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THE TROTSKY-SHKLOVSKY DEBATE: FORMALISM VERSUS MARXISM

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Summary

The controversies and discussions sparked by the Russian Formalists are important to review today because many of the same issues are still current. The most well-known exchange occurred in the early 1920s between Leon Trotsky and Victor Shklovsky, between a high government official of the Soviet regime and a leading member of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language. Was the discussion a harbinger of future Soviet policies? Interestingly, some of the objections voiced by government officials, at the time charged with overseeing cultural policy, are reflected in modern-day conceptions of Russian Formalism. An important question to consider is why a theory in poetics should have stirred the heated debate, about questions of ideology and art, in the first place.

Key Words: Russian Formalism, Marxism, poetics, Socialist Realism, science, art.

Literature and Revolution

As we approach the 100th year anniversary of the Russian Revolution, we are reminded of the discussions on art and ideological content that can be traced to the period just prior to and following the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. The seven or eight years of debate was not the first time for the questions to come up, but it marked future discussions on this topic more broadly than at any previous time. In part, this lasting influence was the result of the establishment soon after of the most complete and totalizing state oversight of artistic activity in modern time for almost sixty years (ending definitively with Glasnost), mainly in the Soviet systems

of Europe and East Asia. Why such influence also came to be important among many artists and critics in the West is the topic for another occasion; suffice it to say that it can be traced to the same period. This study will focus on one point in this debate, that between the Russian Formalists and representatives and supporters of the Bolshevik regime, in particular one of its central leaders, Leon Trotsky. The most well-known exchange, mainly one-sided, is between Trotsky's "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism," Chapter 5 of *Literature and Revolution* (1924[1957]), and writings of leading formalist theorist Victor Shklovsky.

A common perception, in large part resulting from the eventual political defeat of formalism by the late 1920s, is that Trotsky's critical evaluation represented a convincing take-down, at least that his arguments, by and large, carried the day. This view, in its different forms, in fact, has been widely accepted in literary studies, in addition coming to be taken as part of a definitive critique of formalist theories. For most observers, repulsed by the later consolidation of the Stalin regime, Trotsky's legacy has suffered less reproach (a great understatement for defenders and followers). For many, a certain measure of benefit of doubt, or even credit, appears reasonable to grant to his attack on formalism. He perished at the hands of the GPU, had criticized Stalin for dictatorial rule, and famously co-authored, with Diego Rivera and André Breton, the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" (1938[1970]), taken by many to represent a rejection of Socialist Realism and state/ideological control over the arts. While sympathy for these positions today is not uncommon, an objective assessment of both the events of the period and the actual record of the debate will show that this sympathy is undeserved. Above all, it is the historical context of the uneven exchange that helps specify what the issues, on both sides, were really all about.

A Political Critique of an Approach to Poetics

The first difficulty in a close reading of "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism" is to get a clear idea in what Trotsky's (1924[1957]) objection actually consisted. Not only was formalism the only theory ("pre-Revolutionary" ideologies aside) to "[oppose] Marxism in Soviet Russia these years," but the theory was also of "reactionary character" (p. 163). strong words in 1924. In what way could a series of hypotheses about poetic language, its linguistic and stylistic properties, possibly be right-wing or counterrevolutionary? In fact, Trotsky's description of some aspects of formalist research on poetry by the OPOYAZ (Russian acronym for: Society for the Study of Poetic Language, founded in 1916) were not incorrect: the researchers in this case attempted through a systematic analysis of poetic works to propose a scientific account of the essential characteristics that distinguish poetry from (non-artistic) prose. Precisely, OPOYAZ tried to "reduce its task" with this very purpose in mind (Pomorska, 1971). The starting point, so to speak, was that the "meaning" or "content" of a poem (what it's "about," what it makes reference to in society or in a given psychological state, etc.), or the biography of the poet, plainly aren't what distinguishes it from prosaic language. Thus, research could begin by studying the linguistic properties of what they called "verbal art." The concept of "verbal art" was important because it referred to the aesthetic qualities of "the verbal" - the wording in the voice, the language itself. In this way, the starting point was to limit or specify the field of inquiry; that not every possible aspect of creative writing, its history, social utility, the intentions and class origin of the author, etc., would be pertinent, as in any kind of problem solving.

