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# Jurij Striedter's Reading of Russian Formalism

## 1 The beginnings of Russian formalism in Germany

In the 1960s, a rather barren period in German literary theory marked by unclear methodology, texts of Russian formalism created some interest (see also Igor' Pilshchikov's chapter on Russian formalism in this volume). Translations of Shklovskii into German (by Gisela Drohla), Ėikhenbaum and Tynianov (both by Alexander Kaempfe) and Jakobson were published in 1965, 1966, 1967 and 1969. However, a stronger interest was sparked only with a project conceived at the University of Konstanz in the late 1960s and early 1970s: a bilingual edition of formalist texts edited by Jurij Striedter and Wolf Stempel together with a group of young Slavic scholars. The task of translating and editing lay with Karl Eimermacher, Rolf Fieguth, Inge Paulmann, Witold Kośny, Frank Boldt, and Helene Immendörfer. This edition, published in two volumes in 1969 and 1972, allowed a comparison between the original terminology and its German version. Around the same time, Aage Hansen-Löve in Vienna was writing his important book on formalism published in 1978 (Hansen-Löve 1978). Finally, at the University of Bochum, Karl Maurer founded the journal *Poetica* in 1966 in order to revive the theoretical concepts of formalism. He opened with a programmatic statement:

The revival of the title *Poetica* is a tribute to the Russian critics and writers who founded the Petersburg 'Society for the Analysis of Poetic Language', so long ignored in the West, exactly 50 years ago. At the same time, it is a tribute to the spirit of the great 1920s, the era of Oskar Walzel, Karl Vossler and Leo Spitzer. (Maurer 1967, 1)

In the first year, an essay by Shklovskii from the volume *Khod konja* (*Knight's Move*) appeared in the translation of Karl Maurer. Later on, many studies about formalism were published in this journal – especially by Wolf and Herta Schmid. In 1973 Hans Guenther and Karla Hielscher edited the volume on the 'ideological' debate *Marxismus und Formalismus* (*Marxism and Formalism*), containing texts by Trotskii, Bukharin, Lunacharskii, Ėikhenbaum, Brik, and P. Medvedev. In the following year, Wolfgang Beilenhoff presented texts by the formalists on the theory of film entitled *Poetik des Films* (1974, *The Poetics of Cinema*). This common field of interests created productive contacts between the schools of Slavic Studies at Bochum and Konstanz.

## 2 The first reactions to the first translations

The Striedter/Stempel edition and its path-breaking and much-cited introductions opened up a theoretical field which was cultivated in multiple ways over the following years. Special interest centered on the concept of estrangement, on literary evolution in the sense of a replacement of systems (*smena sistem*), on the idea of an automatization and disautomatization of forms, the outline of a theory of poeticalness, and narratological concepts of the construction or absence of plot. One should not overlook the fact, however, that Jurij Striedter and Dmitrij Tschizewskij, the other important Slavic scholar, had already introduced formalism and the concept of estrangement to the discussions of the group Poetik und Hermeneutik (Poetics and Hermeneutics), as documented in the collection *Immanente Ästhetik, Ästhetische Reflektion (Immanent Esthetics, Esthetic Reflection)* in 1966, the year of a renaissance in theoretical interest (see also Schamma Schahadat's chapter on Poetics and Hermeneutics in this volume). Tschizewskij's contribution "Wiedergeburt des Formalismus? In welcher Form?" ("Rebirth of formalism? In which form?") proceeds from Victor Erlich's exposition (1955). In spite of its "shortcomings", he sees the book as "lively and engagingly written", the rediscovery of an "undoubtedly valuable critical and theoretical current of the early revolutionary years" (Tschizewskij 1966, 297). He expressly welcomes the German translation of Erlich (1964) as a contribution to theoretical debate. However, he places even more emphasis on a lecture by Leo Spitzer (1961) at the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM) congress at Liège in 1960, which emphasized the "methodological importance of Russian formalism (with reference to Erlich's book)" (Tschizewskij 1966, 298). Tschizewskij adds that this lecture by the "figurehead of Romanic philology" had been received as a "testament" because Spitzer died a few days after the congress (Tschizewskij 1966, 297). Tschizewskij writes this with regard to his own contact with formalist concepts, especially during his membership of the Cercle Linguistique in Prague, and he is committed to explaining to his colleagues at Poetics and Hermeneutics the genesis und later development of this new literary theory and critical method. His review is also interesting because of its repudiation of a "pseudo-genealogy of formalism" (Tschizewskij 1966, 299) which includes names like Oskar Walzel, Eduard Sievers (via the communication of Zhirmunskii), A. Potebnia and N. Veselovskii. Instead of this pseudo-genealogy, Tschizewskij emphasizes names like Konstantin Leont'ev (esp. his study on Tolstoi's novels) and Innokentii Annenskii (on Konstantin Bal'mont). Tschizewskij aimed at a change of emphasis which presumably could not be fully grasped by his listeners at the Bad Homburg conference of Poetics and Hermeneutics. But they were probably interested in his historical contextualization of this genesis of theory and the highlighting of some

