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

simple—a return to craftsmanship.”

Technology, that branch of knowledge pertaining to the art of human production, was the predominant metaphor applied by this model to the description and elucidation of artistic phenomena.

Šklovskij’s obsession with the machine analogy was well known to his contemporaries. In a commemorative article about Jurij Tynjanov, Lidija Ginzburg recalls a random chat of 1925 in which Tynjanov had tried to differentiate his own approach to literature from Šklovskij’s. “Viktor is a fitter, a mechanic.—And a chauffeur, someone prompted.—Yes and a chauffeur too. He believes in construction. He thinks that he knows how the car is made. . . .”

Tynjanov did not have to explain his phrase because the hint was transparent to everyone. He was alluding to Šklovskij’s bon mot in a 1922 letter to Roman Jakobson: “We know how life is made and how Don Quixote and the car are made too.”

Šklovskij did not reserve his car/literature analogy for the inner Formalist circle. Quite the contrary: it recurs again and again as the central image in his scholarly, pedagogical, and creative texts as well. For example, in his booklet *The Technique of the Writer’s Trade* (1928), Šklovskij advises aspiring prose writers about how to read literature:

If you wish to become a writer you must examine a book as attentively as a watchmaker a clock or a chauffeur a car.

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2. Ibid., p. 327. See also Osip Brik’s succinct account of the program of OPOJAZ: “OPOJAZ studies the laws of poetic production” (“T. n. ‘formal’nyj metod,” *Lef*, no. 1 [1923], 214).

3. The Formalist S. Baluchatyj characterized his method as a “technological literary discipline” (*Problemy dramaturgičeskogo analiza Ĉechova* [Leningrad, 1927], p. 7). G. Vinokur described stylistics as “a kind of ‘linguistic technology’” (*Kul'tura jazyka*, 2d ed. [Moscow, 1929], p. 9). B. Ejchenbaum summed up the early phase of Formalism as follows: “In recent years, students of literature and critics have paid attention above all to questions of literary ‘technology’” (“Literaturnyi byt,” *Moj vremennik: Slovesnost’, nauka, kritika, smes’* [Leningrad, 1929], p. 50).


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Cars are examined in the following ways: The most idiotic people come to the automobile and press the balloon of its horn. This is the first degree of stupidity. People who know a little more about cars but overestimate their knowledge come to the car and fiddle with its stick-shift. This is also stupid and even bad, because one should not touch a thing for which another worker is responsible.

The understanding man scrutinizes the car serenely and comprehends “what is for what”: why it has so many cylinders and why it has big wheels, where its transmission is situated, and why its rear is cut in an acute angle and its radiator unpolished.

This is the way one should read.6

What this technological metaphor meant for the study of literature is apparent in the introduction to *On the Theory of Prose*—the most scholarly of Šklovskij’s books: “In the theory of literature I am concerned with the study of the internal laws of literature. To draw a parallel with industry, I am interested neither in the situation in the world cotton market, nor in the policy of trusts, but only in the kinds of yarn and the methods of weaving.”7 Because of the repeated use of the machine analogy, I shall term this trend in Formalism “mechanistic.”

The source of Šklovskij’s technological metaphor is rather complex. It betrays first the influence of Italian Futurism, with its cult of the machine as the most crucial factor in the birth of the modernist artistic sensibility. But in Russia it also indicated a certain political stance. It was related to the leftist intelligentsia’s yearning for a radical transformation of Russian society. The mastery of technology was often seen as the ultimate means to this end. Lenin’s famous equation—“socialism = the Soviet government + electrification”—was an expression of this belief, as were the unrealizable Constructivist projects of scientifically designed socialist cities, or Vladimir Majakovskij’s statement that a single Ford tractor is better than a collection of poems.

Šklovskij’s interest in literary know-how was conditioned by

pragmatic concerns too. The Formalist leader did not enter the field of Russian letters as an academic observer or an armchair theoretician, but as an active participant—a creative writer. From this perspective, the problems of literary production were of paramount significance. Yet it was precisely in this area that previous Russian criticism exhibited a curious lacuna. Whereas for all the other arts technical knowledge was considered vital to both historical and practical study, in literature technique was relegated to schoolbooks on poetics that were mere catalogues of tropes, figures, and meters derived from Greek and Latin models. It was this gap that mechanistic Formalism, concerned with the literary techne, set out to close.