The idea behind "reduction" that Trotsky presented in "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism" as a defect of the theory actually isn't about politics, left-wing or reactionary, but rather it is a standard methodological tool of science. OPOYAZ sought to apply this method to better

understand what they called: “literariness” – what makes a poem artful, in contrast to the stylistic properties of a newspaper editorial or of a typical narrative account? For this reason, the novice researchers turned their attention to forms and structures in search of foundational characteristics. That’s what “essence of poetry” refers to; and it would be correct to say that a proposed distinguishing characteristic would describe an aspect of its totality that would be “partial,” and even “scrappy” (p. 163), as Trotsky points out. It would be “scrappy” in the sense that no one set of specific and circumscribed features could ever account for all phenomena related to poetry. Rather, the question that interested the formalists was what they might eventually discover about poetic language that is inherent and primary. Meaning and socially relevant content are, of course, interesting aspects of creative writing to analyze and discuss; rather, the formalists argued that they are aspects that are not defining and essential. Whether they are defining and essential, or not, evidently, was a research problem that still needed to be settled through further scholarly work. The idea of OPOYAZ, then, was a proposal, a set of related hypotheses.

In this sense, “reduction,” simply refers to a method of discovery where, in analysis, we focus on a specific problem or question: “specific” here is helpful because narrowing down the problem space and trying to determine which factors and interacting entities are actually relevant makes it easier to study the phenomenon at hand. These would be the factors and interactions that could hopefully shed light on the problem to be solved. The attempt to specify this problem in poetics didn’t mean that OPOYAZ sought a “reduction of poetry to etymology and syntax” (p. 163) or to anything else. Trotsky makes this common mistake based on a misunderstanding of the term. Such a reduction, as he presented it in the subtitle of the Chapter 5, would not be anti-Marxist, but simply nonsensical. All of poetry, of narrative, of expository discourse, or of any other genre, cannot be “reduced.” He was attributing to the researchers of poetics *a kind of reductionism* that posits that a complex phenomenon in its entirety simply consists of one or a small number of its component parts. It was clear that this was not the objective of the work of Shklovsky and his colleagues if one read their working papers with an open mind.^[1] Much confusion could have been avoided here by consulting the major programmatic documents that addressed this research problem, widely available at the time (for example: Jakobson, 1919[1967]; Shklovsky, 1917[1990]). In no representative study of OPOYAZ do we find an argument where we can “regard the process of poetic creation only as a combination of sounds or words, and to seek along these lines the solution to all the problems of poetry” (Trotsky, 1924[1957], p. 172).

Knight’s Move (Shklovsky, 1923[2005]) was a fine work to reference in the debate, but the collection of squibs, random reflections, and brief essays in none of its entries presents even a summary exposition of the theory in poetics that the formalists were working on. The denunciation of formalism on this point was simply founded on a coarse and misleading characterization. As a simplistic argument, easy to remember, it has taken on a life of its own over the years, often repeated by critics who by all evidence have never consulted the source documents.

So, if “formalism, confined within legitimate limits, may help to clarify the artistic and psychological peculiarities of form” opening “one of the paths to the artist’s feeling for the world” (p. 164), in what then consists its “reactionary character”? Trotsky begins by repeating the “reduction” error from the previous page: that “to them verbal art ends finally and fully with the word, and depictive art with color. A poem *is* a combination of sounds, a painting *is* a combination of color spots” (p. 164). Here it is important to add the emphasis to “is” to clarify the point. No reasonable reading of the published proposals for further research by OPOYAZ could take away that they meant: the discovery of an *essential feature*, say, of poetry would be the discovery of what poetry *is*, fully and finally. Surely a passage somewhere could be found where someone used an

abbreviated formulation to say or suggest what poetry *is*. The revolutionary years were times of the exhortation, proclamation, and the provocation. When the revolutionary Futurists (Burliuk, et al. (1912[2004]) called for the works of Pushkin to be requisitioned and tossed into the River Neva everyone knew what they really meant.

But we should ask: Why did the formalists' proposals for the field of poetics, a specific aspect of it, spark such fierce opposition? At first glance, the theories seem rather uncontroversial. Was it the impulse to politicize this field of study as well, as was the case in other disciplines? The second question we can set aside for now. The first question is important because the rejection of the formalist research program came to be so generalized as to take on almost semi-official status; in later years the accusation of "formalism" came to be associated with grave consequences.

