

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 11
Formalism

Hello and welcome back to yet another lecture in this series on Literary Theory. In our lecture today, we are going to discuss Russian Formalism. As you will remember we had talked about a linguistic term in the domain of literary theory in the 20th century when we were discussing New Criticism in our previous lecture. In this lecture on Russian formalism we will continue with our exploration of that linguistic turn.

But, before we proceed with our discussion of Russian formalism I would like to clarify something about the way in which I have organized lectures in this course. So, some of you might have noticed that in my previous lecture on New Criticism almost my entire discussion was focused on the writings of primarily two theorists T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards. I did briefly touch on the works of William Empson and also on the works of a William Wimsatt and Beardsley, but there were other critics who I did not discuss at all.

So, for instance I did not discuss the works of F. E. Levy's, I did not discuss the works of Clay and Brooks or even of John Ransom Crowe and I do admit that this is going to be one of the limitations of this lecture series. The time constraint of each lecture will allow me to take up for discussion only certain representative figures and only certain important aspects of a particular theoretical school. And in preparing these lectures my aim actually has been to make you understand some of the very key theoretical concepts better, so that you can actually put them into practice rather than to provide you just with a comprehensive list of all the theoreticians and a superficial account of all their major works.

And, in doing so I am assuming that you will be using my lectures as a sort of starting point for your own exploration in this field of literary theory. So, for instance if you did find my elaborations of some of the aspects of new critical theory interesting I would definitely expect that you would go beyond the theoreticians that I have discussed and read more about the other new critical theories that I have not had time to discuss more elaborately.

And, not only that I have also mentioned only a very few works of even T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards and I would expect you to go beyond those few works and do your own study and own exploration if you found my lecture interesting. So, please keep in mind that none of these lectures provide an exhaustive list of all the theoreticians and theoretical positions of a particular literary critical tradition. Rather you are meant to use these lectures as samplers or as aids for your more elaborate study of the field.

So, with this clarification in place let us now move to our discussion of Russian formalism. So, what is today known as Russian formalism emerges as a school of literary theory from within two intellectual circles in Russia; one of the intellectual circles was situated in Moscow and the other intellectual circle was in Petrograd. Which is now named Saint Petersburg and that the functioning of these two intellectual schools started around 1915 and 1916 and these two intellectual circles primarily constituted of linguists and literary historians and their main focus was to discuss and debate the essence of literariness of literature.

In other words their work was to find out what is it that enable us to identify a particular work, a particular piece of writing for instance as literary and distinguish it from another piece of writing which is regarded as non-literary.

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Roman Jakobson
(1896 - 1982)



Source: Wikipedija

So, in the words of Roman Jakobson who was a major Russian formalist and I quote.

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“The subject of literary scholarship is not literature in its totality but literariness i.e. that which makes of a given work a work of literature”.

(Roman Jakobson)

“The subject of literary scholarship is not literature in its totality, but literariness that is that which makes of a given work a work of literature”. We will have to return to the theoretical works of Roman Jakobson to study them in more details during the course of this lecture, but right now let me give you a very brief overview of the ways in which the Russian formalists attempted to explore this peculiar quality that made something into a work of literature the essence of literariness.

Now, there are three related points that the Russian formalists need in this regard. The first point is that according to them the source of literariness in a particular work is neither the author of that work nor the context of that work nor is it the theme or the subject on which the work is produced. So, this was a first point. The second point that they made and which follows from the first one is that the source of literariness of a piece of literature is its language. And the third point is that this literary language is different from non-literary uses of language because the literary language is structured differently. So, the difference lies in how language is structured in literature and how this structuring of language and literature follows particular rules and particular laws.