of its representatives, especially Shklovskii and Jakobson. Even more interest was (or could have been) stimulated by a presentation of the new terminology with its analytical implications: 'estrangement' (*ostranienie*), 'slowing-down' (*zamedenie*), 'deviation' (*otstuplenie*), and 'disclosure of poetic procedure' (*obnazhenie priema*). It was perhaps the first time these terms had been mentioned in Germany, with the exception of estrangement (*Verfremdung*). Furthermore Tschizewskij touches on the multifarious coalition of formalism and Futurism and presents the later fortunes of formalism: its persecution in the Soviet Union and its survival which was primarily due to Jakobson's research in the USA. And – now as a critic of the formalists – he censures the missing aspects of their research: the content of the literary work, the author's biography, the dominant *Weltanschauung*, the historical context etc. At no point does he mention the tenets of structuralism which relate to formalism in so many points and which he himself helped to develop at Prague.

### 3 Priem / Verfahren / Device

German, English and French attempts to translate the terminology of formalism into their own language simultaneously show the effort to fit them into an existing scholarly context. That already holds for the very general term *priem*, which has been translated as procedure, strategy, *procédé*, *stratégie*, *Verfahren* but also *Kunstgriff*. Striedter whose doctoral thesis of 1953 analysed the works of Novalis expands on the term *Verfahren* in the preface he wrote to it in 1985:

The term *Verfahren* is common in today's criticism of literature and art in German, and most people who use it are aware that it were the Russian formalists who declared *Verfahren* (procedure) to be the real subject and 'hero' of art and literary criticism. Indeed, this translation of *priem*, the programmatic formalist term, has completely vanquished its older and too narrow translation as *Kunstgriff* ever since we decided to use it in the introduction of our bilingual edition of *Texte der russischen Formalisten* [*Texts of the Russian Formalists*]. But only now, after rereading my dissertation, I have realized that I probably borrowed this term directly from Novalis. In his fragments and notes he uses *Kunstgriff* but also – and much more frequently and centrally – *Verfahren*, including the phrase 'the methods of *Verfahren*', which points to the connection between *Verfahren* and the 'formal method.' (Striedter 1985, 7–8)