As was already noted, it's not likely that *Knight's Move* was chosen for this polemic because it summarized a theory of poetics of the "formalist school." Trotsky's Chapter 5 in fact barely addresses problems of poetic language either, much less critiques any of the specific proposals on these questions by Shklovsky, Ejxenbaum, Jakobson or other representative author. In fact, as was just mentioned, the collection of essays in the short book itself makes little mention of them. A quick reading does, however, give us a hint for why Trotsky found the essays so objectionable. The most enduring quote, often cited, is the commentary on the Futurist experiments of the time: "Art has always been free of life. Its flag has never reflected the color of the flag that flies over the city fortress" (Shklovsky, 1923[2005], p. 22). Taken word-for-word, we know, and by all indication the author knew, that this affirmation could not be literally correct. From the course syllabus of any Art History 101, we know that life and social forces throughout history influence art taken in its full and complete totality. Rather, we can understand the provocative idea just like we understand what Shklovsky's Futurist colleagues meant when they called for discarding forever the great works of 19th Century Russian literature. During the time of slogans, as a response to the steady call for what art and literature *should* be, the idea of freedom from life and from the color of the banner spoke to a bigger idea (Lunts, 1922 [1975]): that party prescription (that year not yet an obligatory instruction) cannot determine either style or content. But as a debating point, the response in *Knight's Move* provided the opportunity for its detractors to explain in what exactly the political prescription would consist. According to Trotsky, the government was not interested in dictating themes to writers, "please write about anything you can think of" (p. 171). But, for choosing which side to be on, and for evading the accusation of reactionary, artists should not "ignore the psychological unity of the social man...The proletariat has to have in art the expression of the new spiritual point of view...to which art must help him give form. This is not a state order, but an historic demand...You *cannot pass this by*, nor *escape its force*" (p. 171) (emphasis added). But as we now know, the correct ideological content in fact was of the utmost importance; to question it, by setting preferred content aside for the purpose of studying patterns of language and discourse, had come to be an obstacle to the larger program, despite disclaimer. To Lunts and the circle of intrepid writers who called themselves the Serapion Fraternity, Trotsky devoted a separate section of his book (p. 76):

If the Serapions get away from the Revolution entirely, they would reveal themselves at once as a second-rate or third-rate remnant of the discarded pre-revolutionary literary schools. It is impossible to play with history. Here the punishment follows immediately upon the crime...To be outside the Revolution means to be among the émigrés. Of this there can be no discussion. But apart from the émigrés abroad, there are the internal ones.

We can now summarize the evolution of the debate on how art and literature are related to affirmative ideological message, how the former incorporates a given version of the latter:

(1) It *can* (a good thing, for example, if it's fashionable or popular, or important to the writer for expressing an idea, portraying an image, etc.);

(2) *should* (or *must* if the artist's work is to be relevant or acceptable, 1917—1932)

(3) *shall* (as in official policy, e.g. Socialist Realism, 1932—1980s). See Note 3.

Knight's move made another provocative proposal, related to the first: that historical materialism was not an adequate theoretical framework for the study of literature. It questioned Trotsky's theory that: "However fantastic art may be, it cannot have at its disposal any other material except that which is given to it by the world of three dimensions and the narrower world of class society....[that] Marxism alone can explain why and how a given tendency in art has originated in a given period of history" (p. 178). If we take "material" broadly to mean both the physical materials of the artist's workshop and all the other resources, which include the artistic abilities and understandings, mental resources of different kinds, motivations, artistic sensibility, etc., then at very least we can grant that Shklovsky was proposing a difficult topic for Marxists to consider. Theoretically, even at the time, they were on thin ice. In effect, could it be that *Marxism alone* explains the history of art? For example, the disputed question of narrative themes, that across historical epochs they may be "homeless" (so to speak) and "interchangeable," addressed the problem that they are difficult to explain simply by recourse to the analysis of class society from one historical period to another. Vladimir Propp (1928[1968]), the formalists' specialist on folklore, proposed a method of taking into account possible psychologically *universal* motifs, that were even *independent* of the historical struggle among social classes. Propp was perhaps thinking about a time in history of classless society.

