Jessica Merrill

The North American Reception of Russian Formalism

Russian formalism was a heterogeneous movement, which was initially developed within two separate societies – The Society for the Study of Poetic Language (Obshchestvo po izucheniiu poeticheskogo iazyka, OPOIaZ) and the Moscow Linguistic Circle, MLC (Moskovskii lingvisticheskii kruzhok, MLK) – beginning in the mid-1910s. Although the core formalists (Osip Brik, Boris Ėikhenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovskii, and Iurii Tynianov) developed their ideas in close collaboration with each other, their writings did not build off of a set of shared presuppositions. In his *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (1984) Peter Steiner concludes that Russian formalism was "not the sum total of its theories [...] but a *polemos*, a struggle among contradictory and incompatible views" (Steiner 1984, 259; see also Steiner 1982). Furthermore, as Ėikhenbaum stressed in his well-known summary and defense of the movement, the formalists were constantly "evolving" in their thinking (Ėikhenbaum 1971 [1927], 3). This heterogeneity is an important factor in assessing the historical reception of the movement. When Russian formalism was introduced to an English-speaking audience after World War II there was an array of possible positions (e. g. Shklovskii's view or Tynianov's), and moments (e. g. writings from the 1910s or 1930s) that could be selected as the center point for constructing a coherent narrative. (See also Igor Pilshchikov's chapter on Russian formalism in this volume.)

This chapter begins with a brief synopsis of what I will call the 'canonical reception narrative' for Russian formalism currently found in English-language textbooks and encyclopedias of literary theory. The second section presents an alternative, summary narrative. This serves to highlight that the canonical narrative is a product of the reception history of Russian formalism, not a given. The third and fourth sections identify the forces that shaped the introduction of Russian formalism to an English-speaking audience in the 1950s and 1960s. I seek to explain why the canonical narrative emerged as it did, and how it was solidified in the 1970s as mainstream North American literary studies began to shift away from literary theory towards cultural studies.

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1 The canonical narrative: Literary autonomy as difference

Entries on Russian formalism in encyclopedias or introductions to literary theory often introduce the movement by stressing the concept of "autonomy" and a methodology of contrastive differentiation. For example, we read that: "the Formalists' ambition was to establish an autonomous science of literature," and that they "insisted on the autonomy of literature and, by implication, of literary study" (Thompson 1985, 152). This stress on the autonomy of literature and literary studies is given as the primary goal of the movement. This raises the question: how did the formalists seek to demonstrate this autonomy? An answer routinely provided in these overviews goes as follows, "Formalism emerged as a distinctly independent school in Russian literary scholarship [...] by focusing attention on the analysis of distinguishing features of literature"; that is, "on the differences between poetic and practical language" (Kolesnikoff 1993, 53). For the formalists, "literature is a 'special' kind of language, in contrast to the 'ordinary' language we commonly use" (Eagleton 1996, 4). Or, "The specificity of literature [...] is embodied in 'special' formal procedures, techniques, and patterns [...] These patterns are perceived as different from 'ordinary' forms of textual organization" (Margolin 2005, italics added). To summarize, what one finds persistently foregrounded in English-language overviews of Russian formalism are two interrelated claims: (1) Russian formalism sought to establish the 'autonomy' of literature and literary studies by (2) seeking to identify the features that differentiate literary (also 'poetic', 'special', 'artistic') discourse from non-literary (also 'prosaic', 'ordinary', 'practical') discourse.

2 An alternative narrative: Psychological parallelism

Summaries of formalist theory that stress the importance of isolating and differentiating poetic language often refer to Lev Iakubinskii's contributions to the first OPOIaZ collections. His articles, published in 1916 and 1917, focused on the sounds of poetic language, differentiating them from non-poetic ('practical') language on empirical grounds. For example, he argued that the general tendency towards the dissimilation of similar liquid sounds ('r', 'l') is not observed in poetic language. This allowed him to claim that "the fate of the accumulation of liquid sounds in practical and poetic language shows to what extent these two language

systems are different" (Iakubinskii 1986 [1917], 180). His arguments suggested that poetic language can be thought of as an autonomous language system, empirically differentiated from non-poetic language.

