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Russian Formalism

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The Three Metaphors

The Machine

To make two bald statements: There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant. [. . .]

There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning, in which they most resemble the machine, to give language its highest dignity, its illumination in the environment to which it is native.

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, *Collected Later Poems*

Probably the best known Formalist model was advanced by Viktor Šklovskij, the self-proclaimed “founder of the Russian school of Formal method.”¹ His answer to the question “what is Formalism?” was very clear: “In its essence the Formal method is

1. *Sentimental'noe putešestvie: Vospominanija 1917–1922* (Berlin, 1923), p. 317.