To spell out his argument more precisely in the chapter of *Literature and revolution* following "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism," Trotsky gave examples that socially-minded poets should aspire to. Among the most pointed was praise of the writings of inspirational poet Demyan Bednyi (1883—1945), famous for setting the slogan to meter and rhyme. But despite the acclamation in Chapter 6, "Proletarian Culture and Proletarian Art," it is hard to imagine that a more rancid and corrupted verse will ever again come to be read aloud: "He is a Bolshevik whose weapon is poetry. The Revolution is, for him, ...the highest authority. His work is a social service not only in the final analysis, *as all art*, but subjectively, in the consciousness of the poet himself...the shrewdness of fables, the sadness of songs, the boldness of couplets, as well as indignation,...nothing of the dilettante in his anger and in his hatred. He hates with the well-placed hatred of the most revolutionary Party in the world...Not only in those cases when Apollo calls him to the holy sacrifice does Demyan Bednyi create but day in and day out, as the events and the Central Committee of the Party demand...Demyan Bednyi does not seek new forms...[The] sacred old forms...are resurrected and re-born in his work, as an invaluable mechanism for the transmission of Bolshevik ideas" (pp. 212—213) (emphasis added).

Death to the vermin! Kill them all to the last!

And having finished off the dammed vermin,

Liberated from the yoke of the lordly horde.

One by one, by regiments, by squads, join our brotherly ranks!

(Poetry of Bednyi, cited in Pipes, 1994, p. 300)

His most memorable poem perhaps was "No Mercy" (1937) composed to mark the trial and execution of Grigori Zinoviev.^[2]

Context of the Debate

Understanding how historical developments determine or influence the stylistic forms of art and literature across time is a difficult research problem. Understanding how the specific historical context of post-revolutionary Russia influenced the debates on art and literature is a question that is much easier. Here we pick up on this same suggestion from the previous section: that the exchange between the Marxists and the formalists was much more than an academic dispute. In reality, it wasn't mainly academic at all.

Without any doubt, the Stalin era inaugurated the most all-encompassing control of politics and ideology over literature. But it would be mistake to mark the change as the counterrevolution that overthrew a “workers’ democracy” regime of Soviet freedom in expression and creativity. This is the claim of the present discussion, following the research on this theme concisely summarized by Krishnan (2010). The above-mentioned specific historical context starts even prior to the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, during the weeks following the overthrow of the Provisional Government in October. The decree establishing The Revolutionary Tribunal for the Press was signed by Lenin in January of 1918, widespread censorship documented in the pages of the Social Democratic *Novaya Zhizn*. The infamous Gravlit extended government oversight and approval to literature in 1922. That is, political control was exercised *prior to* and *following* the period of the Civil War, pretext during these years for all variety of extraordinary measure.

Following the massive opening of KGB files, seventy years later exactly, the Russian Federation rehabilitated the victims of the Tagantsev conspiracy, or the nonexistent Petrograd Armed Organization, so-called by the Cheka which fabricated the plot. Among the approximately 200 university professors, scientists and writers rounded up, between 60 and 70 were executed, including Nikolay Gulimov, leading member of the Acmeist School, Guild of Poets, founded in 1910, and first husband of Anna Akhmatova. Of the remaining, most found their way to the Gulag (NB: not an innovation of Stalin) or were deported to Germany. The conviction of the Tagantsev conspirators followed the show trial (1920) of the “Anti-Soviet Tactical Center Group” and the “Union for the Regeneration of Russia” formed by university professors, teachers, and public supporters of the dissolved Constituent Assembly. Newspaper reports listed the 67 executed members, charged with conspiring to overthrow the new post-October Soviet government (Birstein, 2004).

