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 RUSSIAN FORMALISM

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Russian Formalism or East European Formalism is a school of literary criticism and literary theory that originated in Moscow (Moscow Linguistic Circle) and St. Petersburg (Opojaz) in the 1920s. Among the leading representatives of the movement were Boris Eichenbaum, Victor Shklovsky, and Roman Jakobson. When this critical mode was suppressed by the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, the center of the formalist study of literature moved to Czechoslovakia, where it was continued especially by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, which included Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, and René Wellek. A comprehensive and influential formalist essay is Roman Jakobson's "Linguistics and Poetics," included in his *Language in Literature* (1987). Russian Formalists emphasized the autonomous nature of literature, and insisted that the proper study of literature lay neither in a reflection of the life of its author nor in the historical or cultural milieu in which it was created. They believed that literature was essentially a linguistic phenomenon, and placed literature at the centre, relegating all related matters to the margin. They gave importance to the role of the metaphor and other linguistic devices. It is in this sense that Russian Formalism can be seen as a forerunner to Structuralism. At first, opponents of the movement applied the term "formalism" derogatorily, because of its focus on the formal patterns and technical devices of literature to the exclusion of its subject matter and social values; later, however, it became a neutral designation.

Literariness

According to the Formalists human content in literature did not possess any significance in defining what was 'literary' about the text. The formalists collapse the distinction between form and content. They deliberately neglected the historical, sociological, biographical or psychological dimension of literary discourse; the writer was of negligible importance too. Explanations which base their arguments on the spirit, intuition, imagination or genius of the poet were rejected. They propagated an intrinsic approach which regards a work of art as an independent entity. A work of literature is related to all literature in general, and not to its author or his personality. There is only poetry and literature, there are no poets or literary figures. The object of literary science is 'an authorless literariness.' All the emphasis is on the 'literariness' of the formal devices of a text such as phonetic structures, rhythm, rhyme, meter and other elements which contribute to deviations in language. Victor Shklovsky summarises this attitude in his definition of literature as "the sum total of all the stylistic devices employed in it." He refuted the idea that literature is a social or political product. Instead, literature is a personal expression of an author's world vision expressed by means of images and symbols. Art is a sum of literary and artistic devices that the artist manipulates to craft his work.

Formalism views literature primarily as a specialized mode of language, and proposes a fundamental opposition between the literary (or poetical) use of language and the ordinary, “practical” use of language. The central function of ordinary language is to communicate a message or information, by references to the world existing outside of language. In contrast, literary language is self-focused; its function is not to convey information by making extrinsic references, but to offer the reader a special mode of experience by drawing attention to its own “formal” features—that is, to the qualities and internal relations of the linguistic signs themselves that formalists call ‘literariness’. As Roman Jakobson wrote in 1921: “The object of study in literary science is not literature but ‘literariness’ that is, what makes a given work a literary work.” And literariness is to be studied by focusing on the artistic devices used in the work. Russian formalists use the term ‘deformation’ in a positive sense. It suggests the changes imposed on the material of the poem, and the resultant effects. These include all the poetic devices and artistic instruments which help in the creation of aesthetic effects.

Defamiliarization

Art defamiliarizes things which have become habitual. Defamiliarization is the opposite of automatization. The literariness of a work, as Jan Mukarovsky described it, consists “in the maximum of foregrounding of the utterance”, that is, the foregrounding of “the act of expression, the act of speech itself.” The referential aspect and the logical connections in language is “backgrounded” in poetry. The primary aim of literature in thus foregrounding its linguistic medium, as Victor Shklovsky put it, is to estrange or defamiliarize. That is, by disrupting the modes of ordinary linguistic discourse, literature “makes strange” the world of everyday perception and renews the reader’s lost capacity for fresh sensation. Shklovsky’s concept of ‘Ostranenie’ or ‘defamiliarization’ is the technique of art that makes us see the strange aspects in the familiar and the unusual in the ordinary things of life. The demands of ‘normal’ existence blunt our perception of things and they become to a great extent ‘automatized.’ The purpose of a work of art is to change our mode of perception from the automatic and practical to the artistic. In ‘Art as Technique’ (1917), Shklovsky makes this clear: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.” Sometimes, the process of perception is delayed or prolonged, which is called ‘retardation.’ The Formalists were interested less in the perceptions themselves and more in the nature of the devices which produced the effect of ‘defamiliarization’.

In the “Biographia Literaria”, Coleridge had described the “prime merit” of a literary genius to be the representation of “familiar objects” so as to evoke “freshness of sensation”; but whereas the Romantic critic had stressed the author’s ability to express a fresh mode of experiencing the world, the formalist stresses the function of purely literary devices to produce the effect of freshness in the reader’s experience of a literary work. To the formalists, what distinguishes a literary work from a non-literary work is not the subject matter or content but the ‘mode of presentation.’ This emphasis on the actual process of presentation is called ‘laying bare’ one’s technique.