Now, let us take each of these three points and see what they actually mean as mentioned according to the formalists is the source of literariness of a piece of literature, a poetry for instance, is not the poet nor is it the subject on which the poem is written nor even the context within which the poem is produced. The source of literariness of the poem is

precisely what constitutes a point, which is the language or the words on the page. Now, while discussing the new critics we have already seen how words on the page was prioritized by someone like I. A. Richards, for example. So, this might look like a familiar argument, but nevertheless let us try and see the logic behind the assertion of the formalists that literariness can only emerge from languages and from nothing else.

Now, if for instance we follow the romantic theory and try to locate literariness in the personality of a poet or of an author then the problem that we encounter is that we are not able to distinguish between the literary and the non-literary creations of that author. So, if you are discussing Wordsworth for instance and if it is Wordsworth's personality that makes something political, then the question is how are we to distinguish between the poems that Wordsworth wrote and his laundry list for instance because after all both are products of the same mind and the same personality.

Similarly, a particular theme or a subject cannot also be the source of literariness of a poem. Why? Because, it is quite possible to write a medical thesis on the beatings of human heart for instance, while it is also quite possible to write a very nice poem on that very same subject therefore, the subject alone cannot help us to make a distinction between literature and non literature. The social, cultural or historical context too is ruled out by the formalists from their study of literariness because of similar reasons and this is also understandable because the same historical milieu might frame the production of various kinds of literary as well as non literary pieces. So, the context too cannot be the determinant of literariness.

So, here we come to the second point the source of literalness according to the formalist is what actually constitutes the physical poem which is the language the words on the page. Now, here we of course, encounter another problem because language which is used by a poet to create poetry is also used by the same poet to speak about more mundane things which are not counted as literature language is used by Wordsworth to produce poetry language is used by Wordsworth to produce his laundry list. So, how do we make a distinction.

So, here the formalists will argue that what makes the language of a particular poet literary and thereby different from that poets other non literary users of the language is a special way in which the language of her poetry, the poetry of a particular poet is

structured. So, the primary focus of Russian formalism therefore, boils down to this issue of how language is uniquely structured in literary works which make them identifiable as pieces of literature.

And, since the effort of the formalists were to turn literary theory into a science of literature their exploration of the structuring of literary language took the form of trying to find rules and laws that shaped and controlled the structuring processes., In this lecture we will follow this search for rules of literariness by focusing on two major formalists and again given the limitation of time we can only focus on two they are representative figures, but they are not the only Russian formalists.

So, the two theorists that we are going to focus on is Victor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson. But, before we move on to these two theorists let me briefly dwell upon the relationship between Russian formalism and the contemporary Russian politics. Now, soon after the establishment of the two circles of formalist critical theories Russia underwent the Bolshevik revolution and in 1917, the Russian monarchy was replaced by a communist government.

Now, during the next decade or so, the Russian government came up with its own theories about how literature should be created and what role it should play within the society and the officially sanctioned literature was of course, supposed to portray the realities of economic class dynamics within the society as well as the goodness of the proletariat and also of course, the qualities the good qualities the virtues of the communist regime. Formalism, with its exclusive focus on the literariness of language and its refusal to the social and political context in studying literature unsurprisingly made it particularly unpopular with the government of the day. So, much so that, the that formalism as a school of thought was officially suppressed during the late 1920s and 1930s.

In fact, formalism actually became a major force in the wider field of western literary studies only much later when the two schools of a formalism were actually already gone the Russian government had already suppressed them.

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Tzvetan Todorov
(1939 - 2017)

A photograph of Tzvetan Todorov, an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a dark suit jacket over a blue shirt. He is standing at a podium, holding a glass of wine in his hands, and appears to be speaking or presenting.

Source: Fronteiras do Pensamento


In fact, the Russian formalists gained widespread recognition only after 1965, when one of their group members Tzvetan Todorov published in French, from Paris the translation of a selected number of works by the Russian formalists.

So, as you can see here political events can not only aid the emergence of literary theories, but also can suppress them. And with this in mind let us now proceed to a discussion of the two formalists that we have selected and we are going to start with Victor Shklovsky.