This claim was not universally accepted by the formalists, however. At an April 1919 meeting of the MLC, Roman Jakobson and Osip Brik debated the concept of poetic language. The minutes of the meeting suggest that Jakobson opposed Iakubinskii's approach, arguing that: "in general one must not think of poetic language and practical language as two sharply differentiated spheres. One can speak only of two tendencies, whose endpoints are antipodes" (Institut Russkogo Iazyka 1919). Jakobson (1969 [1923], 16–17) would dispute Iakubinskii's claims in print in 1923. The idea that literary form is autonomous was also not a principle universally accepted by the formalists. In Jakobson's and Petr Bogatyrev's survey, *Slavianskaia filologiia v Rossii za gody voiny i revoliutsii* (1923, *Slavic Philology During the Years of War and Revolution*) they articulate the differences between OPOIaZ and the MLC. The authors report that, while the "one group" – the MLC – "proves the necessity of a sociologically grounded history of the development of artistic forms, the other [OPOIaZ] insists on the complete autonomy of these forms" (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1923, 31). These disputes indicate that, among the formalists, there was no single orthodox position on the concepts of literary autonomy and poetic language.

How can we summarize Russian formalism in a less restrictive way, so as to accommodate these disagreements? Rather than begin with the claim that Russian formalist theory was motivated by the question: what makes poetry different from non-poetry?, we can substitute this for a broader research question: what is poetry? When answering this question, the formalists relied on arguments derived from the psychology of cognition. At the turn of the twentieth century, the relevant psychological discourse centered on debates about how 'ideas' or 'images' are organized in the mind (today, cognitive psychology is defined as the study of how people perceive, learn, remember, and think about information). In her groundbreaking book *Istoki russkogo formalizma: Traditsiia psikhologizma i formal'naia shkola* (2005, *The Origins of Russian Formalism: The Tradition of Psychologism and the Formal School*), Ilona Svetlikova has demonstrated that nineteenth-century associationist psychology was essential for the emergence Russian formalist theory. Associationism was a movement which argued that mental processes and mental structure result from the ability to associate ideas. Association was understood to follow basic laws; the most universal of which were widely held to be the laws of contiguity and similarity. As Svetlikova has shown, the formalists adhered to the widely held associationist premise that conceptual associations based on similarity were more creative than those made on the basis of contiguity, which were more conservative. The latter were thought to be responsible for habits and

clichés, and the former for inventive mental activity including artistic creativity (Svetlikova 2005, 87–92).

Roman Jakobson, for example, described poetry as a mode of cognition using the terms of associationist psychology. In his "Noveishaia russkaia poeziia" (1921, "The Newest Russian Poetry", 1979), he refers to different modes of "linguistic thought" ("iazykovoe myshlenie") – practical, emotional, and poetic – and suggests that these can be defined by the kinds of associations which are operative in the mind (Jakobson 1979 [1921], 304). In poetic and emotional language, Jakobson stresses, "habitual associations of contiguity [*assotsiatsii po smezhnosti*] retreat into the background"; "in poetry the role of mechanical association [*mekhanicheskaia assotsiatsiia*] is reduced to minimum" (Jakobson 1979, 330). Viktor Shklovskii likewise defined art as a mode of cognition, which he described using the neologism *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 14). Like Jakobson, he describes this as a process in which mechanical associations are disturbed: "in order to make an object a fact of art, it is necessary [...] to remove (*vyrvat'*) the thing from the series of customary associations (*riad privychnykh assotsiatsii*) in which it is located" (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 79). How does poetry disrupt these habitual associations? The formalists assumed that verbal art is a product the cognitive process whereby stimuli are associated with each other on the basis of their perceived similarities (the law of similarity). The manifestation of this tendency in verbal form was referred to as parallelism. In this, the formalists were extending (while critiquing) the work of Aleksandr Veselovskii, particularly his study "Psikhologicheskii parallelizm i ego formy v otrazheniiakh poeticheskogo stilia" (1898, "Psychological Parallelism and its Forms in the Reflection of Poetic Style", 2011). Parallelism, for these scholars, was the juxtaposition of two units of language on the basis of perceived similarities between them.

I propose that Russian formalist theory can be summarized as a number of theoretical extensions building off of this idea. I will briefly identify three primary extensions: the identification of 'devices' (*priemy*); the study of poetic production; and the descriptive analysis of individual works. My summary does not purport to account for all of Russian formalist theory, but this framework can be extended to include works and authors not mentioned here. The first extension is that of comparative poetics. This includes efforts to identify a range of 'devices.' For the formalists, these devices all have parallelism as a kind of common denominator. For example, Jakobson writes that:

> Poetic language possesses a certain rather elementary device (*priem*): the device of the convergence (*sblizheniia*) of two units of speech. In the area of semantics, varieties of this device are: parallelism; simile – a particular case of parallelism; metamorphosis, that is, a parallelism developed in time; and metaphor, that is, a parallelism reduced to a single

