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RUSSIAN FORMALISM

BY VICTOR ERLICH

In the last two decades, the Western student of literature has become increasingly cognizant of the body of literary theorizing and practical criticism known as "Russian Formalism." The phrase may require some clarification. What is implied here is not the Russian variant of the supranational "formalist" trend which asserts itself periodically in art and in literary criticism. What is at issue is a more specific and more easily identifiable historical entity—notably, a school in Russian literary scholarship which originated in the second decade of the twentieth century, flourished in the 1920's and was forcibly suppressed in 1930.

The Russian Formalist movement was championed by unorthodox philologists and literary historians, e.g., Boris Eichenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, and Yuri Tynyanov. Its main strongholds were the Moscow Linguistic Circle founded in 1915 and the Petrograd "Society for the Study of Poetic Language" (Opoyz) formed in 1916. The initial statement of the Formalist position is found in the symposium, Poetics. Studies in the Theory of Poetic Language (1919), and in Modern Russian Poetry (1921) by Roman Jakobson.

Like most new schools of thought, Formalism was in large part a reaction against the dominant intellectual trends. Like most new Russian schools of thought, it was a vehement reaction. The young Formalist theoreticians repudiated with equal fervor academic eclecticism which weighed heavily upon Russian literary history, the message-mindedness of the "social" critics, and the metaphysical bias of the Symbolists. It is worth noting that the "formalist" label was pinned on the Opoyz by its opponents rather than chosen by its adherents. The latter favored such self-definitions as the "morphological" approach or "specifiers." These terms were more apposite than graceful: they highlighted two crucial and closely interrelated tenets of Russian Formalism: a) its emphasis on the literary work and its component parts, and b) its insistence on the autonomy of literary scholarship.

The driving force behind Formalist theorizing was the desire to bring to an end the methodological confusion which prevailed in tradi-

1Boris Eichenbaum, "Vokrug voprosa o formalistakh" (About the Formalists), Pechat' i revolyutsiya, V (1924), 3.
tional literary studies, and to establish literary scholarship as a distinct and integrated field of intellectual endeavor. It is high time, argued the Formalists, that the study of literature, so long a happy hunting ground for the cultural historian and the aesthetician, the philologist, and the student of social ideas, delimit its area and define unequivocally its subject of inquiry. Yet to the militant Formalist “specifier” this was not specific enough. In order to disengage his realm from obtrusive contiguous disciplines, it seemed necessary to narrow down the definition still further. “The subject of literary scholarship,” said Jakobson, “is not literature in its totality but literariness (literarnost’), i.e., that which makes of a given work a work of literature.”

“The literary scholar,” added Eichenbaum, “ought to be concerned solely with the inquiry into the distinguishing features of the literary materials.”

In their attempts to pin down the nature and situs of “literariness” the Formalists sought to steer clear of traditional answers. In line with their deep-seated distrust of psychology, they were impervious to all theories locating the differentia in the poet rather than the poem, invoking a “faculty of mind” conducive to poetic creation. The Formalist theoretician had little use for all the talk about “intuition,” “imagination,” “genius,” and the like. The locus of the peculiarly literary was to be sought not in the author’s or reader’s psyche, but in the work itself. But if the Formalists rejected the tendency to account for imaginative literature by reference to underlying psychological processes, they were equally opposed to seeking the clue to “literariness” in the mode or level of experience embodied in the literary work. They were not impressed with the familiar notion that poetry deals in emotions while prose works with concepts. Relativists keenly aware of the protean character of the “literary fact,” modernists fully cognizant of the precariousness of thematic taboos, they knew better than to regard certain motifs as intrinsically more poetic than others.

Clearly the difference between literature and non-literature had to be sought not in the subject matter, i.e., the sphere of reality dealt with by the writer, but in the mode of presentation. Yet in tackling this latter problem, the Formalists found themselves confronted with the time-honored notion dating back to Aristotle and upheld in modern times by critics so dissimilar as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Cecil Day Lewis, George Plekhanov, and Herbert Read, that is, the theory which proclaimed the use of images as the outstanding characteristics of imaginative literature. Under the spirited leadership of Viktor Shklovsky, the Formalists subjected the imagery doctrine

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2Roman Jakobson, Noveyshaya russkaya poeziya (Modern Russian Poetry), (Prague, 1921), 11.