The selection of the machine as the controlling metaphor of his theoretical model served Šklovskij in yet another way. It furnished a frame of reference that enabled him to treat literature in a manner radically different from that of pre-Formalist critics. At the risk of oversimplification, one might claim that traditional literary scholars were concerned above all with what the work conveyed. To understand this “what,” students of Russian literature looked beyond the work: into its author’s life, the philosophy supposedly embodied in it, or the sociopolitical events that gave rise to it. This “what,” customarily called the content of the literary creation, was opposed to its how, its form. And even though the meaning of these two notions varied from critic to critic, the “what,” the message of the literary work, always seemed the decisive member of the pair. Form was relegated to a mere auxiliary mechanism necessary for expressing content, but completely dependent upon it.

By focusing on the nuts and bolts of poetic texts, the internal laws of literary production, mechanistic Formalism radically reversed the value of content. Mocking traditional critics, Šklovskij wrote: “The present-day theoretician, in studying a literary work and considering its so-called form as a shroud that must be penetrated, is mounting a horse while jumping over it.”

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“how” of literature gained decisive prominence in the mechanistic model, and the machine analogy furnished the conceptual viewpoint that enabled Šklovskij to redirect attention from the external conditions of the literary process to the internal organization of the work.

Disjunction was the key logical principle by which mechanistic Formalism organized its basic concepts. This principle split art decisively from nonart, and expressed their mutual exclusivity in the following set of polar oppositions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>art</th>
<th>byt (everyday life)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>de-familiarization</td>
<td>automatization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teleology</td>
<td>causality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>device</td>
<td>material</td>
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<tr>
<td>plot (sjužet)</td>
<td>story (Fabula)</td>
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</table>

The first concept in the table, de-familiarization (ostranenie), has today gained wide currency. The word was coined by Viktor Šklovskij to account for the special nature of artistic perception. In his 1914 manifesto, The Resurrection of the Word, Šklovskij presented the dialectics of de-familiarization and automatization in this way: “By now the old art has already died, but the new has not yet been born. Things have died too: we have lost the

9. My translation of byt as “everyday life” is a rather inadequate rendition of a highly evocative Russian term. According to Roman Jakobson, byt is “the tendency toward stabilizing the immutable present and the gradual accretion of the stagnant slime to it, the stifling of life by tight and petrified molds,” the antithesis of “the creative impulse toward the transformed future.... It is curious,” Jakobson continues, “that while in the Russian language and literature this word and its derivatives play quite a significant role.... European languages lack any corresponding nomenclature” (“O pokolenii rastrativsem svoich poëtov,” Smert’ Vladimira Majakovskogo [Berlin, 1931], p. 13). For this reason, I have retained the Russian byt in all quotations from Formalist texts. In my own prose I alternate byt with “life.” If, however, the word “life” appears in quotation marks it is a translation of the Russian žizn’. The adjective bytovoj is rendered as “extra-artistic” or “extraliterary” depending on the context.
sensation of the world. We are like a violinist who has stopped feeling his bow and strings. We have ceased to be artists in our quotidian life; we do not like our houses and clothes and easily part with a life that we do not perceive. Only the creation of new forms of art can bring back to man his experience of the world, resurrect things and kill pessimism.”

In this early formulation, the principle of de-familiarization is closely linked to the poetics of Russian Futurism, a movement that sentenced past art to death and set out to create artistic forms more attuned to the iconoclastic tastes of radical youth. As his mechanistic model developed, Šklovskij began to replace the existential frame of reference with terminology that would better fit his machine metaphor. It was economy, or more precisely, energy-efficiency, that eventually became the criterion for differentiating between automatized and de-familiarizing modes of perception.

Šklovskij’s concept of artistic perception has its roots in the positivistic belief in art’s economizing of mental energy, in particular the principle of least effort that Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) had declared the universal law of style. In the Russian context, Spencer’s theory had found an echo in the writings of Aleksandr Veselovskij (1838–1906), one of the few critics of the past whom the Formalists did not completely disregard. In the third chapter of his unfinished Historical Poetics, Veselovskij had used Spencer’s principle of the economization of mental energy to support his differentiation of poetic from prose style. Poetry achieves its results with a paucity of means impossible in prose, as witnessed in its unfinished periods, elisions, and omissions. Veselovskij especially stressed the role of rhythm and rhyme, the predictability of which purportedly saves us from wasting energy in frustrated expectations. It was this assertion that Šklovskij challenged. “The idea of the economy of energy as the

law and goal of creativity might be correct when applied to a particular case of language, 'practical' language"; but "the language of poetry is a difficult language, language which is made difficult and hampered." According to Šklovskij, the perception of art manifests not the law of least effort but the law of maximal effort.

