

Formalist literary theory

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Formalism is a literary theory that was spearheaded by two main bodies - Russian Formalists and New Critics - which focused on understanding the literary text through the text itself. Its principles posed a great shift from the traditional approaches during its time, and so it sparked a movement in the field of literary studies that would adopt new perspectives and ideas.

While Formalism received much criticism due to its dubious methods of the closed reading of a text, its lack of a solid theory of language, and so on, it was also able to establish the notion of literary study being a partly scientific, objective process, and its framework would serve as a starting point and a great influence for future ideas and theorists to come. Old Criticism. The form that literary studies had taken during the second half of the nineteenth century, positivism, was largely based on the genetic approach: critics concentrated on uncovering the sources and genesis of particular works.

The role of biography and history reduced the importance of literature itself in literary scholarship. Study of literature had become a loose aggregate of philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, etc. As Jakobson said, historians of literature had become practitioners of what he called 'homespun' disciplines based on psychology, politics, and philosophy, where literature itself could only offer secondary and defective evidence. Emergence of Russian Formalism Formalist theory emerged from the meetings, discussions, and publications of the Opojaz (The Society for the Study of Poetic Language) and the Moscow Linguistic Circle.

They were dissatisfied with the ways of studying literature in the academe. Opojaz was based on St. Petersburg, dates back to 1914, and dissolved in 1923. Its nucleus was formed by Sklovsky, Eikhenbaum, Brik, Tynyanov. MLC

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came to life in 1915. Its best known member is Roman Jakobson. When he left them in 1920 for Prague, they lost their most talented member, and ceased to be a significant formalist center. Some of the figures who influenced Russian Formalism were: Andrei Bely and his work, Symbolism. Said that, "our knowledge of reality is never direct... we do not know reality except approximately through symbols. * Literary criticism has to be preoccupied with the specific forms of artistic creativity. * What is joined in the symbol in a humanly inseparable way is form and content. * Literature is both spatial and temporal. Other arts like sculpture or music realize themselves within only one of these forms. * Reality appears to be different from that seen in a work of art. It is "deformed". Occurs by certain specific constructive forms. These are to be investigated. Immersed in the mystery that the mosaic of art covers, the critic loses their view of their proper task. They search for something that is beyond it before describing it with any accuracy. A. A. Potebnja * Literary activity is cognitive and tightly connected with its medium - language. * Poetry is a form of thinking in images, the 'shape' of which is dependent on the linguistic features of a given language. * Poetic image need not mean a static picture of something, it can also mean action. Not just spatial, but temporal too. * Images play a synthetic role in our thinking.

Poetry strives to reduce the wide variety of complex phenomena to a small number of images. * Imagery is not basic aspect of poetic craft - but also sound. Images are not the only means to convey meaning in a poetic work.

Emergence of New Criticism The prominent figures in the movement for the New Criticism were John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and

Cleanth Brooks. They initiated a professionalization of American literary studies - one way of spreading the ideas of New Criticism was by publishing New Criticism based textbooks to be used in universities.

These individuals saw the contemporary world as driven by desire in profit and greed, as well as "triumphs" in modern science, threatening to destroy tradition and everything that was not immediately useful - including poetry. Poetry is a means of resisting commodification and superficiality. Some of the figures who influenced New Criticism were: T. E. Hulme * "Romanticism and Classicism". Romantic view: man is intrinsically good, spoilt by circumstances. Classical view: man is intrinsically limited, but disciplined by order and tradition to something fairly decent.

Romantics are regarded as a well of possibilities. Classical are regarded as finite and fixed. * Classical view leads to poetry. Romantic one to uncontrolled flights of emotions and metaphors. * New poets will disclaim the thought that poetry is a vehicle for expressing emotions, but rather, it provides a precise description of the world around us. T. S. Eliot * Those who treat literature as a product of a historical moment or a philosophical foundation should be called historians and philosophers. * Rejected vague emotionalism and verbal profusion of Romantic style.

Critic should be preoccupied with literature itself, its accurate usage of words, rather than the phenomena flanking it. * Does not deny that emotions enter poetry, but rejects the directness of the overflow. Disliked sentimental poetry and respected tradition. * Highest poetry should synthesize thought and feeling, argument and image, the rational and the non-rational. Literariness. The first question for the Formalist was not how to study

literature, but what the subject matter of literary study actually is. To get specificity for literary study, it entails the exclusion of all mimetic and expressive definitions of literature.

Because in regarding the literary text as an instrument of expression (a point of view which will lead us to the personality of author, leading to biography or psychology) or representation (we will see it as a picture of society, leading to history, politics, or sociology), we overlook the specificity of its literary qualities. What makes a text literary? This was a concern for the Formalists. What distinguishes literature from, say, a news article or a travel book? Simply put by Eikhenbaum, literature constitutes differences from other orders of facts.

The object of study of literary study is not an object, but a set of differences, and the science will consist of the study of those specifics which distinguish it from any other material. Literary studies analyze the differences implied in the opposition between practical and poetic language. The differential element of poetry, gives it its specificity. We owe this difference to the process of defamiliarization. According to Sklovsky, art defamiliarizes things that have become habitual or automatic. Take for example the act of walking. Walking is a daily activity. We have ceased to be aware of it.