## 4 *Ostranenie* / Estrangement

At the same conference of the Poetics und Hermeneutics circle, Striedter presented a paper on formalism centered on the concept of *Verfremdung*: “Transparenz und Verfremdung. Zur Theorie des poetischen Bildes in der russischen Moderne” (1966, “Transparency and Estrangement. On the Theory of the Poetic Image in Russian Modernism”). His analysis of a poem emphasizing the procedure of estrangement – probably the first in this setting – looks at Esenin’s poem “Pesn’ o khlebe” (1921, “Song of the Bread”). Striedter does not comment on the connection of this term with Brecht’s concept of estrangement in his theatrical practice. In defining the poetic image he is interested in the contrast of transparency (*prozrachnost’*), which is central to Russian Symbolist poetry and its theory, and estrangement (*ostranenie*) as a method which he uses for his analysis with reference to Shklovskii. He gives a full exposition of the genesis of this term in Shklovskii’s poetological thinking and quotes Shklovskii’s famous sentences from his own translation. (It seems to me that the fundamental importance of Striedter’s theses on the poetic image – from Symbolism to Futurism and to the poetry of the 1950s and 1960s – has not been fully appreciated by the Poetics and Hermeneutics circle.) The application of *ostranenie* to Esenins “Song of the Bread” is a reversion of the interpretations of Tschizewskij and N. Kravtsov, who refer to the transformation of riddles and themes of popular poetry as pre-texts. Striedter discovers the *Verfremdung* of these themes, especially of some elements of the *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (twelfth century, *Song of Igor*). He concludes: “Esenins estranging poetry is no more ‘unpoetic’ than Brecht’s estranging drama is ‘undramatic’” (Striedter 1966, 296). He seeks to adapt a method to poetry which was first applied to epic forms, an adaptation already performed for drama by Brecht. Again, Striedter does not mention the unclear genealogy of the term. This genealogy is the subject of my essay (Lachmann 2010) in a collection of essays that follow the migration of these concepts from East to West and back again (Kohler 2010).

*Ostranenie* was translated into German as *Verfremdung*, which was better suited to the semantic aura of Shklovskii’s term than the French *étrangeté* and the English *estrangement* and *foregrounding*. But this brought the term *Entfremdung* – with its plausible French counterpart *aliénation* – into play, opening up a further (Rousseauist-Marxist) field which was echoed by the Russian *otchuzhdenie*. This toing and froing created a tangle of poetological and philosophical terms which allowed reciprocal interpretations. Shklovskii’s later renaming of *ostranenie* as *udivlenie* and his reference to Novalis suggest that he had not completely discarded this concept. However, it did nothing to clear up the circulating terms (Lachmann 1970). (See also Erik Martin’s chapter on alienation/defamiliarisation/estrangement in this volume.)

## 5 Brecht's *Verfremdung*

In Germany, the reference to Shklovskii was not taken up in a sustained manner, since Brecht himself had not made it clear. The *V-Effekt* (estrangement effect) attained a special status which concealed Brecht's contact to the Russian cultural scene. A sophisticated history of the term in which the philosophical and the aesthetic side (with reference to Shklovskii) were balanced was provided by Reinhold Grimm (1984 [1961]). The association with methods of Baroque poetics (*far stupir*), i. e. the grounding of the concept in historical poetics as suggested by Grimm and the attempt to illuminate Pop Art which gained prominence in the 1960s but had not been methodically defined – cf. Wissmann (1966) – established *Verfremdung* firmly in German criticism. It remained closely connected to Brecht, not only to his drama but also to his poetry, as shown by Heselhaus (1966), who rooted it in the German poetic tradition.

The term was established poetically and hermeneutically, as it were, and it was used regularly in the interpretation of texts from different periods. The original points of Shklovskii's theory were not of specific interest, nor was the entangled terminological history of the term, which had been complicated by Shklovskii's own revision.

## 6 The growth of a concept: *ostranenie* / estrangement / *Verfremdung*

The case of Russian formalism provides an insight into the different reactions of intellectual milieus: they may either reject an 'alien' theory or try to incorporate it – erasing its 'alienness' – or they permit contact which allows its further development, sharpening etc. The migration of concepts involves the question which position they may occupy in the receiving system, as categories, paradigms, analytical concepts or hypotheses, and to what degree they are incorporated in or can modify their new theoretical context. Here, estrangement (*Verfremdung*) is the key term whose appearance on the stage of theory – especially in a German context – invokes associations whose consistency cannot be ignored. Thus in a strange way, the theoretical field was ready for the reception of the formalist concept. As a matter of fact, the double function of estrangement – 'disautomatization' and 'complication' of form – is not taken up by critical studies in the 1960s and 1970s. Concepts like the exposing of procedure and the dualism of automatization and disautomatization do not take on an importance of their own – and these two are indeed the constituent moments which lead to a new perception and which