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Victor Shklovsky
(1893-1984)

- “Art as Technique” (1917)

A black and white portrait of Victor Shklovsky, a man with a shaved head, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark bow tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression.

Source: Wikipedia

The dates of Victor Shklovsky are 1893 to 1984 and the concept that he is famously known for is called defamiliarization. Now, according to Shklovsky, defamiliarization is the process that structures language in literary pieces and gives them the quality of literariness. In his important 1917 essay titled *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky observes how in our regular exposure to the world around us we grow accustomed and habituated not only to our surrounding material reality, but also to ideas to concepts and to various narratives that we encounter frequently.

Our perception regarding these material things as well as these ideas are dulled to such an extent that we stop mentally processing them, sometimes not processing them at all. For instance to give you an example the house in which I grew up as a child was very close to a railway crossing and as children we were so habituated to the sound of trains passing through that crossing day in and day out that we often did not even notice the sound. Because of such regular exposure our minds had stopped processing the sound altogether as something that was disturbing or that was intrusive. In fact, we were only reminded of these sounds when some guests who had come visiting would complain about them.

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“If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us.”

(“*Art as Technique*”, Shklovsky)

Thus as Shklovsky argues perception when it becomes habitual turns into something that is automatic and not thought out in his own words and I quote, “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual it becomes

automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us.”

Now, this process of a perception disappearing into the area of the unconsciously automatic has a profound effect on the language that we use in our day to day life. This language too thus echoes the deadening of our perception and in our familiar settings therefore, we use expressions and phrases that are usually half formed and incomplete.

So, for instance if we do public speaking we will realize how carefully we have to speak and if you compare that to how you speak when you are among your friends you will see your language used is really very lazy. But, what is even more important is that whereas, our deadened perceptions result in a language use which reflects that deadening, our ordinary use of language also contributes to the diluting of our perception by repeatedly exposing us to certain words and to certain phrases. Thus for instance thanks to the 24, 7 news channels we have grown so habituated towards like rape for instance towards like murder and war that they do not often allow us to perceive with full force the horror and violence that each of these words actually signify.

Shklovsky argues that literature is unique and different from our more mundane modes of communication because it structures the language in such a way that it defamiliarizes for us things and ideas to which we have become so accustomed that we have stopped perceiving them fully.

The language of literature returns us back to a state of innocence, this is what Shklovsky claims. It returns us back to a state of innocence where we perceive what we already know as if we are perceiving them for the first time. It does so by making strange, by defamiliarizing what is already familiar, so that we cannot recognize that thing very easily. In his essay Shklovsky explains this technique by borrowing an example from one of Tolstoy’s writings, where he defamiliarizes the idea of flogging by describing it as follows and this is how Shklovsky quotes Tolstoy.

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Shklovsky explains 'defamiliarization' by borrowing an example from one of Tolstoy's writings where he defamiliarises the idea of flogging by describing it as follows:

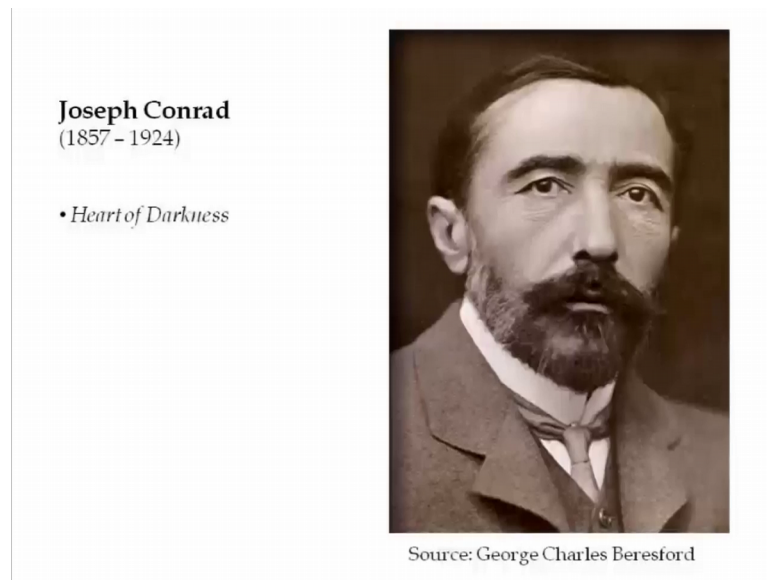
"to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches".

