The limits of formalism in defining literariness

Russian formalism, as a movement, arose to prominence in a time of great artistic change, where experimentation and the avant-garde rose to the forefront of literature, and introduced new narrative structures and styles. Russian formalism can therefore be interpreted as a reaction to the chaotic literature of its time, the early Twentieth-Century, especially in how it attempted to define the notion of literariness through a more modernised, scientific method. The Formalists attempted to contain literature, to provide it, through a more objective, scientific method, with set rules and parameters that provided it order and form. Literariness, for the Formalists, was something that was achieved through the use of a certain method in a text, and was not an innate quality given to any piece of fiction, prose or poetry.

It could be argued, however, that though Russian formalism provided an ordered method through which to understand the chaotic literature of its time, this method is unable to fully comprehend literariness. By identifying literature through a fixed definition, Russian formalism disregards several genres of what is considered canon literature, and makes literature a form of art based solely on abstract methods and obscure styles.

In his ' Introduction to the Formal Method', Boris Eichenbaum wrote: ' that the object of literary science, as literary science, ought to be the investigation of the specific properties of literary material, of the properties that distinguish such material from material of any other kind'[1]. Eichenbaum, considered by many as representative of Russian formalism, thus defines literary science as the investigation into what makes a piece of material literary. What elements of a text make it literary and separate it from another text that is not? We can safely assume that, due to the fact

that Eichenbaum introduces this idea in an essay titled ' Introduction to the Formal Method', Russian formalism can be referred to as a literary science, and thus Russian formalism becomes a method used to distinguish the literary from the non-literary.

Eichenbaum writes that Russian formalism distinguished the literary from the non-literary through recognising the " opposition between ' poetic' language and ' practical' language." (250) Practical language, as defined by the Formalists, is simply language that has " no autonomous value and [is] simply merely a means of communication." (250) Practical language is thus language whose sole purpose is to convey information; it is a tool of communication. The conversation of our daily lives (" Hello, how are you?" " I'm doing well.") is an example of practical language as it is simply communication from one person to another, consisting solely of the exchange of information and pleasantries, and holds no symbolic meaning. Furthermore, everyday conversation is non-literary due to its absence of autonomy. Conversation, the Formalists suggested, is not independent from the converser's language precedent; it is recognised by them and processed without being truly being appreciate for its intricacies and nuances. Practical language, the Formalists argued, does not make a text literary. Textbooks, non-fiction magazines, brochures, and recipe books are therefore classified as non-literary texts as they solely convey information and hold no autonomous value; there is no symbolic meaning to a recipe, it is just a means through which to transfer the steps on how to cook a tasty meal, and the language it uses does not challenge the readers perception of the meal.

The opposite of practical language is poetic language, something which Eichenbaum states is created through the process of estrangement. Estrangement, for Eichenbaum, is the process of distorting the familiar into something unfamiliar, making the ordinary extraordinary. A recipe, just in a plain and simple form, is a non-literary text as it consists solely of practical language. If we were, however, to write a recipe using a variety of techniques and devices (metaphor, allegory, diaspora, etc.) then we could make the recipe literary as it has been estranged and made poetic, the reader is forced by the unfamiliar mix of images and descriptions to comprehend the meal differently. This is, for the Formalists, what makes a text literary, and thus places it into the sphere of art. As Eichenbaum writes, " Art is conceived as a way of breaking down automatism in perception, and the aim of the image is held to be, not making a meaning more accessible for our comprehension, but bringing about a special perception of a thing, bringing about the ' seeing', and not just the ' recognising' of it." (251) A text is made literary, therefore, when its language is estranged and thus forces the reader to perceive the content differently, allowing them to become more aware of its meaning.

This definition of literariness can easily be applied to modernist texts, such as James Joyce's Ulysses. In Ulysses, Joyce used a variety of techniques to record how the human consciousness perceives reality accurately, these techniques including interior monologue, free indirect discourse and, most famously, stream of consciousness. These techniques clearly estrange the language and force the reader to perceive the text differently. Take, for

instance, Joyce's description of his hero, Leopold Bloom, having a sexual fantasy set in a bathhouse:

" He foresaw his pale body reclined in it at full, naked, in a womb of warmth, oiled by melting scented soap, softly laved. He saw his trunk and limbs rippled over and sustained, buoyed lightly upward, lemonyellow: his navel, bud of flesh: and saw the dark tangled curls of his bush floating, floating hair of the stream around the limp father of thousands, a languid floating flower."