3Eichenbaum, Literature (Leningrad, 1927), 121.
to a searching criticism. They argued persuasively that poetic language and figurative language were not coextensive entities. In his influential essay “Art as a Device,” which became a suis generis manifesto of early Formalism, Shklovsky called attention to non-poetic use of “tropes,” e.g., picturesque colloquialisms; somewhat later Roman Jakobson pointed out that the poem could dispense with figures of speech without losing any of its effectiveness. It is not in the presence of imagery, urged the Opozyaz spokesmen, but in the use to which it is put that the differentia of poetry should be sought. If in informative prose a metaphor aims to bring the subject closer to the audience, or drive a point home, in poetry it serves the opposite function. Rather than translating the unfamiliar into the terms of the familiar, the poetic image “makes strange” the habitual by presenting it in a novel light, by placing it in an unexpected context.

Shklovsky’s theory of “making strange” the object depicted shifted the emphasis from the poetic use of the image to the essential function of poetic art. The transfer of the phenomenon to the “sphere of new perception,” that is, a suis generis “semantic shift” effected by the trope, was proclaimed the principal aim, the raison d’être of poetry. The act of creative deformation counteracts the inexorable pull of routine, dislodges the automatism of ordinary perception. By tearing the object out of its habitual context, by juxtaposing disparate notions, the poet gives a coup de grâce to the verbal clichés and the stock responses attendant upon them and forces us into a heightened awareness of things and their sensory texture.

It is scarcely necessary to insist on the modernist tenor of the above. Shklovsky’s “semantic shift” brings to mind Ezra Pound’s “unification of disparate ideas”; the “device of making it strange” (priem ostraneniya), is reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht’s “Verfremdung.” Though there is some evidence that in the late stage of his career Brecht became aware of his Russian predecessor, the affinity between the two concepts is a matter of convergence rather than influence. The affinity, incidentally, is a partial one. Shklovsky spoke about restructuring the ordinary perception of reality; Brecht, about creating an emotional distance between the stage and the audience. Shklovsky’s target was force of habit; Brecht’s, facile identification. Yet in his eagerness to show that “making it strange” was not merely

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6“Iskusstvo kak priyom,” 112.
a slogan of the literary avant garde, Shklovsky drew his most telling examples from the master of the Russian realistic novel, Leo Tolstoy. The Formalist critic observed astutely that Tolstoy’s works abounded in passages where the author “refused to recognize” the familiar phenomena and described them as if they were seen for the first time. Thus, while presenting in War and Peace an opera performance through the eyes of the bedazzled provincial, Natasha Rostova, he refers to the setting as “pieces of painted cardboard”; in the scene of the mass in the Resurrection, the host is resolved into “small pieces of bread.”

Shklovsky’s improvised philosophy of art is more a paean for the Russian Futurist movement than a contribution to the theory of literature. This passionate involvement with the current poetic practice accounts for the Formalist spokesman’s unexpected preoccupation with the uses of poetry and the therapeutic value of creative deformation. A heterodox attempt to define the nature of literature produced another “defense of poesie” as a singularly effective, indeed salutary, mode of dealing with reality. Shklovsky’s key terms, e.g., “making it strange,” “dis-automatization,” received wide currency in the writings of the Russian Formalists. But, on the whole, Shklovsky’s argument was more typical of Formalism as a rationale for poetic experimentation than as a systematic methodology of literary scholarship. The Formalists’ attempt to solve the fundamental problems of literary theory in close alliance with modern linguistics and semiotics found its most succinct expression in the early, path-breaking studies of Roman Jakobson. For Jakobson, the central problem is not the interaction between the percipient subject and the object perceived, but the relationship between the “sign” and the “referent,” not the reader’s attitude toward reality but the poet’s attitude toward language.