> point. In the area of euphony modifications of the device include: rhyme, assonance, and alliteration (or, more broadly speaking, sound repetition). (Jakobson 1979 [1921], 336)

Here Jakobson describes an array of techniques of verbal art – simile, metaphor, assonance, rhyme – as manifestations of parallelism as 'the' elementary device. Shklovskii makes a similar claim in his seminal study, "Sviaz' priemov siuzhetoslozheniia s obshchimi priemami stilia" (1919, "The Relationship between Devices of Plot Construction and General Devices of Style"). Contrasting "art" with "practical thought" (*prakticheskoe myshlenie*), he writes that

> art [...] is based on stepped gradation and the disintegration of even those things which are presented abstract and indivisible. Stepped construction includes: repetition – with its particular case, rhyme, tautology, tautological parallelism, psychological parallelism, deceleration, epic repetitions, the triadic repetition of folktales, peripeteia, and many other devices of plot construction (*siuzhetnost'*). (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 33)

Shklovskii's conclusion is that: "we see that that which in prose can be designated as 'a', in art is expressed by 'A1 A' (for example, psychological parallelism). This is the soul of all devices" (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 37). In these passages we find the distinction between 'poetic' and 'practical' that was stressed in the canonical reception narrative. However, by calling attention to the cognitive psychological underpinnings of their arguments, we can frame the opposition between poetic and practical language somewhat differently. This is not an opposition between two fixed corpora; the formalists did not construct arguments by contrasting examples of 'practical' and 'poetic' speech. Instead they started with cognitive tendencies (i. e. the laws of association) and then looked for formal manifestations of the law of similarity by identifying an array of devices derived from parallelism. The Russian formalists found these devices in political rhetoric and in advertising, as well as in verse. The analyses of the 'devices' of Vladimir Lenin's speeches published by Shklovskii, Ėikhenbaum, and Tynianov demonstrate that the identification of 'devices' is not equivalent to the contrastive differentiation of poetic versus non-poetic language (Ėikhenbaum 1924; Shklovskii 1924; Tynianov 1924).

The second extension of psychological parallelism I want to mention is the study of the production of verbal art. Shklovskii, who was invested in production as a writer and a creative writing instructor, frequently approached the study of narrative structure from this perspective. This is indicated by his theoretical terminology; his goal is to elucidate the laws of "plot construction" (*siuzhetoslozhenie*) (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 27). Shklovskii repeatedly describes the process of production as placing one "piece" (*kusok*) next to another. For example, he writes that "in an artistic work, in addition to elements which consist of borrowings,

there is also an element of creation (*tvorchestvo*), commonly known as the will of the creator (*volia tvortsa*), who is constructing the work, by taking one piece and placing it next to other pieces" (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 54). Elsewhere, Shklovskii specified that the juxtaposition of pieces ought to prompt a feeling of "contradiction" (*protivorechie*): "The sense of the unity (*slitnost'*) of a literary work is, for me, replaced by a feeling of the value of the individual piece. Rather than unifying the pieces, I am more interested in their contradictions" (Shklovskii 1990a [1928], 381). Shklovskii's 'pieces' are juxtaposed as parallels, that is, according to perceived similarities. As he explains in "Iskusstvo kak priem" (1917, "Art as Device"), parallelism is not just about similarity, but about similarity in difference: "in parallelism what is important is the feeling of a lack of convergence despite similarity" (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 20). In sum, in Shklovskii's account of narrative production, this process is driven by the mental process of similarity association. This view is comparable to Jakobson's description of verbal production in the "poetic function" as the projection of "the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Jakobson 1987 [1960], 71). This is a statement about verbal production; the selection and combination of units of speech.

The third extension of Russian Formalist work on parallelism is the description of individual works or discrete corpora of verbal art. In this kind of study similarity associations are employed as an analytic lens. One of the best-known examples of this kind of analysis is Jakobson's article on Baudelaire's "Les Chats" (1857, "The Cats"), co-authored with Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1962 (Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1962]). In contrast to the first extension described above as the identification of devices, this kind of analysis tended towards minute descriptions of parallelism within a work, rather than the identification of 'devices' (derived from parallelism) found across diverse examples. Jakobson was committed to the study of parallelism throughout his career. As he reported in his dialogs with Krystyna Pomorska, recorded when he was in his 80s, "there has been no other subject during my entire scholarly life that has captured me as persistently as have the questions of parallelism" (Jakobson and Pomorska 1988 [1980], 100). In his 1966 article, "Grammatical Parallelism and its Russian Facet," Jakobson demonstrated how the 'parallelistic texture' of a single work could be analyzed not just on semantic and phonological levels, but also at the level of grammar: syntax; nominal gender, animacy, and case; and verbal tense and aspect. Jakobson described parallelism as: "a system of steady correspondences in composition and order of elements on many different levels; syntactic constructions, grammatical forms and grammatical categories, lexical synonyms and total lexical identities, and finally combinations of sounds and prosodic schemes" (Jakobson and 1988 [1980], 102–103). Some of these levels, such as the repetition of entire lines of