The foregrounded properties, or “artistic devices,” which estrange poetic language are often described as “deviations” from ordinary language. They consist primarily in patterns in the sound and syntax of poetic language, including patterns in speech sounds, grammatical constructions,

rhythm, rhyme, metre, alliteration and stanza forms. Prominent recurrence of key words or images also constitutes 'deviation'. These features of poetry are not regarded as simple adornments of the meaning, but as a reorganization of language on the semantic, phonic and syntactic levels. Shklovsky defined a work as a "sum total of all stylistic devices employed in it."

Defamiliarization in Prose fiction:

Formalists have also made influential contributions to the theory of prose fiction. With respect to this genre, the central formalist distinction is that between the "story" (the simple enumeration of a chronological sequence of events) and a plot. The Russian Formalists stress that while 'story' (*fabula*) is merely the chronological sequence of events, the raw material awaiting the organizing hand of the writer, plot (*syuzhet*) is the order of presentation in the narration which is strictly literary. Fabula is the action itself, while *syuzhet* is how the reader learns of the action. *Syuzhet* creates defamiliarisation effect upon *fabula*. The plot of "Tristram Shandy", for instance, is not merely an arrangement of story-incidents but also all the 'devices' used to interrupt and delay the narration. By frustrating familiar plot arrangement, Sterne draws attention to plotting itself as a literary object.

The writer of prose fiction uses his raw material, rearranges it and gives it a shape in such a manner as to create a literary object out of it. The process involves not a direct, chronological or literal representation of the material, but selection, concealment, focalization, distancing and taking up different points of view, all of which go to create the object. Wayne C. Booth, Tzvetan Todorov, Jakobson, Shklovsky and others have made contributions to the analysis and understanding of prose fiction using these concepts. The Formalists often linked plot with the notion of defamiliarization: the plot prevents us from regarding the incidents as typical and familiar. An author transforms the raw material of the story into a literary plot by the use of devices that violate the sequence, and deform and defamiliarize the story elements; the effect is to foreground the narrative medium and devices themselves, and in this way to disrupt and refresh what had been our standard responses to the subject matter. The Formalists look upon a work's ideas, themes and references to reality as merely the external excuse required to justify the use of formal devices. This dependence on external, non-literary assumptions is called 'motivation'. According to Shklovsky, "Tristram Shandy" is remarkable for being totally without 'motivation'. The novel is entirely made up of formal devices which are 'bared.'

Influence of Russian formalism

Russian Formalism's concepts of 'defamiliarization' and 'laying bare' are notions which influenced Bertolt Brecht's famous 'alienation effect.' Like the Russian theoreticians, Brecht was concerned with ways of demonstrating the artificiality of literary discourse. He felt that to consider literature as a natural representation of reality would be deceitful and politically regressive. He, therefore, rejected realism and embraced modernism. He demanded that actors as well as the audience should maintain a critical distance from the play. Therefore he brought in alienating elements to remind the spectators of the artificial and illusory nature of a theatrical performance.

The main influence of Russian and Czech formalism on Anglo-American criticism has been on the development of stylistics, and of narratology. Roman Jakobson and Tzvetan Todorov have been influential in introducing formalist concepts and methods into French structuralism. This movement had its impact on other movements such as structuralism.

Weaknesses

There are many weaknesses in the Formalists' theory of art. As Rene Wellek points out they have chosen a technical, scientific approach to art that would dehumanize art, and destroy criticism. The individual artist is ignored. The emphasis on form at the expense of thematic content was not well received after the Russian Revolution of 1917. One of the most sophisticated critiques of the formalist project was Leon Trotsky's Literature and Revolution (1924). Trotsky does not wholly dismiss the formalist approach, but insists that the methods of formal analysis are necessary, but insufficient "because they neglect the social world with which the human beings who write and read literature are bound up." Strong opposition to formalism, both in its Russian and American varieties, has been voiced by some Marxist critics who called their ideology reactionary and attacked them for ignoring the social dimension. The need to take into account the sociological dimension led to the writings of the 'Bakhtin School' which draw on formalist and Marxist traditions. More recently, proponents of reader-response criticism, speech-act theory, and new historicism reject the formalist view that there is a sharp and definable division between ordinary language and literary language. Julia Kristeva condemns the 'mechanical idealism' of the formalists.

When Stalin came to power, official disapproval brought an end to the Movement in about 1930. Jakobson and Rene Wellek immigrated to the United States where they helped shape the development of New Criticism during the 1940s and 1950s. Russian formalism got absorbed in other systems of thought and lost its identity as a separate literary movement. Towards the end of the last century, there was the return to formalism known as "new formalism" which proposed a positive programme, undertaking to connect the formal aspects of literature to the historical, political and worldly concerns in opposition to what the formalist movement had earlier defined itself.