“To strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches”. Now, according to Shklovsky this language is literary because by spelling out in such gruesome details what the act of flogging actually involves it makes strange the action and helps us perceive it in all its vividness that is otherwise not available when we just encounter the familiar world of flogging because we do not process it properly when we hear it.

Now, one of the ways in which Shklovsky applied this theory of defamiliarization to the domain of literary criticism was by suggesting a distinction between what he called a story and a plot. According to Shklovsky a story is a straightforward narration of a sequence of events which do not use the technique of defamiliarization and therefore, cannot be considered as literary. He suggests that a story becomes literary only when the technique of defamiliarization is applied to the sequence of events and they are converted into something that cannot be easily recognized by the readers and therefore, they break the hold of dull habituation.

This defamiliarized sequence of narration is what Shklovsky identifies as a plot. So, it is by converting a story into a plot that a narration according to Shklovsky gains the quality of literariness.

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And, here I think a good example of this distinction between what is a story and what is a plot is provided by Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. This novel, which was first published in 1899, defamiliarizes the idea of colonialism and its associated narrative of civilizing mission for the European audience.

During the 19th and early 20th century, European colonialism of places like India and Africa was accompanied and justified by a story. And, the story was that these people living in India and Africa were barbarians and therefore, the Europeans went there and they colonized these barbarians and they colonized them in order to civilize them. A very sort of sequential narration of what happened and what is going to happen.

Now, Conrad's novel makes strange this familiar story of the civilizing mission through a plot that traces the journey of its protagonist Marlowe through the Congo valley. The easy understanding of the narrative of colonialism as a civilizing mission is hampered, is impeded by the plot which presents in painful details the kind of barbarity unleashed by the so-called bringing in of European civilization to places like Africa and Congo.

So, as you can see here, formalism, though it might appear to be a political, because it does not directly engage with the historical context of a work or the political ideology of it, its authors can nevertheless function politically, by pointing out the ways in which literature defamiliarizes certain ideas, certain concepts, and certain narratives that are accepted within the society habitually and automatically. Just like, colonialism was

accepted habitually and automatically by the European most of the European audience of the late 19th and early 20th century when Conrad wrote his novel.

So, from a Victor Shklovskys theories of defamiliarization, let us now move to the works of the other major formalist Roman Jakobson. Jakobson was born in 1896 and was one of the leading figures within the Moscow circle of the Russian formalists. During the suppression of the formalist school of thought in Russia by the government, Jakobson shifted to Prague where again he became one of the leading lights among a circle of intellectuals who formed what is known as a Prague school.