It is in the way that the poet uses his medium that Jakobson, along with the bulk of the Formalist theoreticians, saw the situs of literariness. The task of locating the differentia of imaginative literature became here fundamentally a matter of sharply delimiting poetic speech from other modes of discourse. The earliest Formalist writings tended to equate the dichotomy of “poetic” vs. “practical” language with the semanticist’s distinction between the cognitive and the emotive uses of speech. Yet the “emotionalist” deviation was soon discarded. In Modern Russian Poetry, Jakobson insisted on the basic difference between poetic discourse and any kind of communicative language, cognitive and affective alike. Poetry is seen here as an ut-

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7Shklovsky, op cit.; “Paralleli u Tolstogo,” Khod Konya (The Knight’s Path), (Moscow, Berlin, 1923).
terance characterized by the "emphasis on the medium," or, to quote a like-minded theorist, "perceptibility of the mode of expression." In literary art language is not simply a vehicle of communication. From a mere proxy for, or verbal shadow of, the object, the word becomes here an object in its own right, an autonomous source of pleasure, as the multiple devices at the poet's disposal—rhythm, meter, euphony, imagery—converge upon the verbal sign in order to dramatize its complex texture.

The view of poetic language implicit in the first Formalist publications was strongly affected by the Futurist or Dadaist experiments in pure euphony. Jakobson claimed that in poetry "the communicative function is ... reduced to a minimum"; Shklovsky spoke of poetry as a "dance of articulatory organs." Yet this fascination with "trans-sense language" proved short-lived. By the early 1920's, the Formalist spokesmen fully realized that poetry did not live by sound alone, that its hallmark as a unique mode of discourse lay not in the absence of meaning but in the multiplicity of meanings. "The aim of poetry," wrote Boris Eichenbaum, "is to make perceptible the texture of the word in all its aspects." This meant that the "inward form" of the word—the semantic nexus inherent in it—was no less essential to the aesthetic effect than the sheer sound. The "actualization" of the verbal sign achieved by poetry was recognized as a complex transaction involving the semantic and morphological as well as the phonetic levels of language.

From insisting on the complex unity of the verbal sign there was but one step to postulating the indivisibility of that peculiar system of signs which is the work of literature. Working their way up from its atom, the individual word, the Russian Formalists arrived naturally at one of the axioms of the modern theory of literature, notably the rejection of the traditional dichotomy of form vs. content which, as Wellek and Warren have put it, "cuts a work of art into two halves: a crude content and a superimposed, purely external form."

These general propositions were tested in acute studies of rhythm, style, and narrative structure. Not surprisingly, the most fruitful field of Formalist endeavor was the theory of versification. To the Formalist, verse is not merely a matter of external embellishment such as meter, rhyme, alliteration, superimposed upon ordinary speech. It is an integrated type of discourse, qualitatively different from prose, with a hierarchy of elements and internal laws of its own, "the speech

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8Jakobson, op. cit., 10.
9Tomashevsky, Teoriya literatury (Moscow, Leningrad, 1925), 180.
10Loc. cit.
11Khod Konya, 29.
12Lermontov (Leningrad, 1924), 35.
organized throughout in its phonic texture.”

The notion of rhythm as a Gestaltqualität, a structural property operative at all levels of poetic language, helped elucidate a crucial problem of poetics, that of relationship between sound and meaning in verse.

“A literary work of art,” said Eichenbaum in his remarkable essay on Gogol’s “The Overcoat,” “is always something made, shaped, invented, not only artful but artificial in the good sense of the word.”

This emphasis on the basic “conventionality” of literary art shaped the Formalist approach to narrative fiction. Shklovsky’s Theory of Prose (1925) asserted the primacy of organization over theme, of narrative conventions over “life” allegedly reflected or deflected in the work. To be sure, artistic prose which deals in larger verbal units has a different scale than poetry. Yet when seen at close range, it was made to reveal identical or analogous organizing principles, to exhibit refrains and parallels, to yield intricate patterns of contrasts and similarities.