The general intellectual climate in the humanities, to a large extent, took its lead from the proletarian art movement, notably among artists themselves and mainly on their own initiative.^[3] The superiority of the socialist order was already brushing aside the decaying bourgeois culture and its “uncommitted” art. The negation of capitalist literature was marked by the “grand style” and “monumental character,” idealization of proletarian labor, the class struggle, mechanization and technology, and the ethos of collectivism (Ermolaev, 1977). The jockeying for favor would even include the denouncing of one another among the different revolutionary art groups as “bourgeois” and “counter-revolutionary” (e.g. Mayakovsky’s *Left Front of Literature*, staunchly pro-regime, was accused in these terms, for having suffered the influence of Futurist tendencies). It’s important to point out that during the same years of selective censorship and repression – prior to, during, and after the Civil War, and then during the relative relaxation of control, in some areas, of the New Economic Policy (1917—1927) – identifiable intervals and significant working space of noninterference were also in evidence (Jangfeldt, 2014; Krishnan, 2010; Pipes, 1994), presenting a contradictory and even confusing panorama for historians of literature. For example, all of the

leading members and sympathizers of OPOYAZ as far as we know, in some cases surprisingly, were spared (by 1930, all who were still in the Soviet Union had either recanted or moved on from the discussion; from 1920 Jakobson was in Czechoslovakia). Sheldon (1977, 2005) has contributed exceptionally to clearing up the seeming contradiction and confusion. In the end, as the cited authors argue, the expectation that art serve the revolution, promoted by the proletarian art movement, helped to pave the way during the 1920s for making this expectation official in the 1930s.

In a study of Communist-era science, Birstein (2004) traces the evolution of political intervention, closely analogous to that outlined in the previous section on literature. Coinciding with the imposition of Socialist Realism, the most aberrant distortion of scientific research is associated with the Stalin period, notably the promotion as official of Lysenko's version of inheritance of acquired characteristics. In the sciences, the field of genetics appeared to party leaders as the one most amenable to politicization (the idea of "competition" perhaps having bourgeois implications, "cooperation" more in line with the shaping of New Man). The earlier revolutionary period was marked by selective and uneven repression, resulting in the overall appearance of tolerance. In fact, much of the work of scientists was not directly controlled by the party/state, unlike the stricter supervision later, beginning in the 1930s. Recall that the first and second show trials and executions (1920 and 1921) of academics and writers carried out by the Cheka (established under the direction of Felix Dzerzhinsky in *December of 1917*) included several prominent scientists. In August of 1922 the large scale deportations of counterrevolutionary academics, including prominent scientists, began: one contingent to "the northern regions," and the majority abroad, truly unprecedented measures never undertaken even under Tsarist rule.^[4] During the 9-month period following the February 1917 formation of the Provisional Government, academic institutions had gained independence from state control for the first time. In sharp reversal, they were nationalized following the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. Three years later, professional meetings of scientists and other academic unions required registration with the GPU (1922 successor to the Cheka). As in the other realms of the national culture, it was the period of relative/selective tolerance and freedom from outright political intervention that laid the groundwork for the subsequent imposition of state-sponsored pseudo-science (Birstein, 2004, pp. 15—39).

In the plastic arts we take note of a parallel to developments in both literature and science. The evolution of Kazimir Malevich's experience with party influence and governmental oversight of culture is instructive. It provides a glimpse into the antecedents of the full imposition of Socialist Realism in this domain, implemented explicitly in 1934. Arrested by the security forces in September of 1930, the three month interrogation centered on his meetings with counterrevolutionary artists during an official trip to Poland years earlier and, more specifically, accusations of formalism. There was in fact reason for suspicion, as it was true that since 1917 and all throughout the 1920s the work of Malevich had to some extent resisted tendencies and calls for favoring greater functional design, socially defined concepts of utility, and propagandistic content. With time, tendencies in favor and strong promotion, even from working colleagues and fellow artists, evolved toward more direct suggestion. In fact, the themes he had touched on in a published essay, previous to his interrogation, had a familiar ring from the concurrent debate in literary studies. "Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion... [It] wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, *in and for itself*, without "things" (Malevich 1927[1959], p. 74) (emphasis added). The copying of nature may turn out to be more comfortably "comprehensible" for didactic purposes, but "creative workers ("persons of [this] category call themselves free people" - p. 21) are always a step ahead... they show it the road of progress" (p. 34). "An artist who creates rather than imitates expresses himself; his works are not reflections of nature but, instead, new realities... The depicting

of the events of daily life, in the manner of ...reflected images, falls to the lot of those who lack the capacity for new creation..." (p. 30). Those who succumb to the regimenting power are advanced as loyal...while those who preserve their subjective consciousness and individual point of view are looked upon and treated as dangerous and unreliable" (p. 21).