The explanation of this claim offered by the mechanistic Formalists is elegant in its simplicity: artistic form is difficult because it is made so. The teleology used in this argument is in perfect harmony with the technological metaphor. The work of art as a product of an intentional human activity is a functional object whose purpose is to change the mode of our perception from practical to artistic. This change can be effected in several ways, most simply by displacing an object from its customary context. "In order to render an object an artistic fact it must be extracted from among the facts of life . . . it must be torn out of its usual associations."13

The Formalists were not so much interested in ready-made objects or found art as in the artistic work as a complex artifact. For this reason the concept of "displacement" was always secondary to that of the "device," which pertains specifically to the production of the work. "Every art," argued Šklovskij, "has its own organization—that which transforms its material into something artistically experienced. This organization is expressed in various compositional devices, in rhythm, phonetics, syntax, the plot of the work. It is the device that transforms extra-aesthetic material into the work of art by providing it with form."14 The device changes extra-artistic material into art, forming it anew and in this way de-familiarizing it. The cardinal position of the concept of the device is apparent in Jakobson's programmatic statement: "If literary history wishes to become a scholarly discipline it must recognize the artistic device as its sole hero."15

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It must be stressed, however, that despite their obvious similarity there is an important difference between Jakobson’s and Šklovskij’s notions of the device. For Jakobson, the material of verbal art was language and hence he conceived of poetic devices as linguistic by their very nature. Šklovskij did not deny that in poetry language itself is de-familiarized. “But,” he hastened to add, “there are works of art in which the aesthetic perception of divergence rests outside the word, where the word is disregarded, is not felt, or has ceased to be felt.”16 These are, obviously, works of literary prose—the main field of Šklovskij’s expertise. In this literary form, the source of de-familiarization is the deformation not of language but of events and happenings in the process of their verbal representation. Accordingly, the devices that Šklovskij studied most closely were those pertaining to prose composition and narrative.

The difference between literary narrative and the events it narrates in Šklovskij’s understanding is that between the device and the material. A prose work is an intentional construction, whereas the events represented in it are merely the material for this construction. The corresponding terms in the sphere of narratology are “plot” and “story,” the two modes in which events “occur” in literature. Story was understood as the series of events ordered according to their temporal succession (as they would have occurred in reality) and, as Tomaševskij stressed, according to causality.17 Plot, on the other hand, was the liberation of events from temporal contiguity and causal dependency and their teleological redistribution in the literary text. The story, equated with material, served the artist as a mere pre-text for plot construction, a process governed not by external causes but by internal, formal laws. Here form, conceived “as the law of construction of the object,”18 was opposed to “motivation” defined by Šklovskij as the “extraliterary [bytovoe] expla-

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nation of plot construction.” Motivation was seen as playing only a secondary role in the literary construction, for “the forms of art are explained by their artistic regularity and not by extra-literary motivation.”

By relegating material to a mere ancillary position, the mechanistic Formalists ascribed value to it only insofar as it contributed to the technique of the work itself. Material was deprived of any emotional, cognitive, or social significance. Thus, a literary construction was nothing more than “pure form—a relation of materials.” Or, even more radically, “values became artistic material, good and evil became the numerator and the denominator of a fraction and the value of this fraction equaled zero.”

The position of the mechanistic model in the overall picture of Russian Formalism is rather peculiar. Perhaps the term “teaser” (probnik), which Šklovskij used to describe his own existential predicament, best characterizes the role this model played in the history of the movement. From the vantage point of hindsight, the mechanistic metaphor represents a transitory stage in Formalism. Šklovskij’s The Resurrection of the Word was, without any doubt, the first attempt at formulating some of the basic principles of literary study that later acquired the name of the Formal method. But in marking the beginnings of the Formalist enterprise, over the course of time this text inevitably became marginal in view of further developments. A historical marker, it seems, plays a double role. It is not only the boundary that separates two successive developmental stages, but also the point of their contact. Thus, while Šklovskij’s 1914 manifesto revolutionized

22. Ibid. p. 169. Šklovskij was far from consistent in his arguments, and though his position in general was that form determines material, sometimes he was willing to argue precisely the opposite. It is interesting for this study that his concessions to material were also couched in a simile from the realm of technology: “If a mechanic wished to substitute a steel part of a machine for a bronze or an aluminum one, this new part cannot be a copy of the old one. A new material requires a new form” (Literatura i kinematograf, p. 18).
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literary studies by injecting into them principles of the avant-garde artistic practice of Russian Futurism, at the same time it carried over a large remnant of the older critical tradition.

