



PROJECT MUSE®

Russian Formalism

Steiner, Peter

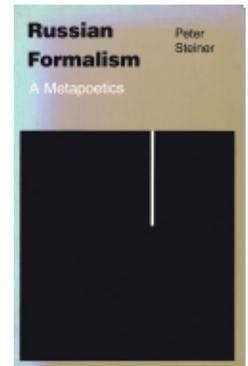
Published by Cornell University Press

Steiner, Peter.

Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics.

Cornell University Press, 2016.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/47557.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47557>

Access provided at 20 Oct 2019 16:21 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

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

Preface

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.

In writing this book I have relied on the advice and help of a great many people. These were, first of all, René Wellek, Victor Erlich, and Vadim Liapunov at Yale. At later stages, Miroslav Červenka, Sergej Davydov, J. Michael Holquist, Joseph Margolis, and Stephen Rudy provided valuable criticism, insightful suggestions, and much-needed encouragement. My special thanks go to Bernhard Kendler of Cornell University Press for the manner in which he guided my book through its numerous rites of passage. I am grateful for the support of the American Council of Learned Societies, whose grant-in-aid in the summer of 1977 presented a palpable incentive for continuing my work, and to the Research Foundation of the University of Pennsylvania, which furnished funds for the final typing of the manuscript. But most of all, I am indebted to that “good look’n’ girl”

Preface

who wanted me to write a book, and consequently had to put up with all the unpleasantness and deprivation that this process entailed.

PETER STEINER

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Russian Formalism