It was true; Malevich and an entire generation of Russian visual artists had been influenced by the avant-garde currents of Western Europe, in turn reflecting back and multiplying this impulse internationally. By all evidence, the period of relative tolerance, for them, late into the 1920s, allowed for greater margins of freedom and experimentation than was the case in the literary arts. The national and international influence of the Vitebsk Arts College, with its lively debates, would count among the most well-known examples.

The Society for the Study of Poetic Language on the Defensive

We're not sure if Shklovsky ever publicly replied to "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism." For OPOYAZ, the prospects for developing new lines of work, sharpening incipient and rudimentary conceptions (there were a good number of these), and polemicizing with opposing views had already begun to dim by the mid-1920s. But for our purposes, a glance through the book that Trotsky singled out will help us get an idea, in addition to the passages cited above, of what all the fuss was about.

Picking up on the "free of life" theme, trying to answer the question of "what makes art enchanting," the reader is provoked again: "That the outside world doesn't exist" (1923[2005], p. 65). We know what Shklovsky means: that imagination is better than reality, and art is better still. The idea was important at the time, and is today. Recall the observation of Malevich about copying nature, that for this purpose (non-artistic) photography could now do just fine. With their "repudiation of space...the Supremacists freed themselves from the slavery of things" (p. 63). Kandinsky (1914[1977]) had made a similar observation, comparing abstraction in music and in the visual arts, calling attention to the miserable failure of "program music." In an argument with Proletkult, Shklovsky (1923[2005], p. 21) declared that there had been enough of the "[incessant clamor] for a new art that will correspond to the new class ideology"; that someone should be able to take "propaganda out of art" (p. 27). Here, he gets credit for the prescient warning to take it out of music too (p. 26).

In *Knight's Move* there is only passing mention of one of the central tenets underlying the concept of literariness, an hypothesized distinguishing property of verbal art: estrangement, or defamiliarization (pp. 74—75, 86—87). The idea, from "Art as device" (1917[1990]) and Ejxenbaum's "Theory of the formal method" (1926[1970]), was put forward early and some progress was made in refining it, but time just ran out. More recent reflection on its currency for literary studies can be found in Eagle (1988), Ehrenreich (2013), and Vatulescu (2006), important to take a minute here to review in light of the controversy and persistent misunderstanding. As mentioned in the first section, this aspect of formalist theory didn't come up in "The Formalist School of Poetry and Marxism."

Shklovsky and Ejxenbaum wanted to study how the artist of language recovers for the reader and listener *a sensation*, by prolonging and making difficult the automatic perceptions that, with time, become unmarked (expected). This is *the feeling* they proposed that would be specific to (defining of) poetry, because the emotional response that is evoked by a theme (the semantic content), for example, can also be evoked in prose. Remember, this view doesn't imply that there is anything wrong in studying the themes of poetry (what poems "mean"). Estrangement refers to

when words and their patterns, and *how* meanings are constructed, come to be unfamiliar in the language forms that are taken as art. They are now new for an aesthetic purpose. The processing of language in everyday speech and writing that was efficient is now broken up, sometimes removed from the customary context. As a result, processing slows down. Impeded perception, de-automatized, appears as rough and foreign. In the context of verbal art “rough and foreign” is experienced in an aesthetic way, as “strange and wonderful,” removed from the “everyday.” The sound patterns of poetry show a “phonetic roughening” and a rhythm that is marked (unexpected). These are the “devices” for shifting attention to the patterns themselves, sometimes decomposed and rearranged. The sensation is triggered, so to speak, by foreign patterns, by unfamiliar forms (typically without awareness by the listener or reader). Whereas prose is economical and direct, poetic speech is attenuated. Thus, when the marked rhythms and phonetic patterns of verse become predictable and conventional, according to the formalists, this shift in perception sets the stage for innovation. Evidently, on some level, the theory of estrangement applies to the visual as well as to all the temporal arts. But we can see now why OPOYAZ focused more on the analysis of poetry than on narrative, a more complicated problem in some ways.