As I shall illustrate later, mechanistic Formalism was in some respects a mirror image of Veselovskij's poetics. We have already seen how its key term, "de-familiarization," was derived from its predecessor by reversing Veselovskij's criterion of poetic style. But Šklovskij was able to do so because he was brought up on Veselovskij's system and shared some of its postulates. While subverting some of Veselovskij's principles, Šklovskij covertly borrowed others from the nineteenth-century philologist. He was certainly aware of the perils that this inverse parallelism posed to his own theorizing. "I am afraid of the negative lack of freedom," he complained. "The negation of what others are doing ties me to them." And it was this link to nineteenth-century philology that at least in part was responsible for the quick aging of the mechanistic model. In fact, most of the subsequent developments of Russian Formalism might be seen as a series of corrections of and departures from the original Šklovskian metaphor.

In his perceptive study of Veselovskij's poetics, Boris Ţengel'gardt described it as consisting of two integral components: the history of literature in the strict sense of the word, and the theory of the genesis of poetry from extra-aesthetic phenomena. The great Russian philologist conceived of literature, first of all, as part of the larger cultural context. According to his famous formula of 1893, the history of literature is the "history of social thought in imagistic-poetic experience and the forms that express it."

The role of the literary historian, then, is to recover the causal relations among successive elements of social thought. "When

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studying a series of facts,” Veselovskij argued, “we observe their successivity, the relation of what follows to what precedes it. If this relation recurs we begin to suspect a certain regularity. If it recurs often enough we cease to speak of preceding and following and substitute the terms cause and effect.” To establish the true regularity of the phenomena studied, however, historians must extend their research to the series contiguous to the one under investigation, to discern whether the cause of change does not lie outside it. They must also test knowledge gained from one series on other similar series to discover whether a causal relation obtains there as well. “The more such tested recurrences,” Veselovskij concludes, “the more probable it is that the resulting generalization will approximate the precision of a law.”

The history of literature for Veselovskij is an incessant interaction between two factors: the passive artistic form and the active social content. What differentiates literature from other intellectual practices (philosophy, religion, and so forth), and hence what makes it possible to speak about the history of literature, is the repertoire of elementary poetic forms that express thought. These forms—various types of imagery, parallelisms, or plot constructions—which Veselovskij outlined in his genetic studies of poetry, are passed from generation to generation in the same way as every national language and are recombined in every literary work.

From this perspective it might appear that literary history is simply the permutation of the same forms without any actual change, but Veselovskij claims that literature does evolve, that the constant poetic forms are continuously imbued with new content. This content does not come from literature itself but from developments in social life and corresponding transformations in the human spirit. Thus, the engine of literary history according to Veselovskij lies outside literature and the task of the historian “is to study how new life content, this element of freedom that rushes in with every new generation, fills the old

27. “O metode i zadachach istorii literatury, kak nauki,” ibid., p. 47.
molds, those forms of necessity in which the entire previous development has been cast.” 28

This short presentation of Veselovskij’s views on literary history should suffice to explain Šklovskij’s attitudes toward him. Šklovskij’s radical separation of literature from other spheres of social life, his rejection of the causal explanation in literary studies—all of this can be seen as resulting from his negative relation to Veselovskij. Yet it must be stressed that despite this, Šklovskij did not banish diachrony from literary studies, and in fact affirmed the historical dimension of verbal art. As Jurij Striedter has observed, de-familiarization, the key concept of mechanistic Formalism, as the juxtaposition of old and new, definitionally presupposes some form of temporality. 29 Nevertheless, Šklovskij’s notion of literary history deviated radically from Veselovskij’s.