verse ('total lexical identities'), are relatively obvious to any perceiver. Other levels require training in linguistics to perceive. Jakobson's analyses range across these different levels, treating them as equal. This was criticized by Michael Riffaterre, who argued that the perception of equivalences on the order of words or phrases is categorically different from perceived grammatical similarities; the latter are constituents which can be identified by a linguist, but are not perceptible to an ordinary reader (Riffaterre 1980 [1966], 31). This critique highlights the fact that Jakobson's work on grammatical parallelism can be seen as resulting from a particular (linguistic) mode of perception: the use of similarity associations as an analytic lens for describing a discrete text.

In sum, it is possible to summarize Russian formalism as (at least) three extensions of the study of psychological parallelism: as comparative poetics (identification of devices); as poetic production; and as the linguistic description of works (as invariants and variables). In the reception of formalism in the US after World War II these three extensions were not treated as equally valid, but were instead incorporated into a narrative of progress, in which the third extension was seen as the most accurate, surpassing other kinds of Formalist research.

3 The North American reception of Russian formalism

English translations of Russian formalist texts and English-language publications on the movement began to appear in significant numbers only in the early 1970s. David Gorman's bibliography of English-language resources relating to Russian formalism (1992; supplemented 1995), lists twelve anthologies of Russian formalist texts; of these, only one was published before 1970. The English-language publications on or related to Russian formalism available before 1970 included: Victor Erlich's *Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine* (1955, revised 1965); Vladimir Propp's *Morfologiia skazki* (1958, *Morphology of the Folktale*); Lee Lemon and Marion Reis' *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (1965); Roman Jakobson's *Selected Writings: Phonological Studies* (1962) and *Selected Writings: Slavic Epic Studies* (1966); Krystyna Pomorska's *Russian Formalist Theory and its Poetic Ambiance* (1968). Other impactful introductions to Russian formalism from this period were found in: René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949) and Lev Trotskii's critique of the movement in *Literatura i revoliutsiia* (1923, *Literature and Revolution*, 1925, Trans. Rose Strunsky). In this short list one can already see indications of the forces that shaped the reception of Russian formalism in the 1950s and 1960s. I began this chapter by noting that formalism was a protean, difficult-to-synthesize

movement. In its English-language reception it was adapted to two more familiar theoretical movements: New Criticism and structuralism. I will focus first on the influence of New Criticism, and then turn to the influence of Roman Jakobson and the amalgamation of formalism with structuralism. These were two separate developments, yet they converged in shaping the reception of Russian formalism.

The emergence of New Criticism in the US is dated to around 1923. As with Russian formalism, scholars stress the diversity of the movement. Wellek, for example, asserts that "the view that the New Criticism represents a coterie or even a school is mistaken [...] Ransom, Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and R. P. Warren may be grouped together as Southern Critics. Burke and Blackmur stand apart, and Yvor Winters was a complete maverick" (Wellek 1978, 613). New Criticism emerged as an alternative to the methods of philology and literary history, which had dominated academic literary studies in the US since the 1890s. John Crowe Ransom, in his seminal "Criticism, Inc." (1937) proposed, as an alternative, that literary 'criticism' should be "seriously taken in hand by professionals," and that the field should "receive its own charter of rights and function independently" (Ransom 1937, 588, 600). Over the course of the 1930s, the program for an independent and professionalized criticism established itself not only against academic philology, but against other modes of criticism. The New Critics emphatically rejected what they called 'moral' criticism, particularly Marxist or Marxist-informed criticism. Gerald Graff mentions, as examples, R. P. Blackmur's 'attack' on Granville Hicks's *The Great Tradition* in 1935, and Cleanth Brooks' critique of Edmund Wilson's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* in 1939. As Graff summarizes, by the end of the 1930s, the New Critics came to embrace a position that: "literature had no politics except as an irrelevant extrinsic concern" (Graff 2007 [1987], 150). Simplifying some, the New Critics defended this position by arguing that no statement of a poet's thought can be separated from the total communication of the poem as a complex whole. By the mid–1950s, "the New Criticism was identified with the formalist study of an individual, autonomous text which was displaced from any sense of context" (Jancovich 1993, 5).