The concept of estrangement doesn't explain every facet or aspect of poetic quality, much less aesthetic effects in general; there are clearly other factors in play. Then the concept was pressed into service by the formalists to account for historical change. This was an interesting point of debate with their competitors and critics. The idea is that, in art, the process of familiarization (habituation) contributes to change across time. This hypothesis can be taken as at least plausible, because of the need to renew perception. Consider the case of one-time innovative styles becoming predictable and commonplace. But here again, the shift of estrange to familiar wouldn't be the only dynamic to take into account. Not surprisingly, the attraction of this hypothesis for the formalists was that it was an explanation that focused on a kind of “internal” factor. Ejxenbaum reminded his critics that formalism didn't reject the influence of “external” forces. Rather, the interactions specific and “internal” to art itself called their attention for having been neglected until then. And if it could shown to be correct that these structural factors were part of the explanation, they would turn out to be closely related to the immanent and defining formal properties of literary language (the aspect of literature they saw as important to study). In any case, progress on this question lies in a systematic study of a large and representative corpus of examples. In this discussion, the notion that “form-determined content” was never actually elaborated upon seriously, probably because it wasn't a good idea to begin with, and should have been discarded early on. I for one don't see the connection with their overall theory. Perhaps Shklovsky in this case had something in mind that might have developed at some point into a more productive line of work.

Tracking the debate, checking quotations and citations, should remind us that the “formalist school,” such as it was, was not only short-lived (perhaps ten years of steady activity before “discussion” became completely one-sided), but immature throughout its development. The novice theorists often contradicted each other and themselves, common, and not necessarily a bad thing for a start-up movement. Imprecise informal hypotheses, such as “form determines content” would be difficult to maintain with any consistency. Recall that Ejxenbaum admitted that external environmental, social/historical, conditions influenced the evolution of artistic genres (it's obvious that they do). But then on occasion his colleagues apparently contradict him (*Knight's Move*, pp. 56, 93). Sometimes the contradiction springs from the brazen short-hand, slogan-size challenge, or the animated retort to incite another round of polemic, or just from normal everyday short-hand: “Art has always been free of life” – We have emancipated art from it! Shklovsky said that these were the *banners* of Futurism. Indeed, along a street demonstration of banners, we don't expect each one to

be coherent with all the others (if art has always been free of life, then the Futurists didn't emancipate it). Even their most clearly formulated theories (e.g. defamiliarization) we have to take as tentative, remaining so for missing the opportunity to test them out empirically. It was about ten years, more or less, and time ran out. An accurate balance sheet, therefore, requires a head-to-head comparison of representative works of the full record. The comparison would need to include relevant research proposals that could have been actually carried out. Out-of-context capsules will not suffice to advance our understanding of the actual differences at stake.

In the end it's fair to say that the circumstances surrounding the debate imposed a vastly unfavorable relationship of forces (to borrow an expression) for one of the sides, conducted on a stage where events were moving rapidly (Francis, 2015). Skhlovsky was a member of one of the political parties that opposed the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. *Knight's Move* was written from exile in Berlin to where he had fled to avoid arrest. Seven years earlier, OPOYAZ took to heart the great opening of free expression that the February Revolution had ushered in. As already mentioned, by 1924 the intellectual climate had tilted far in the direction toward assumptions that strongly disfavored their views (to put it mildly), and the pace of events would soon start to accelerate. It's also fair to say that with the eventual triumph of art as propaganda in the 1930s, the record of the debate and the assessment of the young formalists' proposals has remained in large part one-sided.

In an otherwise thorough history of Russian Formalism, Erlich (1965) fell into the same dead end of other biased commentators. The chapter on Trotsky's attack on formalism turns out to be almost as shallow. Picking through *Knight's Move* to find the same offending quotes in an attempt to show that OPOYAZ "divorced" (p. 99) art from social life, ideology and (the Marxist interpretation of) history, he also didn't seem to get it that there was something wrong in branding an approach to studying poetic language as "reactionary," adding his own disqualifications of: "ultra-Formalist," "aggressive" (p. 99) "arrogant," "juvenile," and "impertinent" (p. 101). By all the evidence in his confusing summary of the discussion of narrative plot, Erlich was as unfamiliar with the work of Propp as Trotsky was. The hypothesis that the formalists were exploring, in this case related to the evidence for universal themes in prose narrative, was simple. If there are common motifs that can be shown to be widely cross-cultural, this finding might be accounted for in fundamental predispositions of human nature (a possibility, by the way, that would have been anathema to the idea that ideology and social conditioning can mold the "new man" without limit). The bias that runs through Erlich's apparent misunderstanding is interestingly transparent: the problem-solving work of scientists, focused on specific empirical questions, is unacceptable unless certain "social determinants" are included as required considerations. They must be integrated into the research program, obligatorily, to avoid the accusation that the research has become a tool of reaction. But focusing on specific problems or questions is always "partial" (in the sense of "incomplete") because the objective that empirical investigation tries to stay away from is the theory of everything.