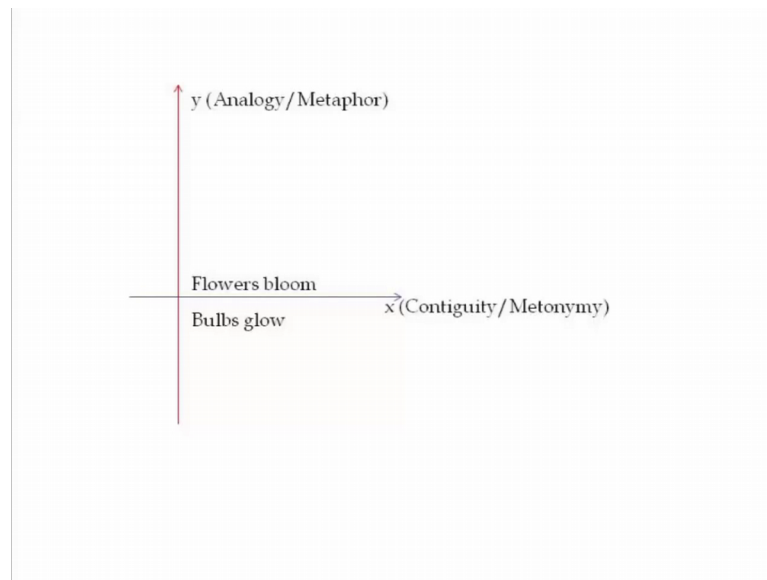
And, then again at the verge of the outbreak of the Second World War Jakobson who was a Jewish descendant escaped Europe to escape from the rise of the Nazi government and he fled to America, where he first taught in the new school and then he went on to teach at the Harvard university. So, the Anglophone academic sphere was exposed to the thoughts of the Russian formalist school not only via the translations of Tzvetan Todorov, but also via the presence of Jakobson in America.

Now, Jakobson was a linguist and his contribution to the field of literary theory is primarily through his efforts to identify what makes particular kinds of language uses more poetical than other. To understand Jakobson's theory of poetical language we need to start by studying how he explores the notion of equivalence in language.

So, consider for a moment these two sentences the first sentence is flowers bloom and the second sentence is bulbs glow. Now, the words in each of these sentences are connected with each other in a relation of contiguity. That is, in the first sentence flowers and bloom are associated with each other by being placed side by side and by being related in terms of a sequence. So, let us call this relationship horizontal and this relationship of course, also exists between the words bulbs and glow.

Now, if you consider the two sentences together the first and the second, you will see that they can be very easily mapped onto each other and you will find that there is a relationship of similarity or analogy between them. Thus, the nouns flowers and bulbs are analogous to each other just as the two verbs bloom and glow are analogous to each other. So, let us call this analogous relationship vertically. Now, if we plot these two relationships in the form of a graph it will look something like this.

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The y axis is the plane along which the vertical relationship of analogy functions, that is the relationship of a similarity; similarity between the words flowers and bulbs and the words bloom and glow. Jakobson calls this y axis the axis of metaphoric relationship. On the other hand the x axis is the plane along with the horizontal relationship of contiguity functions, that is, the relationship established through the sequence between the words flowers and bloom and between the words bulbs and glow. Jakobson calls this x axis the axis of metonymic relationship.

Now, according to Jakobson language functions poetically when we transport the words related along the metaphoric or analogous axis on to the contiguous or the metonymic axis. So, for instance, take the words flowers and bulbs, they are related along the y axis of analogy or metaphor. If I now transport the word flower on to the x axis of contiguity and metonymy and place it next to the word bulbs to create a sentence like bulbs flower, then this according to Jakobson will be an example of poetic language and this poetic transformation is actually very easily understood.

So, for instance a sentence like I pressed the switch and the bulb flowered over my head sounds much more poetic than a sentence like I press the switch and a bulb glowed over my head. Now, here it is important to note that such poetic uses of language which juxtaposes the metaphoric on to the metonymic plain can and in it does occur in our day to day speech as well.

So, this is a function that is not unique to poetry, but what makes the language of poetry distinct from our day to day language of communication is that in the former which is in the language of poetry the poetic function of language is used much more extensively. And to use Shklovskys concept here, it defamiliarizes our everyday use of words and phrases and makes us perceive them as fresh by disturbing their usual order.

With this we end our discussion of a Russian formalism. In our next two lectures, we will take up the work of a man who in spite of being associated with Russian formalism created several theoretical concepts that stand out for their uniqueness and not only for their uniqueness, but also for their far reaching applicability and here I am talking about Mikhail Bakhtin. So, we will take up Mikhail Bakhtin and his works in our next lectures.

Thank you for listening.