represent the real poetical semantics of the term *Verfremdung* that Striedter foregrounds in his outline of the history and interpretation of formalist theory. They lead to a new perception and represent the poetic semantics of the term *Verfremdung*. Aage Hansen-Löve's comprehensive and still unmatched study *Der russische Formalismus. Methodologische Rekonstruktion seiner Entwicklung aus dem Prinzip der Verfremdung* (1978, *Russian Formalism: Methodological Reconstruction of Its Development Based on the Principle of Alienation*) provides a new opening up of the field of discussion. For Western criticism, this work reconstructs the genesis of a theory, the development of its concepts and terminology on a ground saturated with *Verfremdung*. For its country of origin, it brings to light what had been temporarily banned, almost forgotten and hidden by other critical concepts. Slavic literary studies in the German language have fully made use of this newly presented theory, and with further works on it they have had an impact beyond the boundaries of their subject. But the vital point of the concept of migration here is the return in the light of *Verfremdung*, as it were, of formalist theory to Russia in a clearer, theoretically sharpened form. And one might say that some concepts of literary criticism only gradually develop their theoretical (and methodical) potential in the migration from one context to another.

## 7 Striedter's reading of Russian formalism

How did Striedter, to whom Hansen-Löve referred in many passages of his book, proceed in his reading of formalism? Striedter highlights fundamental themes of formalist theory and orders them thematically. His starting point is a concept of theory and science which uses Habermas' opposition of nomological-empirical and historical-hermeneutical. From the very outset, Striedter stresses that the formalists are aiming not at a definition of the literary, but at the specific quality of literature as a special form of language, not at a text-based aesthetics but at the describability of forms (Striedter 1969, IX–XXVII). Following the opposition of nomological-empirical and historical-hermeneutical discussed in the social sciences, he sees the formalist concept of theory in the field of the nomological and rejects a reductionist interpretation that reads formalist theorems as fixed results. Such an understanding would create an overly static picture of the theoretical practice of formalism and would ignore that on the contrary, formalism is distinguished by the rapid development and change of its methods and categories, and that its main challenge is the constant reassessment, correction and replacement of its own methods and theses. Striedter reconstructs the dynamics of the theoretical discussions of the formalist circle in the 1910s and 1920s, the

development from pure theory to a literary history that foregrounds the idea of literary evolution. He also examines the theoretical profile of the main protagonists of the circle, Shklovskii, Ėikhenbaum, Tynianov and Jakobson:

It is characteristic for Eichenbaum – in contrast to Shklovskii – to proceed from the interpretation of a single text as a poetic system and to ask for the dominant aspects of the style of an author, and it is significant for the practice of formalism in general that he analyzes the phenomenon of *skaz* in its historical development and its importance for contemporary literature but also uses it as a point of departure for looking at the fundamental tasks and possibilities of a theory of narrative. (Striedter 1969, LI)

Striedter wanted to show the difference to the relevant theoretical schools of the 1960s, e.g. to the New Criticism which did not see the deviation from the norm as the norm itself, as formalism did, but which understood the “aesthetic norm” as a given and absolute yardstick. He points out connections between formalism and structuralism and states that the Prague School adopted some prominent formalist concepts.

In the German context, Oskar Walzel is considered a precursor of formalist thinking because of his interest in form, but his contrasting of content (*Gehalt*) and form (*Gestalt*) was not in line with formalist ideas. This would rather hold true for the “morphological method” of André Jolles, whose ‘simple forms’ (*Einfache Formen*, [Jolles 1930]) as specific forms of language stressed the autonomy of linguistic procedures. But the idea of *Urformen* (primal forms) and the lack of a concept of rupture or deviation separates this position from the formalists. Certainly there are parallels to critical positions that do not pursue a ‘philosophy’ of narrative but analyze its construction as in Eberhard Lämmert’s *Bauformen des Erzählens* (1955, *Types of Narrative*). The turning away from a work-immanent analysis of literature and the adoption of analytical-functional methods (also applied by Käte Hamburger and Franz Stanzel) seem to evoke the formalist positions of the 1920s. Striedter highlights the parallel between Ėikhenbaum and Walter Benjamin, who both wrote about Leskov (Benjamin in 1936 after contact with the USSR) (on Benjamin’s reading of Leskov see Michał Mrugalski’s chapter on Kracauer and Benjamin and the Frankfurt School in this volume). According to Striedter, Benjamin sees the functional difference between oral and written narrative in accordance with formalist procedure, but since he does not use the concept of automatization/disautomatization of procedures, he cannot appreciate the specific quality of Leskov.