It is clear to see how Joyce estranges the image of Bloom masturbating at a bathhouse, disjointing his physiology and using metaphorical objects to represent body parts. Formalists would argue that this is a good example of poetic language, that Joyce has written something inherently literary due to the fact he forces the reader to perceive the image differently than they would if they were actually at the bathhouse with Bloom. Perhaps, then, the Formalist definition of literature is correct; literariness is achieved through a process of estrangement, the distortion of perception.

Though this definition of literature can easily be applied to the more experimental, avant-garde works of the early Twentieth-Century, it is, however, more difficult to apply to literature as a whole. It is possible that Russian formalism is a form of criticism that best suites certain genres and styles, but when applied to literature throughout time it can become irrelevant. If a text is only made literary by " breaking down automatism in perception", then several areas of conflict arise. The genre of realism, for example, offers a challenge to this definition, realism being the attempt to record the everyday life as accurately as possible, convincing the reader of

its reality, and attempting to relate to their experiences as closely as possible through language they are accustomed to.

Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton is seen as a prime example of the industrial novel, a form of realism specifically designed to relate to the daily experiences of the Victorian working class. In the novel, Gaskell makes no attempt to distort the perception of the reader, instead her aims are to record the plights of Manchurian factory workers. This section, from the opening chapter of the novel, shows a definitive attempt to accurately convey the physiology of John Barton, the father of the titular heroine:

" He was below the middle size and slightly made; there was almost a stunted look about him; and his wan, colourless face, gave you the idea, that in his childhood he had suffered from the scanty living consequent upon bad times, and improvident habits. His features were strongly marked, though not irregular, and their expression was extreme earnestness; resolute either for good or evil, a sort of latent stern enthusiasm."

In many ways this passage can be read as an example of practical language. Gaskell makes no overt attempt to estrange the image of John Barton, instead presenting a man who we, as the reader, can easily envision in our imagination. Metaphor and simile are not used to describe his body, as they are for Bloom's, and we are not forced to perceive the human anatomy any differently than we already do in our everyday lives. Gaskell simply communicates to the reader the objective appearance of John Barton. This passage is representative of the novels style as a whole, and thus the

question as to whether the novel can be, from a Formalist perspective, be considered literary arises.

Realism is generally considered one of the major genres of literature, and many writers thought to be among the finest in history are considered to write realist novels, Gaskell included amidst the likes of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Gustave Flaubert. Dickens, Eliot, and Flaubert are generally considered to be major figures within the literary canon, but if they adhere to a genre that defies the Formalist method, two possibilities arise. Firstly, if the Formalist method is assumed to be the correct way to judge whether a text is literary or not, then realism, through its overt use of practical language and its lack of estrangement, is a genre of literature that is not literature. Instead, it is merely the transfer of imagined information, of fictional images that hold no symbolic value, and differ in no way from the everyday lives of the reader.

The second possibility is to the contrary of the first, and is possibly the more feasible of the two: the method adopted by Russian formalism is impractical and cannot be applied to literature as a whole. If literature can only be defined as a form of art where the normal is made strange, then a great part of what is considered literature should be disregarded and robbed of the label " art". There have been efforts on both ends of a spectrum of styles to write with opposing intentions, to make literature as unfamiliar as possible on the one end, and as close to human experience as possible on the other. Often times the two attempts get distorted and confused; Joyce's use of stream of consciousness may distance the reader due to its abrasiveness, intensity, and estrangement, but Ulysses is often considered by critics as as

close to a realistic representation of human consciousness as ever has been attempted, maybe making it as familiar as humanly possible to what the reader actually experiences on a constant basis. On the other hand, while Gaskell merely communicates to the reader the physiological information of John Barton, she distances herself from realistic human experience by consciously omitting an endless amount of information, and therefore estranges the way in which the reader perceives reality. The concept of estrangement, when read into, is therefore too vague and loose an idea to be used to define something as vast and diverse as literature.

There is, therefore, no one way to define literature as the Formalists attempt to do. The variety of genres and styles do not allow for a definition of literariness to exist, literature being too diverse to be contained as such. The definition attempted by the Russian formalists can only be applied to certain texts totally, or if it were to be applied to literature as a whole it would provide only a partial definition open to a variety of criticisms and counterarguments. For the Formalist definition of literature to work, the literary canon would have to be wildly accepted as consisting solely of works written in obscure, experimental styles that are difficult for the reader to decipher and understand. The distinction between poetic and practical language is too vague and open to interpretation to have a lasting effect, and though estrangement can be accepted as a tool for making a text literary, it cannot be seen as the sole property in defining literariness.