With the realistic criterion of verisimilitude brushed aside as a delusion, with psychological and social factors relegated to the status of mere “motivations,” i.e., post-factum justifications of compositional schemes, character was bound to be subordinated to plot and philosophical confrontations to be treated as delaying devices. Hamlet, Shklovsky remarked casually, was created by the techniques of the Elizabethan stage. By the same token, the dialogue about the immortality of the soul between Raskolnikov and Svidrigaylov in Crime and Punishment was explained away as a suspense-building mechanism.

It may seem paradoxical that one of the most valid Formalist contributions to the theory of fiction was the study in comparative folklore, V. I. Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale. Actually, there is nothing surprising about this. For one thing, in spite of its apparent “simplicity,” the fairy tale, with its migratory stock situations and its indispensable loci communes, is one of the most formalized literary genres. For another, it is one of the least psychology-minded types of fiction: in the fairy tale, not unlike the detective story, character, usually stereotyped, is no more than a tool of the plot. The emphasis on compositional patterns, on the “function” which a pro-

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14Tomashchevsky, O stikhe (On Verse), (Leningrad, 1929), 8.
15“Kak sledana ‘Shinel’ Gogolya” (How Gogol’s “The Overcoat” Was Made), Poetika (Petrograd, 1919), 16.
16“Sentimentalnoe puteshestvie” (A Sentimental Journey), (Moscow, Berlin, 1923), 132.
17O teorii prozy (Moscow, 1925).
tagonist performs in a story, rather than on his identity, paid off handsomely here as it yielded an economical and lucid typology of the Indo-European fairy tale that has had a seminal impact on Western folklorists and anthropologists, not the least, on Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The Formalist's proclivity for morphological analysis did not necessarily imply a static view of literature. True, some of the early Opoязaе formulae, e.g., Shklovsky's "the literary work is the sum-total of literary devices," came dangerously close to such an approach. Yet with Tynyanov's redefining the literary work as an aesthetic "system," the notion of the mere coexistence of various elements in a literary whole gave way to that of dynamic integration. This new definition implied periodical shifts in the hierarchy of components, "continuous changes in the esthetic function of the literary devices" (B. Tomashevsky) which, in turn, raised the problem of literary change or literary evolution.

The anti-historical bias endemic among some "formalist" critics in the West was thoroughly alien to the Opoязае theoreticians. If anything, the Formalist critics seemed to have suffered from a hypertrophy of the historical sense, to be overly preoccupied with the literary movement as such, too prone to see a work of literature as an event or a cause of events rather than a human expression of intrinsic value. In this respect the Russian Formalist critic was not significantly different from his Marxist counterpart. Yet where to the latter, literary evolution was an epiphenomenon, a by-product or reflection of social change, to a Formalist, more exactly to an early Formalist, literary history was a self-enclosed sequence, a succession of styles and genres, a process propelled by internal exigencies.

Yet the distinctive Formalist contribution to the theory of literary history did not rest on this lopsided view of literary dynamics, which, incidentally, was significantly modified in the later Formalist writings. It lay, rather, in a keen sense of the fluidity and complexity of the literary process, in a recognition that a new art form or style is not an antithesis of the preceding one, but its reorganization, "a regrouping of old elements" (Tynyanov). Hence an important role of parody, with its capacity to present the old in a new key, as a mechanism of literary change. Moreover, a healthy distrust of rigid definitions and official hierarchies made the Formalists alive to literary affinities and cross-connections undreamt of by the textbook writers.

19 Rozanov (Petrograd, 1921), 15.
20 Tomashevsky, "La nouvelle école d'histoire littéraire en Russie," Revue des études slaves, 8 (1928).
21 Tynyanov, Arkhaisty i novatory (Archaists and Innovators), (Leningrad, 1929), 413.
They knew that literary conflict, like politics, makes strange bedfellows: "In the struggle with his father, the grandson turns out to resemble his grandfather" (Tynyanov). Shklovsky urged a still more heterodox genealogy: "In the history of art, the legacy is transmitted not from father to son, but from uncle to nephew." This "law" which became known as "canonization of the junior branch," posited that periodically, in order to renew itself, literature should draw upon motifs and devices of subliterary genres, e.g., journalism, vaudeville, folksong, detective story.