The incorporation of formalist concepts, theoretical approaches and concrete interpretations, especially narrative forms, into the theoretical and analytic studies of mostly German critics practised by Striedter shows a mutual compatibility that can be seen as a response to the problem of integrating migrated concepts.

## 8 Striedter, Russian formalism and reader-response criticism

In the context of the development of *Rezeptionsästhetik* (reader-response criticism) in the 1960s, Striedter sees a rather critical relation between the approach of Hans-Robert Jauss and certain formalist tenets. However,

Jauss is not placing himself in direct opposition to formalism, but tries to resume and proceed systematically from the point at which formalism was content with a mere acknowledgement of its own historicity instead of drawing the methodological consequences. These consequences include Habermas' general insight, applied by Jauss to literary criticism, that the 'empirical' or 'nomological' theory and methodology cannot simply be transferred to the social sciences and the humanities because the latter are concerned with the historically conditioned interpretation of historical phenomena, and therefore need their own historical-hermeneutic methodology. (Striedter 1969, LXXII)

According to Striedter, it would have been relevant for reader-response criticism to elaborate on Shklovskii's remark: "It is important for the writer to emphasize the ambiguity [*raznosmyslivanie teksta*] of his work" (Striedter 1969, XXXV). The potential for multiple meanings is contained in the work itself.

Striedter seeks to question specific theoretical positions, for instance, he disagrees with Victor Erlich's criticism of Shklovskii's apodictic statement on the central role of parody and the thesis that *Tristram Shandy* is the most typical novel in world literature. He answers this criticism by referring to Shklovskii's essay on prose without plot (*vne siuzheta*) and arguing that the genre of the novel is designed to disclose hardened or hardening artistic procedures. This is accomplished by parody as well as by the reduction of plot or of the hero in narrative texts. These procedures of deviation from genre conventions may become features of the genre itself. Striedter's method of presentation involves the explication of theorems and the testing of their methodological usefulness:

The dissolution of traditional plot constructions allows the accommodation of themes and methods which are new or previously regarded as 'unliterary'. In this way it may become an important factor of literary evolution. And this leads to the question whether novels that are 'lacking in plot' or offend against traditional 'methods of plotting' may be of special importance to the genre and its evolution. (Striedter 1969, XLI)

Striedter also examines Tynianov's concept of parody. In its inherently destructive element, which is at the same time constructive, he stresses the general movement of literary evolution. (The intertextual aspect is not important yet.)

## 9 Wolf-Dieter Stempel and Russian formalism

In following the stages of theoretical development of the formalists, Striedter detects a decline of self-reflection within the group, which he appraises critically:

Whereas in his early article Jakobson still poses the question of the historical conditionality of his own position in judging artistic works, later formalist statements on the problem of evolution concentrated unambiguously on the 'supersession of systems and schools' and their doctrines, without reflecting on the principally historical character of their own 'school' and their 'system' or making it evident as a part (and foundation) of theory and analysis itself. (Striedter 1969, LXX)