At the outset it must be said that Šklovskij’s treatment of literary diachrony is not altogether consistent. The charismatic Formalist leader did not study this topic systematically, and in the course of time changed his mind about some important issues. The concept of de-familiarization is a case in point. In his Resurrection of the Word, Šklovskij argued that what art modifies above all is our habitual perception of the world. Art develops in order for us to regain a feeling for objects (and language) that have become automatized in our perception. This notion of de-familiarization is the direct reverse of Veselovskij’s idea of literary change. For him it was the evolution of life that revitalized petrified artistic forms, whereas for Šklovskij the evolution of art revitalized the automatized forms of life. Nevertheless, this reversal still proceeds from an inevitable relationship between literature and everyday life, which Šklovskij’s mechanistic model denied. The value of art is a function of its utility for byt, and hence cannot be separated from it.

For this reason Šklovskij subsequently modified his notion of

28. Ibid., p. 52.
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de-familiarization. As early as 1919, in the OPOJAZ collective volume Poetics, he declared that the development of art is totally immanent. New works come about to change our perception not of byt but of the artistic form itself, which has become automatized through our acquaintance with older works. “The work of art is perceived against the background of and through association with other works of art. Its form is determined by its relation to other forms that existed prior to it. . . . A new form appears not to express a new content but to replace an old form that has lost its artistic quality.”30

The admission that the work of art is peculiar because it differs not only from everyday reality but from earlier works as well introduces an element of chaos into the two-term system of mechanistic Formalism. Though Šklovskij still upheld the original opposition of art and byt, he was forced to complicate the category of art with a secondary dyad, canonized/noncanonized art. He took this step in his short booklet on Vasilij Rozanov. “In every literary period,” Šklovskij wrote, “not one but several literary schools may be found. They coexist; one of them is the canonized apex and the others are a noncanonized [lower stratum]. . . . While the forms of the older art become as little perceptible as grammatical forms in language—from elements of artistic intention [ustanovka] turning into ancillary, nonperceptible phenomena—the new forms of art that substitute for the older ones are produced in the lower stratum. A younger school bursts into the place of an older one. . . . However, the defeated school is not destroyed, does not cease to exist. It is only displaced from the top to the bottom . . . and can rise again.”31

This model of immanent literary history, however, begs certain questions. First of all, what is the ontological status of noncanonized literature? Within the framework of mechanistic Formalism this category is a conceptual bastard, in that it is composed of artworks whose form, paradoxically, is not percep-

30. Šklovskij, “Svaz’ prièmov sjužetosloženija,” Poëtika: Sborniki po teorii poët-
îèeskogo jazyka (Petersburg, 1919), p. 120.
tible. One might also inquire whether this model, which treats literary history as an “eternal return” of the same artistic forms, does not preclude the possibility of any actual developmental novelty. Earlier I argued that a similar problem had existed for Veselovskij when he insisted that every literary work is a recombination of the same elementary poetic forms. But because he did not conceive of literary history as an immanent process, formal repetition nevertheless implied for him novelty in content. This avenue was closed for Šklovskij, however, who programmatically refused to deal with the issue of literary content.

Locked in his mechanistic metaphor, Šklovskij could provide no viable answer to the ontological status of noncanonical art. It was only in another Formalist model, the one advanced by Jurij Tynjanov, that this issue was addressed. Tynjanov’s studies of the change that Russian literature underwent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries refuted the basic premise of mechanistic Formalism, the strict separation of art from byt. As he illustrated convincingly, the line separating literature from nonliterature is flexible. What bursts into the place of canonized art may not be noncanonized art at all, but extra-artistic phenomena; moreover, the deposed canonized art may not only descend to lower strata in the artistic hierarchy but leave the sphere of art entirely and become extra-artistic.

Though Šklovskij admitted in a letter to Tynjanov that he was impressed by this argument, his overall reaction was ambivalent. On the one hand, Šklovskij seemed to reject the concept of immanent literary development to which he earlier subscribed: “We claim, it seems, that the literary work can be analyzed and evaluated without leaving the literary series.... However, the notion of literature changes all the time. Literature extends and absorbs extra-aesthetic material. This material and those changes which it undergoes while in contact with the material already aesthetically transformed must be taken into account.” On the other hand, Šklovskij insisted that once this material becomes a part of art it loses its original ties with life and becomes a component of artistic form. “Literature lives while extending over non-
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literature. But the artistic form accomplishes a peculiar rape of the Sabines. The material ceases to recognize its master. It is deformed by the law of art and is perceived outside of its original context."32