"Practical criticism" which emerged from the Russian Formalist movement kept pace with its basic tenets. In dealing with the current literary production, the Formalists favored inventiveness, aesthetic sophistication, search for new modes of expression. They espoused poets-innovators such as V. V. Mayakovsky and Velemir Khlebnikov, and form-conscious, heterodox prose writers, e.g., E. Zamyatin and V. Kaverin. Predictably, their views of the Russian classics were a far cry from the traditional notions. Gogol's famous story, "The Overcoat," hailed by his contemporaries as a moving plea for the little man, became under the pen of Boris Eichenbaum a piece of intricate grotesque stylization. Pushkin, viewed this time at the level of style and genre rather than that of Weltanschauung, appeared as a magnificent culmination of eighteenth-century Russian poetry rather than as the father of Russian romanticism. And the moral crisis of the young Tolstoy was interpreted in largely aesthetic terms as a struggle for a new style, as a challenge to Romantic clichés grown stale.

These frankly controversial and invariably provocative reexaminations—a salutary antidote to the aesthetic puritanism of nineteenth-century "social" criticism—were testimony both to the opportunities of close literary analysis and to the built-in limitations of pure Formalism. In Formalist essays and studies critical acumen and a keen sense of the literary-historical context often co-existed with a wanton one-sidedness of critical vision, a stubborn refusal to take ideas seriously, a determination to reduce literature to "literariness." This philosophical weakness was compounded by the habit of deliberate overstatement. In a 1923 essay, Shklovsky went as far as to declare: "Art was always free of life and its color never reflected the color of the flag which waved over the fortress of the city." In his first study, Jakobson likened those who "incriminate the poet with ideas and feelings" (allegedly expressed in his work) to the "medieval public which beat up the actor who played Judas."

22Ibid., 562.
23Shklovsky, Literatura i kinematograf (Berlin, 1923), 27.
24Shklovsky, Khod konya, 39.
25Roman Jakobson, Noveyshaya russkaya poeziya, 11.
These strident exaggerations rendered the Formalists’ position even more vulnerable to hostile attacks than it might have been otherwise. By 1924–25, a full-fledged Marxist-Leninist offensive against the Formalists got underway. It was sparked by no less a figure than Leon Trotsky who, incidentally, in repudiating the Opozitsia aesthetics, was not unappreciative of “some Formalist research.” At first the Formalists stood their ground. Eventually the convergence of the mounting outside pressure and of genuine doubts about their position caused some Formalist spokesmen to revise their initial claims and to seek a middle ground between the formalist and the sociological approaches to literature. Though these hasty attempts at synthesis, especially in the case of Viktor Shklovsky, had an ad hoc, makeshift quality, they could have, under different circumstances, served as a prelude to a promising evolution. Yet a rapidly deteriorating cultural climate left little room for methodological experimentation. In 1929–30, intellectual debate in the Soviet Union was rudely called to a halt. With Soviet criticism being whipped into orthodoxy, Formalism was bound to be suppressed as an anti-Marxian heresy to the accompaniment of official vituperation which branded it “false because it was reactionary and reactionary because it was false.”

Ever since the 1930’s, “formalism” has been, in Soviet parlance, a term of abuse connoting undue preoccupation with “mere” form, experimentation with a medium of art conveniently labelled as “pseudo-innovation,” interest in Western literature and art, bourgeois escapism, and like offenses. The anti-Formalist campaign reached its peak or nadir during the cultural purges of the late 1940’s. In 1946–48, the term “formalism” was used so widely and indiscriminately that it became increasingly difficult to disentangle its precise meaning, to locate its referent. The formalist label was pinned on offenders as dissimilar as 1) literary historians with a penchant for comparative literature, some of whom had nothing in common with Formalism; 2) “decadent,” “aesthetesizing” poets, i.e., Anna Akhmatova or Boris Pasternak; 3) the foremost Soviet composers, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian; 4) painters and architects who had strayed from the path of Soviet neo-academicism misnamed Socialist-Realism. Nor does this tell the whole story. In 1949 an article in the Leningrad journal Zvezda detected formalist bacilli in Soviet nuclear physics under the guise of widespread adherence to the theories of Niels Bohr.

