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# LITERARY HISTORY BETWEEN RUSSIAN FORMALISM AND CZECH STRUCTURALISM

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The aim of my study is to compare the views of the concept of literary history by Russian formalists and Prague structuralists, two significant literary theoretical schools of the beginning of the twentieth century. In spite of the fact that both schools are primarily considered literary theoretical, their particular members were involved in a whole scale literary critical investigation – including the area of literary historical inquiry. Indeed, slowly but surely both respective schools became more emancipated in their claim of a general validity of their originally literary theoretical ideas and started to widen the scope of their scholarly interest towards encompassing the concept of literary history. The formalists originally almost dismissed literary history as an unwelcome heritage of the old approach and the structuralists overlooked it due to their initial emphasis on synchronic aspects of literature.

Keywords: Russian formalism, structuralism, Prague Linguistic Circle, Jan Mukařovský, Felix Vodička, literary history

## I. RUSSIAN FORMALISM

When speaking about literary history in connection with The Russian Formalist School, the inner heterogeneity of the School, noticed by all scholars who have seriously examined the School, should be emphasized also in this particular area. Indeed, it is impossible to find a consistent approach or a linear development of particular ideas regarding the notion of literary history – the notion stays rather scattered in a universe of asked questions and offered answers following individual scholarly needs and preferences of the members of the School. Nevertheless, at the same time, these questions and answers originate from a shared desire to found a new tradition of literary studies, which would grow from the specificity of literature itself.

## DEMARICATION

In the initial phase of their investigation, in order to point out its limits and in order to stipulate the main guidelines of their own, new approach to literature, Russian formalists often referred to the current literary historical investigation in order to demarcate their own positions. However, it is a matter of fact that their calls for the necessary reform of contemporary literary studies are not reserved for the formalists themselves but they appeared already in the work of their predecessors: one of the most known is the claim of Alexander Nikolayevich Veselovsky who, in his introduction to *Historical Poetics* (1894), provides us with an early concept of literary studies:

“Literary history is reminiscent of a geographical zone that international law has consecrated as *res nullius*, where the historian of culture and the aesthetician, the erudite antiquarian and the researcher of social ideas all come to hunt. Each carries away what he can, according to his abilities and views; the goods or the quarry display the same tag, but their contents are far from identical. There is no agreement about a common standard, for otherwise we would not return so insistently to the question: What is the history of literature? One of the views to which I am most sympathetic can be reduced more or less to the following definition: literary history is the history of social thought in its imagistic-poetic survival and in the forms that express this sedimentation. History of thought is a broader notion; literature is its partial manifestation. Such a specification presupposes a clear notion of what poetry is, what the evolution of poetic consciousness and its forms is, for otherwise we would not speak of history” (Veselovsky 2016: 40).

As we can see, Veselovsky assigns literature an important role in human existence (the bind to social thought in its imagistic-poetic survival) and therefore subsumes literary history to history of thought. In order to study the part of history of thought which is carried by the phenomenon of literature, Veselovsky clearly states the need to develop a literary critical approach which enables us to study the variety and development of literary forms.

It has been thoroughly described that early formalists considered several ideas of Veselovsky (but also of other predecessors like Alexander Potebnja) old and obsolete, nevertheless, in the special case of literary history we can detect a shared need to start with the definition of specificity of literature as such, which is a precondition for the move towards literary history. In their early delimitations Russian formalists regularly emphasize the positivist and psychological traps of the contemporary literary investigative practice. Boris Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum in his early (1914) review of the book *History of Western Literature* (1912), stipulates the “deep crisis” of contemporary literary history. The crisis is, according to Eikhenbaum, caused by the fact that contemporary literary history focused more on the relationships between historical events and verbal art than on “inner *analysis* and a thorough examination of literary artworks as such” (Eikhenbaum 2012: 9). Eikhenbaum, in the same study, also mentions another approach to contemporary literary history which he considers equally wrong: the “purely psychological method”, as he call is, which actually leads the investigators to “purely superficial psychological induction” (9). The third of the contemporary approaches to literary history, mentioned by Eikhenbaum, is the philological method, which focuses on the “investigation of the text, its variants, taking over, influences etc.” (9) This method, according to Eikhenbaum, inspires the modern literary studies which “revise previous literary classifications, periodizations, appurtenance of particular writers to concrete schools etc.” and protects literary critical investigation from pronouncing “an objective and once and for all completed evaluation of a writer or a group of writers” (9). Based on this, Eikhenbaum explicitly calls for a completely new approach to the challenges of literary history, which actually results in the need for a specific literary criticism – a special approach of which the most important quality is its a-historism: indeed, according to Eikhenbaum the connection between literary criticism and the present (via “eternal values”) is more important for these kind of studies than the connection between literary criticism and historical investigation: “The study of literature cannot be developing outside its bound to reality, it must not be archeological”(10). As it can be

clearly seen, Eikhenbaum is in his early suggestions reluctant to connect literary studies with a purely historical dimension: he views the literary historical investigation marginal with regard to the investigation of the values literature shares with our lives. This early sociological approach can be traced, as we will see, also in other formalist theoretical approaches to the concept of literary history.

## HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE POETICS

Among other contributions of Viktor Shklovsky to the development of literary theoretical studies the most valued with regard to literary history is his concept of *defamiliarisation*: this concept actually invites us to a historical poetological inquiry. It is Shklovsky's practical example of defamiliarisation, *parody*, which is commonly considered the gate to the historical comparative method to the study of literature. "For Šklovskij, parody was above all a means of de-familiarizing automatized devices and the displacement and violation of customary literary norms, and its aim was to provide us with a new perception of literary form" (Steiner 1984: 119). Undoubtedly, Shklovsky's examination of parody represents an important move towards the strategy of historical poetics, however, it has to be emphasized that the author's claim goes far beyond this particular genre when he explicitly states that "all works of art, and not only parodies, are created either as a parallel or an antithesis to some model" (Shklovsky 1990: 20). Boris Ejchenbaum in his famous study *The Theory of the "Formal Method"* of 1926 states: "Shklovsky's essay marked the changeover from our study of theoretical poetics to our study of the history of literature. Our original assumptions about form had been complicated by our observations of new features of evolutionary dynamics and their continuous variability. Our moving into the area of the history of literature was not simple expansion of our study; it resulted from the evolution of our concept of form. We found that we could not see the literary work in isolation, that we had to see its form against a background of other works rather than by itself" (Ejchenbaum 1965: 118-119).

The formalist's practical investigations of particular literary artworks, their comparisons of the work of one author and of several authors, the

comparative history of plot constructions, thematics and poetics – these actually represent the essential contributions to the “practical” literary history and, undoubtedly, are inspirational to these days.

#### EVOLUTION – LITERARY SERIES AND LIFE (“BYT”)

As much as the “practical” literary history encompasses a fair part of the formalist’s investigation and effort, at this point, it is time to focus on a specific conception of the late phase of Russian formalism, that of Jurij Tynjanov as it is described in his essay *On Literary Evolution* (1927). Tynjanov, again, aims his attention at the notion of literary history, and again, observes its contemporary features in order to re-build its system:

“Within the cultural disciplines literary history still retains the status of a colonial territory. On the one hand, individualistic psychologism dominates it to a significant extent, particularly in the West, unjustifiably replacing the problem of literature with the question of the author’s psychology, while the problem of literary evolution becomes the problem of the genesis of literary phenomena. On the other hand, a simplified casual approach to a literary order leads to a sharp break between the literary order itself and the point of observation, which always turns out to be the major but also the most remote social orders. The organization of a closed literary order and the examination of the evolution within it sometimes collides with the neighboring cultural, behavioral, and social orders in the broad sense. Thus such an effort is doomed to incompleteness” (Tynjanov 1987: 152).

Tynjanov, after describing the unfortunate stage of literary historical investigation, in his approach to literary evolution and history insists that in order to study literary evolution properly it must be considered a system – only then can it be studied in its correlations with other systems surrounding it. In the hierarchy of systems, Tynjanov claims that the study of literary evolution “must move from the literary system to the nearest correlated systems, not the distant, even though major, systems” (Erlich 1965: 162) – this process ultimately leads the literary historian to the study

of life ("byt") which is closely connected to literary production by the verbal function which dominates them both. Literary series are thus studied in a strong bind to outer phenomena (orders, series) (behavioral, cultural, social etc.) This bind is no longer viewed in a "simplified casual view" but in the complex system of a subtle network of mutually influential developing series.

## II. THE PRAGUE SCHOOL

The Prague school, centered around The Prague Linguistic Circle, which was first established in 1926, represents a set of fairly more unified approaches to the study of literature than the Formalist School. The influence of Russian formal method(s) on Czech structuralism has been analyzed and described extensively and in terms of literary historical investigation and the explicit connection between the ideas of Jurij Tynjanov and practice of Jan Mukařovský in his analyses of *Sublime of Nature* by Milota Zdirad Polák (1934). Nevertheless, in terms of "theoretical" literary history, the Prague Schools scholars paced in their own specific way.

