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Russian Formalism

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Preface

This book grew out of my earlier comparative study of Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism. The juxtaposition of these schools, I was surprised to find, pointed up their fundamental difference much more than their similarity. The Prague School, with its single organizational center, shared frame of reference, and unified epistemological stance, could easily be conceived as a coherent movement. But its Russian counterpart was far more resistant to synthesis. I began to see Formalism, in fact, not as a school in the ordinary sense of the word, but as a peculiar developmental stage in the history of Slavic literary theory.

This fact is reflected in the relative agreement among students of Prague Structuralism about the coherence of their subject matter and the corresponding lack of a consensus among scholars of Formalism. It is this feeling of discord that I wish to convey in my first chapter. Because of the great variety of meanings that the label "Formalism" has attracted in the course of time, it seems legitimate to question its utility and to offer my own understanding of the term as a historical concept.

The middle two chapters treat the Formalists from what I

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term a metapoetic stance. That is, their discourse about poetics is analyzed in terms of poetics itself, or more precisely, in terms of the poetic tropes that structure their theorizing. Chapter 2 focuses on the major metaphors of Formalist thought: the three tropological models that describe the literary work as a mechanism, an organism, and a system. The third chapter addresses the synecdochic reduction of the work to its material stratum—language—and the consequent substitution of linguistics for poetics. In particular, I deal here with the two mutually incompatible concepts of poetic language advanced by the Formalists and the basic tenets of their metrics.

I return to the question “what is Formalism?” in the last chapter, where I take up the issue of the movement’s unity. As I see it, the intellectual coherence of Formalism lies in its developmental significance within the overall history of Slavic literary theory. This significance consists in the conjunction of two factors: the movement’s effectively dividing pre-Formalistic from post-Formalistic scholarship, and its positing of a uniquely literary subject matter to be approached “scientifically,” without presuppositions. From this perspective, the baffling heterogeneity of Formalist theorizing can be seen as an “interparadigmatic” stage in the history of literary scholarship.

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