As brutal harassment of the intellectuals gave way to the somewhat more permissive climate of the first post-Stalin decade, the anti-

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26L. Trotsky, Literature and Revolution (New York, 1925).
27M. Gelfand, “Deklaraciya carya Midasa ili chto sluchilos’ s Viktorom Shklovskim?” (A Declaration of King Midas or What Happened to Viktor Shklovsky?), Pechat’ i revolyutsiia’, II (1930).
Formalist witch-hunt abated. “Formalism” is still considered a fallacy and an offense, but hardly an epitome of intellectual sabotage. The erstwhile Formalists and Formalist sympathizers were afforded more latitude. Viktor Shklovsky, whose 1953 collection of essays on nineteenth-century Russian masters was a timid and conformist performance, recaptured in his studies on Dostoevsky (1957) and on artistic prose (1959) some of the freshness and vigor of his early writings. Boris Eichenbaum and Boris Tomashevsky, for years reduced to annotating academic editions of the classics, embarked on large-scale monographs. N. Bakhtin’s quasi-Formalist inquiry into the structure of the Dostoevsky novel, which first appeared in 1928, was republished in 1963. Perhaps more importantly, younger literary theorists such as V. Ivanov and Yu. Lotman, revived some of the late Formalist emphases in their highly sophisticated pleas for “structural poetics.”

As the term “structural” clearly implies, the Ivanov-Lotman methodology, while clearly reminiscent of the more mature Formalist pronouncements, harks back to a kindred Slavic intellectual tradition, notably Czech Structuralism. Back in the 1930’s, the Prague Linguistic Circle was the center of a vigorous ferment in both linguistic and literary studies. As a successful example of the “working symbiosis” between Russian philologists (Roman Jakobson and Nikolay Trubetzkoy) and their Czech counterparts (Vilém Mathesius, Jan Mukařovský, René Wellek), the Circle helped to lay the foundations for what is known today as structural linguistics. “Structuralism” was the battle cry of the spokesmen of the Prague Linguistic Circle at the international linguists’ congresses held in the late 1920’s and in the 1930’s. Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, along with like-minded Western European linguists such as Charles Bally, Viggo Brøndal, and A. Sechehaye, led a successful fight for the proposition that language is not an aggregate of isolated facts, but a system, a “coherent whole in which all parts interact upon each other.”

The same Gestalt approach was brought to bear upon literature in what turned out to be a balanced and judicious restatement of the initial Formalist tenets. The Prague theorists salvaged the healthy core of the Opoyaz message: the notion of the perceptibility of the verbal sign, of the emphasis on the medium as the differentia of poetic language, the insistence on the basic conventionality of literary art and the concomitant distrust of literal readings of imaginative literature. They have eschewed, however, the doctrinaire lopsidedness of “pure” Formalism, its naively empiricist

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29 Quoted from Ernst A. Cassirer, “Structuralism in Modern Linguistics,” Word, 1, 2 (1945), 99–120.
fixation on the verbal "given." In this revised framework "literariness" was neither the only pertinent aspect of literature nor merely one of its components; it was the principle of dynamic integration, or to use again the key term of modern psychology, the *Gestaltqualität*. Consequently, the psychoideational content of the work appeared not as a pseudo-realistic camouflage for the "real thing," but as a *bona fide* element of the aesthetic structure, and as such, a legitimate object of literary study, provided that it is discussed within the context of the literary work. And finally, the work itself was defined not as a cluster of devices, but as a complex, multi-dimensional structure integrated by the unity of the aesthetic purpose. Jakobson stated succinctly the difference between Formalism and Structuralism when, in an important 1933 essay, he postulated "the autonomy of the aesthetic function rather than the separatism of art." 30