The New Critical approach was often referred to as 'intrinsic' criticism, a term which relies on its opposite: 'extrinsic' criticism. This division was widely employed, and organized, for example, Warren and Wellek's *Theory of Literature* (1956 [1948]) – a textbook described as having "exercised a profound influence on the teaching of and research into literature at university level" in the 1950s and 1960s (van Rees 1984, 504). Their book divides the study of literature into an "extrinsic approach," with chapters on literature and biography, psychology, society, ideas, and the "intrinsic study" of literature with chapters on prosody, style, symbolism and myth, and genre (Warren and Wellek 1956 [1948], xi). Wellek's considerable knowledge of Czech structuralism (as a former member of the

Prague Linguistic Circle), and of Russian formalism allowed him to weave references to these movements into the book's arguments throughout. With the onset of the Cold War in the 1950s, the New Critics' opposition to extrinsic, Marxist-informed analyses was foregrounded as an important commonality with Russian formalism. For instance, writing in 1955, Victor Erlich referred to an anti-Soviet political alliance between New Criticism and Russian formalism:

> Russian Formalism is not necessarily a thing of the past. 'Formalist' activities in Russia, and subsequently in other Slavic countries, could be prohibited by bureaucratic fiat. But many Formalist insights outlasted the totalitarian purge as they found new lease on life in kindred movements on the other side of the 'Marxist-Leninist' iron curtain. (Erlich 1955, 241)

This equation of the two movements as political allies ignores the intellectual and political context which informed the emergence of Russian formalism in the late 1910s and early 1920s – a time when some formalist leaders, such as Osip Brik and Viktor Shklovskii, voluntarily and enthusiastically allied themselves with the revolutionary movement. What was more important, in the US after the 1950s, was that Russian formalism had ultimately been repressed by Stalin in the 1930s. The impulse to think in terms of the oppositions 'intrinsic-extrinsic,' and 'formalism-Marxism,' overpowered many important differences between Russian formalism and New Criticism. The most obvious of these is that the movements adhered to incompatible methodologies and rationales for their scholarship (Thompson 1971, 152). The New Critics were primarily interested in literary interpretation and literary criticism, while the Russian Formalists were committed to the study of poetics and literary theory. Simplifying some, this meant that while the New Critics sought to elucidate the meanings created by literary works, the formalists eschewed interpretative questions–focusing instead on identifying poetic devices found in many works (i. e. poetics). Moreover, while the New Critics saw their task as the evaluation of a literary work as better or worse than others (what they called literary or aesthetic judgment), the formalists vehemently rejected this kind of value judgment as unscholarly. Their understanding of literary theory was modeled on the 'value-free' social sciences and linguistics.

Nevertheless, the introductory English-language scholarship on Russian formalism often sought to explain the foreign movement by pointing to possible analogies with New Criticism. The most obvious example is the important anthology *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lemon and Reis 1965; 2012 [2nd edition]), which for decades was the primary resource for Russian formalism in English. Subsequently published English-language anthologies, although more extensive and compiled by specialists, have still not been cited nearly as often (according to a Google scholar search). The editorial commentary and introductions in the *Four Essays* volume supplied by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis,

consistently seek to explain Russian formalism through the lens of New Criticism. Their "Introduction" begins by noting that

> an English-speaking reader going through the early works of the Formalists will often feel that, despite differences of names and details of arguments, he is on familiar ground. With the necessary adjustments, he recognizes some of the concepts of the New Critics, their strategies, and 'even their enemies' (Lemon and Reis 1965, xix; emphasis added).

Helping the reader to make these adjustments throughout, the editors suggest a series of analogies: Vissarion Belinskii and Nikolai Chernyshevskii are equivalent to Matthew Arnold and Paul Elmer More; A. A. Potebnia is like I. A. Richards, A. N. Veselovskii like R. S. Crane (Lemon and Reis 1965, xx, xxi, xxii). Commentary on the articles themselves often fuses the voices of the formalists with their New Critical counterparts: Shklovskii makes the same point as Richards; Tomashevskii is like Kenneth Burke and Warren; Jakobson is close to Ransom; Tynianov to Brooks, etc. (Lemon and Reis 1965, 5, 61, 95, 127, 130). The translation of Russian formalism into English is, in effect, the translation of the movement into the language and conceptual framework of New Criticism. Today, the association of the two movements is well established in surveys. For example, a popular textbook edited by David H. Richter, *The Critical Tradition*, issued in three editions (1989, 1998, 2007), introduces Russian formalism along with New Criticism and Chicago Neo-Aristotelianism under the heading of "Formalisms." The rationale for grouping these movements together, is that:

> all three versions of formalism proposed an 'intrinsic' criticism that defined and addressed the specifically literary qualities in the text, and all three began in reaction to various forms of 'extrinsic' criticism that viewed the text as either the product of social and historical forces or a document making an ethical statement (Richter 2006, 699).