But when we dance, the automatically perceived gestures of walking are perceived anew. " A dance is a walk which is felt. " In the same way, everyday use of language is something that is natural or unconscious. But language in poetry is more or less the same language we know, but this time, we have become more aware of its presence - it is a new sensation to be felt, just like the dance. Practical language constitutes the main

automatized elements made strange by art. Everyday language is made strange in poetry, and in particular, the physical sounds of words themselves become unusually prominent.

Poetic speech is formed speech. Poetic speech is not the specialness of vocabulary (e. g. just because a poem uses an unfamiliar word like " lo! " does not mean that it is poetic speech), but because its formal devices - like rhyme and rhythm - act on ordinary words to renew our perception of them, as well as their sound texture. Because of that, defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found. The poetic speech that one would find in a poem is a deliberate act of creating a form that is based on defamiliarized language. As Jakobson described it, poetry is organized violence committed on ordinary speech.

It roughens up and impedes pronunciation of ordinary speech - syntax, rhythm, semantics. Devices and Function. Poetry makes use of literary devices - hyperbole, parallelism, repetition, iambic pentameter, and so on. That poses the question: can't devices lose their function? Because the literary devices themselves were subject to automatization of perception since they are in literature now, they lose their distinction as literary and non-literary. Literariness then is a feature not just of form as impeded speech, but more importantly, of impeded form.

So the defamiliarization will not wholly depend on the existence of devices, but their function in the work they appear in. For example, foregrounding gives us a dominant factor. A work will contain passive or automatized elements that are subservient/subordinate to the dominant element. So what would interest a Formalist, is how the elements are interrelated. How do

these automatized elements give way for the foregrounded element, or perhaps, what makes the foregrounded element stand out; the device could have been just commonplace or uninteresting, so how does it achieve its dominant status in relation to other devices?

In other words, the active components of a work are now differentiated not only from the practical language, but from other formal components which have become automatized. Fabula and Syuzhet. However, the method for analysis and the literariness of poetry cannot be applied exactly for prose narrative as well. They have different constructions. The Formalist study of narrative was based on a distinction between the events and construction of a prose narrative - Fabula and Syuzhet. Fabula (plot) refers to the chronological sequence of events. Syuzhet refers to the order and manner in which they are actually presented in the narrative.

Syuzhet creates the defamiliarizing effect. We could have a crime story and it could be told in its chronological sequence: there was a crime, the police went to investigate, they had to seek for the help of a world-famous detective, and he solves the crime, the end. From point A, it ends to point D. That is the Fabula. Manipulation of the Syuzhet though, allows it to be told in a different, more defamiliarized way. We could start with the ending wherein the crime was already solved, or we can start in the middle of the sequence of events wherein the detective receives a request for his assistance.

We can even tell the story from the point of view of the killer. All of it makes for a new way of telling a common plot. Close Reading. When we do a reading of a text, we ought to focus on the text of a work; exclude the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts. The text was an object of

literature complete in itself. It is an autonomous entity, and therefore should be treated as one that is not dependent on its creator or external influences. If the goal of reading a text is to get its meaning, then we should not look further from the text.

Form and meaning are intimately connected and should not be analyzed separately. Good literature transcends the time of the author. Who cares if X was in love with lady Y? We should disregard the details of such, and focus on how the poem focuses on scorned love. Emotion and Intention. William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's essay, *The Intentional Fallacy*, talks about the mistake of attempting to understand the author's intentions about his work since it violates the autonomy of the work. The meaning of a work should be contained solely within itself. *The Affective Fallacy* talks about the mistake of interpreting a text through the emotions of the reader. A text must be understood not relatively, but its meaning must be inherent. Paradox. Poetry should carry the element of heterogeneity, of negating their own affirmations. They are better equipped for whatever treatment they will undergo. Homogeneous poetry cannot bear "ironic contemplation". It is irony and ambiguity that make for good poetry. Poetry is paradoxical in nature. Life is complex. The force of the paradox holds a poem together, it builds unity and coherence within the text and the task of the critic is to lay bare these paradoxes and show how they work.

Poetry says something 'for real' that is not equal to a logical statement or to an emotional attitude. It is not just a psychological stimulus, as Richard said. Poetry obliquely tells us something about the nature of reality. All of its meaning is linguistic, but not all that is pertinent to meaning can be

explained by linguistic analysis. Literary History. The dominant devices in a particular genre and/or period contribute to the evolution of literature. When they become familiar, new works will pick them up to make them perceptible again.

Through this, genre evolves. If so, then literary language is not a planned development of tradition, but a colossal displacement of traditions. Legacy Formalism, because of the specificity it wished to explore, thus creating the concept of literariness, was a productive and adaptable framework. Formalism anticipated and influenced some important ideas in 20th century literary theory - central position of language, devaluation of biographical element, importance of norm deviation, etc. will be featured by future theorists from Jakobson to Barthes. Shortcomings

They have no developed theory of language, especially since Formalism was made in a pre-Saussurean view of language. Marxist critics argue against the absence of any social dimension in Formalism's conception of literature. They claimed that use of language is social and ideological. References: Bertens, Hans. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008. Jefferson, Ann & Robey, David. *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. Totowa, N. J. : Barnes and Noble, 1984. Thompson, Ewa. *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism: A Comparative Study*. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.