¹⁴Extreme or all encompassing *reductionism* is not pertinent to this discussion. The theory of historical materialism, for example, is an attempt to reduce explanations of social phenomena to a

smaller set, that in addition seeks to focus attention on relevant evidence. The idea is that the new theory will have greater explanatory power, in the end, requiring fewer assumptions. For example, materialist approaches in science are preferred because they reduce the field to natural explanations, to material phenomena. Historical research can be also be objective if it does not arbitrarily limit its scope to recent history and to only one theoretical framework. For example, inquiry into essential properties (e.g. of narrative and poetic competencies in humans) would need to take into account evolutionary antecedents. Reducing factors to consider, among all the logically possible, is a common everyday approach that we also apply to routine problem solving. Finally, it's important to point out that to hypothesize a distinguishing property, say of a given aesthetic genre, is not the same as proposing that it is the most "important" aspect of it that observers and participants need to consider.

^[2]During the years of the pursuit of Trotsky by the Soviet security forces, the reputation for advocating freedom of expression and for opposing dictatorial realism that he gained in many circles can be traced to a short passage in the "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" (the very title, though, should be cause for critical reflection). However, the notion of "...not the least trace of orders from above" sits uncomfortably within the context of a political program indistinguishable from the period of the run up to the Stalin era: "[In] defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference,...revive a so-called pure art *which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction*..."[The] supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part...in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content" (Trotsky, 1938[1970], pp. 119—120). For absolute clarity on this point Trotsky reiterates the 1918 standard for selective censorship and repression: "We recognize, of course, that the revolutionary state has the right to defend itself against the counterattack of the bourgeoisie, even when this drapes itself in the flag of science or art" (p. 119). This last condition, in fact, forms part the current-day program for art of political organizations that trace their heritage to "Trotskyism" (Siegel, 1970). As this view is summed up in the concluding lines: "[True] art is unable not to be revolutionary"..."The independence of art – for the revolution. The revolution – for the complete liberation of art!" (p. 121) (emphasis above added). The question is posed in the cited passage: in what possible way could a "pure," apolitical, art form, a poem with no discernible "social content" for example, be "reactionary"? The reader will forgive me for pointing out the irony (one nonetheless that is representative): the verse of the exalted proletarian poet of *Literature and revolution* (1924), subsequent author of "No Mercy," Trotsky now found to be wanting ("pathetic"... "simple") in the pages of the *Bulletin of the Opposition* (1932), cited in Volkogonov (1996, pp. 340—341), when he was on the run from the GPU himself. In fact, a careful reading of "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" shows it to be entirely consistent with the *Literature and Revolution* of 1924.

^[3]This aspect of the ideological and historical antecedents of Socialist Realism is important to emphasize, Proletkult, for example, having been an important force among writers and artists that for a number of years formed part of a true mass movement independent of the regime. As such, the regime came to distrust its leadership and disfavor its activities, soon ordering its integration into the Commissariat of Enlightenment. Thus, Proletkult was an example, until its dissolution, of defending autonomy for its cultural project within the second stage (2) in the evolution (1917 to 1932) of revolutionary aesthetics: artists (1) *can*, (2) *should/must*, and (3) *shall*, incorporate affirmative political content into their work. Proletkult militantly favored (2), but outside the control of the state.

^[4]In an interview with American reporter Louise Bryant one year after the execution of the

professors and writers of the Tagantsev “conspiracy,” Trotsky explained the new policy: “...by themselves they are politically insignificant, but they represent a potential weapon in the hands of our enemies. ...[All] of these elements would become agents...of the enemy and we would be obligated to execute them by the laws of war. It’s for this reason that in this period of relative calm that we prefer to exile them.” Cited in Emelianov and Malishev (2001, p. 86).

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