In sum, we find in English-language translations, anthologies, and scholarship on Russian formalism an overwhelming tendency to amalgamate the movement with New Criticism. Formalism was received as an ally of the New Critics in their opposition to extrinsic (i. e. socially-minded or Marxist) criticism. This meant that important sociological, conceptual, and methodological differences between the movements were overlooked. Instead, the aspects of the formalist legacy which seemed most compatible with New Criticism were foregrounded: the conceptual center of Russian formalism was located in its proto-Structuralist or even Czech-Structuralist 'phase'.

This second trend in the reception history of Russian formalism is intertwined with the career of Roman Jakobson. Jakobson's influence on this history was considerable, as he was the only member of the original core group of formalists to leave the Soviet Union and establish contacts in Central and Western Europe

and in the United States. Moreover, Jakobson was a masterful institution builder. After co-founding the MLC in the 1910s, Jakobson moved to Czechoslovakia in 1920, where he was influential as a co-founder of the Prague Linguistic Circle, and as a leading theorist of Czech structuralist linguistics and semiotics. In 1941, Jakobson arrived in New York as a refugee from Nazi-occupied Europe. He initially taught at the École Libre des Hautes Études and at Columbia University in the 1940s, but by 1951 Jakobson would take up the teaching and research positions at Harvard University and at MIT that he would hold until his retirement. The two monographs on Russian formalism that appeared in English before 1970 were both written by Jakobson's students. Victor Erlich's book began as a dissertation advised by Jakobson while he was at Columbia, and Krystyna Pomorska's book was begun under Jakobson's supervision at MIT before they were married in 1962. Jakobson's considerable influence on Erlich's understanding of Russian formalism is candidly described in the latter's 2006 memoir. For instance, Erlich includes the following assessment of his dissertation by another faculty member: "few dissertations have an epic hero. This dissertation has got one. His name is Roman Jakobson" (Erlich 2006, 135).

It is impossible to pinpoint one person's role in a complex historical process. Yet, one place we can potentially identify Jakobson's influence is in the reiteration of his discursive formulations in the work of his students. Jakobson presented the history of formalism as a structuralist overcoming of earlier mistakes. For instance, in the 1930s, Jakobson told his students in Brno that:

> in the earlier works of Shklovskii, a poetic work was defined as a mere sum of its artistic devices, while poetic evolution appeared nothing more than a substitution of certain devices. With the further development of Formalism, there arose the 'accurate' (*správný*) conception of a poetic work as a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. (Jakobson 1978 [1935], 85; emphasis added)

Jakobson creates a narrative in which the 'earlier' theory – associated with Viktor Shklovskii–produced simplistic scholarship which has been surpassed by a more 'accurate,' structuralist, approach. There is arguably a personal factor at play here, in that Shklovskii and Jakobson had once been close friends and collaborators, but by the mid-1920s had become rivals. This rivalry was transposed into Erlich's *Russian Formalism*, where Shklovskii's work is treated in a dismissive tone, something that Erlich later attributed "in part" to his "thesis advisor's slant on his former comrade-in-arms" (Erlich 2006, 133). Even more importantly, the teleological narrative of progress from an 'early' Shklovskian formalism towards a more 'accurate' Jakobsonian structuralism informs Erlich's book throughout; articulated in statements such as: "Russian formalism 'at its best' was or tended to be Structuralism" (Erlich 1980 [1965], 200; emphasis added).

This narrative of progress has remained central to summaries of formalism for decades. For instance, an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* breaks Russian formalism into two "phases" and goes on to state that the "inadequacies of the early formalists' approach to literature were threefold": it was too "mechanistic," "ahistorical," and insisted on "too strict a separation of literature from life" [...] "Most of these inadequacies were eliminated in the second phase of formalism..." (Kolesnikoff 1993, 56). A more recent entry echoes this assessment, without the overt evaluative judgment: "the initial perspective was aestheticist, ahistorical, reductive, and mechanistic and is associated with the early Shklovskii" (Margolin 2005). In this narrative of progress, Shklovskii is firmly associated with the "inadequate," "early" phase, and Jakobson and Tynianov are championed as the authors of the more advanced phase (Margolin 2005).