Because of the rule of exclusion underlying the binary model of mechanistic Formalism, the approach was unable to provide a description of literary change that would adequately account for the interplay of the literary and nonliterary spheres. Šklovskij's position was inevitably contradictory. He was aware of the historical relativity of the concept of literature, but could not take full advantage of his knowledge without destroying his conceptual frame. Caught in this paradox, he was unable to offer any solution. The conclusion of his letter is an example of what Richard Sheldon termed "the device of ostensible surrender," that is, an overt surrender hiding covert intransigence.33 "Answer my letter but do not drag me into the history of literature," pleaded Šklovskij. "I will study art, realizing that all its dimensions [veličiny] are historical."34

While evading the problem of the interaction between literature and byt, Šklovskij's immanent literary history did offer a solution to the second problem: artistic novelty. In a succinct history of the novel, Šklovskij depicted artistic change as follows. Like all narratives, the novel's artfulness lies in the transformation of a lifelike story (fabula) into a literary plot (sjužet). This task is complicated by the composite nature of the novel, by the fact that it is a concatenation of several short stories. The history of the novel from this perspective is a succession of different motivations for the device of fusing short stories into larger wholes. In the most elementary novels (for example, Don Quixote), it was the protagonist who strung the pieces together. After this method became automatized, the psychology of the hero was used as the connecting thread. The works of Stendhal, Tolstoij, and Dos-

34. "Pis'mo Tynjanovu," p. 100.
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toevskij provide ample variations on this psychological motivirovka (motivation). Eventually even this mode of fusion wore out. The audience’s interest in connecting individual pieces waned and the segments themselves began to attract attention. At this moment, motivation itself turned into a device. The individual segments were brought together in a negative way to show the reader that they had nothing in common, that their connective tissue was simply a technical device enabling the writer to make them into a novel. This is the method of modern novels, Šklovskij claims, most notably of his own epistolary novel Zoo.35

It is instructive to compare this history of the novel with the earlier account of literary development found in Šklovskij’s booklet on Rozanov mentioned before. Both proceed from an imminent notion of literary history driven by the opposition, defamiliarization/automatization. But whereas the Rozanov booklet presents literary change as an infinite permutation of the same poetic forms, Šklovskij’s history of the novel adds something new to this scheme. The master device of this genre—the fusion of the constituent stories into a larger whole—remains the same, but different literary periods introduce different motivirovki. What the source of these new motivations is, Šklovskij does not say, and one might intuitively surmise that it is byt. This assumption does not contradict his two-term model, for as I showed earlier, the motivation of a device for him is merely an auxiliary component of the literary construction.

Šklovskij’s foray into the history of the novel is noteworthy for yet another reason: its conception of historical process. According to this conception, the development of a literary genre is not an uninterrupted continuum, a chain of works successively defamiliarizing each other, but instead a qualitative leap, an abrupt ascent to a higher level of literary consciousness. There seems to be a qualitative difference between the way elementary or psychological novels are produced and the way their modern counterparts are. The earlier works presuppose a “naive” attitude

35. Zoo, ili pis’ma ne o ljubvi (Berlin, 1923), pp. 83–85.
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toward writing. The author portrays characters and their psychic lives without being aware that all of this is nothing but an excuse for fusing short pieces into a novel. The modern novel is based on a self-conscious attitude toward writing on the author's part, a deliberate debunking of "deceptive" artistic practices. The modern novelist says that the emperor is naked, and by eliminating "fictitious" motivations lays the devices of his trade bare.

This ironic attitude toward literary production stems in turn from the writer's historical self-awareness, his or her reflexiveness about the logic of literary history. For example, the "naive" novelist creates characters and events without realizing that in fact he is complying with the historical demand for de-familiarizing artistic form. The "cunning" modernist, conscious of his historical role, proceeds differently. He analyzes the present state of literature and designs his writings in such a way as to achieve the maximal artistic effect. He does not merely deviate from previous conventions, but shows that they are mere conventions. By stripping bare the very process of literary creation, the modernist de-familiarizes artistic form anew, thus reaffirming the logic of literary history.