The introduction of the Romance scholar Wolf-Dieter Stempel also looks at the concepts, their argumentative validation and fields of application, in particular the theory of poetic language, the problem of confronting poetic with practical language, the development of a poetic linguistics and the specifics of verse emphasizing the role of rhythm compared to metrics. Stempel highlights a later phase of formalist thinking which takes up a historic approach connected to a specific concept of meaning, stemming from Tynianov's analysis of verse. He shows the interrelation between the concept of poetic language and the practice of Futurist poetry and discusses the opposition between 'poetic' and 'practical' language with reference to the theory of deviation, which he considers imprecise. For him, "the question of the linguistic status of literature has remained controversial even beyond the subsequent Prague structuralism to this day" (Stempel 1972, XVII). He misses the differentiation between the general 'deviation' of the poetic code and the deviating use of linguistic elements. "Neither is the deviation from or breaking of linguistic rules 'poetic' in itself [...], nor is correctness or regularity unpoetic per se" (Stempel 1972, XXII). Stempel sees the definition of poetic language as a statement focussing on expression as the continuative functional aspect. According to him, Jakobson's model of the functions of language which was conceived after the formalist period has begun a new phase in the theoretical discourse about poetic language. In his discussion of the theses of Jakobson, Tynianov and Tomashevskii, Stempel uses a style of argumentative debate by discussing the aporias of many theoretical approaches or their incompleteness in the context of the linguistic poetics of the 1970s. Like Striedter, Stempel presents cross-references to contemporary or later positions which were analogous or oppositional (Benedetto Croce, Paul Valéry, Spitzer, Vossler, linguistic poetics of the 1970s). He also quotes Novalis' characterization of poetic language as "expression for expression's sake" (Novalis 1968, 93).

## 10 Russian formalism and Poetics and Hermeneutics

The theoretical positions advocated by Striedter and Stempel as members of the research group *Poetik und Hermeneutik* centered on formalist concepts in connection with theoretical developments in France (Greimas, Todorov, Genette, Kristeva, Riffaterre).

At the conference of the group devoted to “The Comic” (1974) Striedter came up with a little performance one might call a mimed enactment of formalist theory. In a clownish way, he mimed dealing with an obstacle, a hurdle. (It was a wooden lath blocking the path, which had to be surmounted in different ways – deviously, elaborately.) This involved the testing of alternatives, the verification and falsification of solutions. There was neither a clear solution, nor a conclusive approach to the problem, rather a dynamic, undogmatic tackling the obstacle without doctrine and clear options. Striedter’s mime was an interpretation of Èikhenbaum’s theory of the formalist method centering on dynamics, transformability, relinquishing of doctrine and self-correction. And he follows Èikhenbaum:

We do not have a complete system, a closed doctrine, and we never did. In our scientific work we value theory only as a working hypothesis used for discovering facts and meaning, both in their regularity and as material for research. Therefore we eschew definitions, so necessary for epigones, and general theses, so beloved by eclectics. We formulate concrete principles and stick to them if they are verified by the material. If the material calls for their differentiation or transformation, we change and differentiate the principles. In this sense we are independent of our own theories. There is no finished science – science does not take place in the postulation of truths but in the surmounting of errors. (Striedter 1969, XIV)

In the role of a clown, Striedter enacted, as it were, the opposition between the nomological-empirical and the historical-hermeneutical (though it is not Shklovskii’s knight’s move that he enacted). Supported by arguments, he turned his performance into a verbal text. In this form it is documented in the proceedings of the conference on “The Comic” (Striedter 1976). The argument for alternative solutions, the self-correction, the positing of principles and their surmounting sound like a disclosure of formalist methods. As a formalist clown, Striedter managed to lead the conference – usually a rather stiff discussion group around an oval table – to a ‘new seeing’ (*novoe videnie*); he addressed the group as “Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen” (Striedter 1976, 390) and even managed to make them laugh.

After moving to Harvard, Striedter took part in influential literary debates as a lively and much sought-after participant, consistently presenting formalist positions for discussion.

## 11 Conclusion

Striedter managed to connect the two aspects of theory in his account: its semantics and its syntax. The semantics is more figurative in the sense of the production of concepts, the syntax is narrative. An interpretation of semantics looks at the forming of concepts, their figurativeness; the syntactic aspect means that a theory about topics like literature is using an argumentative discourse, a theoretical narrative. Striedter analyzed both the discourse and the narrative.

As authors of the introductions to the two volumes on Russian formalism, Striedter and Stempel considered it their task to project the central positions of formalism onto an existing or just evolving field of discussion. They saw themselves as mediators who also intervened retrospectively in the theoretical discussion of the formalists. This is what makes their introductions so challenging. They both were concerned with emphasizing the openness, incompleteness and compatibility of formalist positions. In other words: the anti-doctrinaire quality of a theory.

*Translated by Martin Richter*

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