In general, the initial stage of the Prague School is known for borrowing from (synchronic) structuralist linguistics but also for turning its attention to the diachronic dimension of language and literature. The diachronic dimension of the study of literature is firmly embodied in one of the most important Prague structuralist axioms (based on the Hegelian influence) that considers literature to be a specific *developing structure*. Thus, the structuralist thought of literary history is fully centered around the evolution of literary structure, which is considered *energetic* and *dynamic*. Mukařovský, in his sociological approach, places this structure among the collective consciousness of mankind. Particular literary artworks are then part and parcel of this developing structure and their authors, individuals, guarantee the connection of this specific structure to structures outer: historical, cultural, political etc. Mukařovský explicitly stipulates that "the aim of structuralist literary history is to comprehend the development of literature in all its complexness, scope and regularity" (Muka-

řovský 1948: 91-92). On the one hand, Mukařovský in fact does not develop a systematic “practical complement“ of his theoretical conception of literary evolution (based on the piers of the immanently developing literary structure and particular literary artworks as material embodiments of this structure bound to the outer reality through authors-individuals); on the other hand, his analyses of particular literary artworks provides us with certain clues which insinuate how the analytically vague structuralist idea of literary history could be systematically applied to literature itself. Mukařovský, when analyzing the works of prominent Czech writers in both synchronic as well as diachronic relations combines the detailed structuralist investigation of structural aspects of particular artworks by placing these aspects into a wider developmental perspective regarding genres, trends, forms and themes and their (diachronic) metamorphosis. To these days, Mukařovský’s analyses represent one of the most thorough and complex applications of the structuralist method to Czech literature. To sum up, structuralists of that stage “tried to reveal the internal unity of particular works, but, at the same time,[...] tried to follow each particular work and each phenomenon as a component of the evolution of the whole literary structure” (Vodička 1948: 317).

Coming from the general structuralist ideas of literary history, which were mainly centered around Jan Mukařovský’s general suggestions, Felix Vodička, a prominent historian of the Prague School, developed the most systematic Czech structuralist system of literary history. In his early work, Vodička focuses, similarly to Mukařovský, on analyses of particular literary works, however, unlike Mukařovský, Vodička from the beginning practices the masterpieces of structuralist historical (or developmental) poetics: in his encounters with Czech literature of *The Beginnings of Modern Czech Prose* (1948) he emphasizes the evolutionary metamorphoses of structures of Czech prose of the 19th century. Nevertheless, pacing towards his own concept of the system of structuralist literary criticism, in his first step Vodička, similarly to some of the formalists, defines the scope and place of (structural) literary history and, similarly to his predecessors, expresses his belief that “structuraslism provides literary historical investigation with a base to move

from the critical point of its development“ (Vodička 1998: 11). It can be said that the core of Vodička's contribution to the theory of literary history consists mainly in his claim of three sets of tasks which should be obeyed by literary historians when dealing with a particular literary artwork from the literary historical perspective. The respective tasks are divided into three sets and paraphrased as follows: first, to reveal the history of the author's creative role in the genesis of the artwork in order to investigate the influence of extra-literary phenomena on the literary artwork, second, to uncover the history of the artwork as a specific (sign-based) structure against the background of the wholesome developing literary structure, and third, to describe the history of the reception, *echo*, of the artwork in question in order to reconstruct the contemporary aesthetic norm.

As it can be seen from Vodička's proposal, his system of the historian's tasks actually represents a paradigm encompassing several previously incongruent (or even antagonist) approaches to the literary evolutionary (developmental) phenomena. The *authors creative role*, which at the beginnings of the formalists investigation suffered from the stigma of psychologization and only in the pace of further development became an important part of literary evolutionary studies – as an important agent of extra-literary series which are important for the study of the connection of literature and life – plays an important role in the structuralist system as the mediator between the developing literary structure and reality. The investigation of the *place of a literary artwork in the developing literary structure* which is crucial for the structuralist diachronic turn enables the historians to use all the means they have developed in order to analyze the structure of literary artworks – structuralist linguistics here complements the tradition of poetics and aesthetics. And finally, the *history of a reception of a literary artwork*, which represents the most innovative structuralist contribution, takes into account the development of the aesthetic norm and its metamorphoses – only then the historian is able to reconstruct the variable aesthetic context of the history of reception of the artwork, its echo. The attention paid to *echo* clearly represents the anti-essential, socially variable foundation of the Prague structuralist aesthetics and embodies



the final solution of the connection between the development of literature and its outer milieu.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the notion of literary history in time became too alluring to be omitted for the scholars of the Russian formalist school and the Prague school. During the process of the emantipation of both schools which resulted in an extension of the initial scopes of their scholarly interest they provided us with original and beneficial thoughts of literary history of which some seem to still be fruitful in 1968: “The actuality of the conceptions of literary evolution in Russian formalism and Czech structuralism consists especially in the fact that their representants showed in their practices that a structural analysis of literary phenomena not only does not have to be in an antinomy with a historically developmental aspect, but also that there is a strong dialectical relationship between these two levels” (Grygar 1968: 268). As a result, I believe that it is primarily only up to current literary theoreticians and historians to prove the validity of this “dialectical” concept in the 21st century.

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