Privileging the branches of Russian formalist theory that were most compatible with structuralism facilitated the conceptual convergence of Russian formalism with New Criticism. As exemplified by Erlich, this could be done by picking out moments of organicist thinking in the two movements:

> we find that the version of New Criticism which comes closest to the Formalist-Structuralist methodology is the trend represented by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. This approach, which is often described as 'organistic' [...] parallels in many crucial respects the later phase of Slavic Formalist theorizing. The emphasis on the organic unity of a work of literature, with the concomitant warning against the 'heresy of paraphrase', a keen awareness of the 'ambiguity' of poetic idiom [...] all this reminds one of Tynianov and Jakobson in their later phases and of the Prague Linguistic Circle. (Erlich 1980 [1965], 275)

As suggested by Erlich's use of the hyphenated amalgamation 'Formalist-Structuralist', the convergence between formalism and New Criticism went alongside the convergence between formalism and structuralism. The prevalence of organicist thinking for the New Critics – the tendency to describe poems metaphorically as organic bodies, totalities, or wholes – is well-established, and is commonly traced to the influence of the English romantic poet Samuel Coleridge. While Czech structuralist linguistics described language as a system, not as an organism, the popular simplification of structuralism as asserting that "language is a system in which 'tout se tient': in which everything is inextricably related to everything else," has allowed for a perceived convergence between structuralism and organicism (Culler 1975, 13). For instance, in an essay on structuralist linguistics, Ernst Cassirer summarized that "language" is "organic in the sense that [...] it forms a coherent whole in which all parts are interdependent upon each other. In this sense, we may even speak of a poem, a work of art, of a philosophic system as 'organic'" (Cassirer 2007 [1945], 310; for the influence of biological theories on Czech Structuralism see Seriot 2001, 214–231).

To return to my suggestion that Russian formalism can be summarized as three extensions of psychological parallelism, we can see that these extensions were not received as equally valid. Preference was shown for work which was compatible with organicist thinking. Jakobson's descriptive analyses of individual works were perceived as complimentary to a New Critical agenda: both isolated an individual text, treated as an autonomous or organic whole, in order to explicate the intricacies of its structure. In their analysis of "Les Chats," Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss describe the poem as "consist[ing] of systems of equivalences which fit inside one another and which offer in their totality, the appearance of a closed system" (Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss 1987 [1962], 195). This kind of work could be seen as a supplement to the goals of New Critical literary studies. For example, in a favorable review of Jakobson's analysis of grammatical parallelism in Shakespeare's sonnet 129 "Th' expence of Spirit…" (1609), I. A. Richards suggested that Jakobson's "unchallengeable" description can be taken as evidence for the judgment of this sonnet as one of "topmost rank" (Richards 1970, 589). Jakobson's focus on individual works, or corpora, as systems, allowed his extension of parallelism to appear compatible with the expectations for literary scholarship in North America established in the 1930s.

This was not true for Shklovskii's extension of parallelism as the study of poetic/narrative production. An indication of this can be found in the English translation of the sentence in Shklovskii's "Plot Construction" study cited above. In this quote, Shklovskii is describing the process of narrative production as the placement of one 'piece' after another. In his translation of this passage Benjamin Sher added a new clause ("as an integral whole") to the end of the sentence. The Russian reads:

> В художественном произведении, кроме тех элементов, которые состоят из заимствований, существует еще элемент творчества, известной воли творца, строящего произведение, берущего один кусок и ставящего его рядом с другими кусками. (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 54)

Sher's translation reads:

> Apart from elements which consist of borrowings, a work of art also contains an element of creativity, a force of will driving an artist to create his artifact piece by piece 'as an integral whole'. (Shklovskii 1990b [1929], 41; italics added)

This addition is unmotivated by the text of the original. Moreover, it overrides Shklovskii's rejection of the concept of the literary work as a 'unity' elsewhere in *Theory of Prose*. Shklovskii writes, for example, that "the unity (*edinstvo*) of a literary work is probably a myth" (Shklovskii 1985 [1929], 215). One way of explaining

this addition is that Sher is making Shklovskii's theory more compatible with the New Criticism and/or with structuralism. The apparent need to rewrite Shklovskii in the English translation suggests the extent to which the dominant reception narrative for Russian formalism, which privileged the proto-structuralist work of Tynianov and Jakobson, created expectations which were projected onto the movement as a whole.