By merging literary theory and practice, its *istoria* and *poeisis*, Šklovskij also effectively subverted Veselovskij's objectivist literary history. For Veselovskij, the literary historians's task was to reconstruct the causal chain of the literary series. From Šklovskij's point of view such an approach to history writing was a mirror image of the "naive" novelist's attitude toward literary production. Not only were novelists unaware of their actual role in the historical process, but objectivist historians seemed equally ignorant of the aesthetic presuppositions involved in their practice. Because the literary series is virtually an infinite continuum, objectivist historians had to focus on only certain works, authors, or periods. And because they were dealing with literary phenomena, the ultimate criterion for this selection was their own literary sensibility. Thus, despite its claims, objectivist historiography never actually recaptured the literary past "as it was" but always provided varying, distorted pictures of it. The remedy
Šklovskij proposed was the same one he put into practice in his creative writing. Literary history should turn in upon itself and lay bare the devices of its trade. Instead of the pretended reconstruction of the literary past, literary history should become "the gay business of [its] destruction," a self-conscious "misreading" of history according to modern artistic principles.36

Hence, the job of the literary historian in Šklovskij's view was complementary to that of the artist. The artist revitalizes literature by creating new poetic forms that replace old, automatized ones; the literary historian does so by recycling these old forms through a de-familiarizing recreation of them. "We are losing the living perception of Puškin," Šklovskij argued, "not because our byt and language are far removed from his, but because we did not change the standard (the criterion) to which we compare him." Aiming at his own camp, Šklovskij continued, "the study of literary traditions, the Formal study of art in general, would be utter nonsense if it did not provide us with a new perception of the work." Therefore, he concludes, "the task of the Formal method or at least one of its tasks is not to 'explain' the work but to impede its perception, to renew the 'set toward the form' that is characteristic of the work of art."37 He put this call into practice in the same article by presenting a new Puškin—a master parodist, a Russian follower of Laurence Sterne—whose Evgenij Onegin lays bare the devices that created its literary form.

This program for a new literary history, however, did not receive much of a welcome from the Formalists. The Muscovite Grigorij Vinokur, for example, in his review of the anthology on Puškin in which Šklovskij's essay had appeared, declared that its author "lacks any—even the most elementary—sense of history."38 This negative reaction was in part conditioned by the fact that most of the other members of this movement did not share Šklovskij's passion for mingling scholarship with art. Even those

37. Ibid., p. 205.
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who, like Tynjanov, applauded the artistic boldness of \textit{Zoo} and its highly unusual blend of literary theory and creative writing,\footnote{Tynjanov, \textit{"Literaturnoe segodnja," Poëtika, istorija literatury, kino} (Moscow, 1977), p. 166.} refused to go the full route with Šklovskij and radically relativize their notion of literary history. They viewed Šklovskij’s approach as a manifestation of aesthetic egocentrism, an ahistorical “imposition upon the past of current modes of poetic production,” for which they had already blasted the older generation of literary scholars.\footnote{Roman Jakobson, \textit{Novejšaja russkaja poëzija}, p. 5.}

The rejection of Šklovskij’s approach to literary history by his comrades-in-arms had a certain justification. His reading of \textit{Evgenij Onegin} was arbitrary, insofar as it was motivated by his idiosyncratic literary sensibility rooted in the iconoclastic poetics of Russian Futurism. Such an orientation was clearly unacceptable to the young theoreticians striving to establish an “objective” science of literature. Yet, at the same time, one might ask whether the Formalists in their campaign against historical relativism were not blind to the historical relativity of their own enterprise. As Jurij Striedter argues, most of the later Formalist reconstructions of the literary past “did not reflect on what was principally the historical character of their own school and its system, nor did they incorporate it in any way into their theory and analysis.”\footnote{\textit{"The Russian Formalist Theory of Literary Evolution,"} 11.}

Of the Formalists, only Řejchenbaum was willing to take Šklovskij’s challenge seriously and translate it into a more cogent scholarly program for a self-reflexive historiography. “In its essence,” he wrote, “history is a discipline of complex analogies, a discipline with a dual vision: the facts of the past are discerned as significant and enter the system invariably and inevitably under the aegis of contemporary problems. . . . History, in this sense, is a particular method for studying the present through the facts of the past.”\footnote{\textit{"Literaturnyj byt,"} p. 49.}

Ultimately, one may speculate that such a stance could have developed into what modern critical theory calls the history of
literary reception. But before this happened, Russian Formalism itself was transformed into a historical phenomenon.