The advantages of the new approach are evident in Roman Jakobson's and Jan Mukarovský's explorations of Czech Romantic poetry, and in Dmitry Čiževsky's demonstration of the organic connection between verbal texture and the moral universe in Gogol's "The Overcoat." Yet, when all is said and done, Czech Structuralism was afforded little scope for testing its hypotheses. The intellectual climate in postwar Czechoslovakia was less than hospitable to any departure from Marxism-Leninism. By that time, however, structural analysis had made substantial inroads in Western study of literature. The salient case in point is Anglo-American New Criticism, especially its "organicist variant," as represented by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. Brooks's emphasis on the organic unity of the poem with a concomitant warning against the "heresy of paraphrase," his keen awareness of the "ambiguity" of poetic idiom, and the "conflict-structures" resulting from this ambiguity, such as paradox and irony, all this is closely akin to the Formalist-Structuralist theory. One ought to add that the affinity between these two schools of thought rests on analytical procedures rather than on criteria of evaluation. While the majority of Anglo-American New Critics have worked toward some flexible yet absolute standards applicable to literature of various ages, the Russian Formalists, not unlike in this respect their Czech heirs, frankly espoused critical relativism—a corollary of a keen, indeed almost overdeveloped historical sense.

In the 1960's, Structuralism came to dominate much of the critical discourse in France which hitherto had proved nearly immune to literary theorizing. The impact of Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology, clearly indebted to the Jakobson-Trubetzkoj model, and the increasing awareness of the Russian Formalist legacy due to the anthologizing and interpretative efforts of T. Todorov, are among the

30 "Čo je poesie?" (What is Poetry?), *Volne Směry*, XXX (1933–34).
factors responsible for the Structuralist vogue in present-day France. To try to sum up this lively if delayed response to the Formalist stimulus would be both difficult and premature. Thus far the Structuralist awareness of the centrality of language and the conventionality of art has been put to good use in G. Genette's lucid and graceful essays and T. Todorov's discussion of narrative modes in artistic prose. C. Bremond's attempt to extend the typology drawn from V. I. Propp to other types of fiction than the fairy tale has not been entirely successful. Roland Barthes has learned a great deal from the Russian Formalists: his recent theoretical pronouncements—a deft synthesis of Jakobson and Shklovsky with a native "formalist" tradition of Mallarmé and Valéry—are sophisticated and provocative. They are not immune, however, to some of the Formalist fallacies which the Prague Structuralists had set out to eschew, e.g., the tendency to reduce literature to language and to deny its moral and social relevance.

Viewed in retrospect, Russian Formalism appears as one of the most vigorous and systematic manifestations of the twentieth-century trend toward structural analysis of cultural phenomena as well as a sophisticated and coherent rationale for the "modern" movement in literature and art. Doubtless, the remarkable vitality of the short-lived school was due in no small part to its active involvement with what Susanne Langer has called the "generative ideas of our age."31 By the same token, the brash irreverence of Shklovsky's best essays, the brilliance of Tynyanov's and Jakobson's studies in modern Russian futurism, owed a great deal to the excitement of rubbing shoulders with the literary avant-garde of a turbulent and creative era. On balance, the modernist commitment of the Opoyaz spokesmen proved a mixed blessing. If it enriched and enlivened much of the Formalist's critical practice, it often handicapped his theorizing about literature by lending his generalizations the air of special pleading, of partisan lopsidedness.

Yet in one's final assessment of the Formalist heritage, the impatience with its excesses is likely to be offset by an enduring sense of intellectual gratitude. This is, in part, testimony to the relevance and fertility of the Formalist concepts. It is also, and in no small measure, a tribute to the impressive concentration of sheer critical talent within the ranks of the Formalist movement. Few serious students of Russian literature, whatever their methodological persuasion, will fail to place Yu. Tynyanov's Dostoevsky and Gogol, B. Eichenbaum's The Young Tolstoy, or R. Jakobson's "On the Death of Vladimir Mayakovsky," among the finest achievements of modern criticism.

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31Philosophy in a New Key (Cambridge, Mass., 1942), 16.