4 The poetic language debates

In this last section I will focus on a particular moment in the reception of Russian formalism which served to solidify the amalgamation of formalism to New Criticism and structuralism and to entrench the canonical narrative of autonomy and differentiation found in summary articles. This was a debate in the 1970s over the relationship between linguistics and literary studies, which centered on the question of 'poetic language.' The debate was conducted, in part, on the pages of *New Literary History*, which devoted special issues to the *The Language of Literature* (1972) and to the question: *What Is Literature?* (1973). This debate can be seen as a further step in the synthesis of Russian formalism with New Criticism and with structuralism, motivated by the perception that these movements could all be seen as allied intrinsic approaches in opposition to extrinsic scholarship. In the debate over poetic language a number of broader disagreements were implicitly at stake. An attack on the foundations of an allegiance between literary studies and linguistics (e. g. Jakobsonian linguistic poetics) could be seen as preparatory to advocating a preferred allegiance with the study of culture. The challenge to a linguistic definition of literature could be seen as a challenge to elitist definitions of the literary canon in favor of a broader object of study. In these debates the reception history of Russian formalism became intertwined with the shift in American literary studies away from New Criticism towards a Marxist-informed cultural studies.

In the 1970s debates, the opposition between the intrinsic and extrinsic camps was articulated as positions in favor of, and opposed to, an empirical distinction between 'poetic' and 'ordinary' language. The legacy of Russian formalism came to stand for a defense of this binary opposition, while the anti-formalist camp sought to dissolve it. This is evident from the titles of articles alone: e. g. Stanley Fish's "How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?" (1973) or Manuel Duran's "Inside the Glass Cage: Poetry and 'Normal' Language" (1972). One of the most extended and explicit statements of the anti-formalist position can be found in Mary Louise Pratt's *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (1977), which begins with a chapter devoted to a strident critique of Russian formalism and Czech

structuralism titled "The 'Poetic Language' Fallacy". For Pratt, this fallacy is equivalent to the: "belief that literature is linguistically autonomous, that is, possessed of intrinsic linguistic properties which distinguish it from all other kinds of discourse" (Pratt 1977, xii). Pratt sees that this fallacy is the central legacy of Russian formalism and Czech structuralism, movements which she treats as a single entity. Moreover, she stresses that:

> the poetic language doctrine which I am trying to refute constitutes the main area of overlap between structuralist poetics and Anglo-American "New" [...] criticism. Regardless of their differences, there is no question that both structuralist poetics and New Criticism foster essentially the same exclusivist attitude toward the relation between literary discourse and our other verbal activities. This affinity no doubt accounts for the ease and enthusiasm with which structuralist poetics was received on this side of the Atlantic in the 1950s and 1960s. (Pratt 1977, xiv–xv)

Pratt's critique of this poetic language 'doctrine' or 'fallacy', is both ethical and empirical. She argues that the division of poetic from ordinary language is based on elitist prejudices inherited from Romantic and Symbolist poetic movements, and she seeks to show that the devices found by Russian formalists in 'poetic' language are also found in 'ordinary' language, such as in oral narrative (Pratt 1977 xvi–xix, 68). In doing so, she refers for support to William Labov's *Language in the Inner City* (1972) and Labov's and Joshua Waletzky's "Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience" (1997).

It is notable that the critique of formalism which accompanied the rejection of literary theory (e. g. structuralism) in favor of cultural studies (e. g. New Historicism) within mainstream Anglo-American literary studies is reiterated almost verbatim in summaries of Russian formalism found in encyclopedias and textbooks. This apparent consensus around the 'autonomy' and 'differentiation' narrative, as I hope to have shown, is a product of the historical reception of Russian formalism – impacted by a Cold War understanding of intrinsic versus extrinsic criticism, and by the amalgamation of Russian formalism with New Criticism and structuralism along these lines. My alternative summary which suggests that Russian formalism can be seen as a movement departing from the psychology of cognition provides grounds to challenge Pratt's critique (Merrill 2017). More importantly, my understanding of Russian formalism is part of a broader effort to reinterpret the movement in a way that restores its connections with cultural history, biography, and politics (see, for example, Kalinin 2016; Levchenko 2012; Tihanov 2019; Svetlikova 2005). It is to be hoped that this research will eventually reshape the reception narrative for Russian Formalism not only within the field of Slavic Studies, but in the broader domain of Anglo-American literary academic studies.

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