhenbaum and Jurii Tynianov, eds., Russkaia proza (1926, Russian Prose, trans. Ray Parrott, 1985)
Victor Erlich, ed., Twentieth Century Russian Literary Criticism (1975)
Roman Jakobson, Language in Literature (1987)
Roman Jakobson, Questions de poétique (1973)
Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, eds., Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays (1965)
Ladislav Matjeja and Krystyna Pomorska, eds., Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views (1978)
L. M. O’Toole and Ann Shukman, eds., Formalism: History, Comparison, Genre (1978)
L. M. O’Toole and Ann Shukman, eds., Formalist Theory (1977)
Tzvetan Todorov, ed. and trans., Theorie de la littérature: Textes des formalistes russes (1965)
Secondary Sources

Carol Any, Boris Eikhenbaum (1994)
Michel Aucouturier, Le Formalisme russe (1994)


Aage Hansen-Löve, Der rusische Formalismus (1978)


Krystyna Pomorska, Russian Formalist Theory and Its Poetic Ambience (1968)

Peter Steiner, Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics (1984)


TOP