Šklovskij’s concept of literary history constitutes a programmatic rejection of Veselovskij’s poetics. It either reversed or subverted all the crucial notions of its nineteenth-century predecessor concerning the development of literature. This is not to say that Šklovskij’s relationship to Veselovskij was purely negative. According to Ŋel’gardt, whose account was quoted earlier, Veselovskij’s system involved not only literary history but also a theory of the genesis of poetry from extra-aesthetic phenomena. To this latter domain, in my opinion, mechanistic Formalism is very closely linked indeed.

Let me briefly characterize this aspect of Veselovskij’s theory. In his genetic studies Veselovskij strove to establish which phenomena of primitive culture evolve into the simplest poetic forms. In order to do so, he dissected the literary work into its smallest elements—motifs, epithets and formulas—which he then pursued across the entire range of literatures of different nations and periods. Thus, aside from its historicity, Veselovskij’s poetics can be described as genetic, inductive, and comparative.

The main thrust of mechanistic Formalism is also decidedly genetic. It tries to establish how a literary work arises from extra-literary phenomena. Šklovskij revealed his bias toward a genetic explanation when he wrote, “Phenomena can be grasped best when we can understand the process of their origin.”43 Because the most basic premise of mechanistic Formalism was never to seek an explanation for the facts of art among the facts of byt, its adherents disregarded all general cultural preconditions. Works of art were seen as intentional artifacts, and to grasp them meant to explain how they were made. The titles of some essays, for example, Šklovskij’s “How Don Quixote Is Made,” or Ŋichenbaum’s “How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ Is Made,” bear witness to this genetic approach.

The titles of these essays might, however, be misleading. They

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seem to suggest that by focusing attention on the genesis of particular literary texts, the mechanistic Formalists were studying their actual origins as individual and unique creative acts. Nothing would have been more alien to the Formalists and the tradition that they continued. The sober positivist Veselovskij had already waged a war against the Romantic myth of the literary work as a totally subjective expression of a strong individual. Assessing the state of his discipline in 1870, he wrote, “contemporary scholarship has taken the liberty of looking at the masses, which until now have stood behind [the heroes], deprived of any voice. It has discerned a life and movement in them which, like everything else that takes place on a grand spatiotemporal scale, is imperceptible to the naked eye. It is here that the hidden springs of the historical process ought to be sought. . . . The great individuals now appear as reflections of this or that movement prepared for among the masses.”44 The author, in Veselovskij’s view, is merely a crystallization of poetic traditions and social currents existing independently of the author, and it is precisely these general preconditions of literary creation rather than any unique creative act that form the true object of scholarship.

The Formalists followed in Veselovskij’s footsteps, though instead of attacking Carlyle and Emerson they attacked more recent psychological critics. Pointing a finger at the Freudian method, Šklovskij wrote: “Least of all should one become involved with psychoanalysis. It analyzes the mental trauma of only a single man. But the single man does not write; it is the time, the school-collective that writes.”45 As Osip Brik put it: “OPOJAZ thinks that there are no poets and literati but poetry and literature. Everything written by a poet is significant only as a part of his work in the common enterprise and is absolutely worthless as an expression of his ‘I.’ . . . The devices of the poetic craft must be studied on a grand scale, along with their differences from contiguous spheres of human work and the laws of their development. Puškin did not

44. “O metode i zadačach istorii literatury, kak nauki,” p. 41.
create a school; he was merely its head.” And to make his point stick, Brik declared: “If there were no Puškin, Evgenij Onegin would have been written anyway. America would have been discovered even without Columbus.”

Given such a strong Formalist aversion to the individual aspect of the literary process, it is obvious that Šklovskij and Ėjchenbaum were aiming at something other than a simple description of two disparate creative acts. Replying to a self-imposed question, “what is significant about the Formal method?” Šklovskij wrote in his characteristic staccato style: “What is significant is that we approached art as a production. Spoke of it alone. Viewed it not as a reflection. Found the specific features of the genus. Began to establish the basic tendencies of form. Grasped that on a large scale there is a real homogeneity in the laws informing works. Hence, the science [of literature] is possible.” What the Formalists subscribing to the mechanistic model set out to investigate, therefore, was the general technology of literary production and the laws that govern it, rather than the genesis of some randomly chosen texts. Both Šklovskij and Ėjchenbaum utilized Cervantes’s and Gogol’s works as case studies to outline the broader principles that generate prosaic works in two different genres: the novel, and the short story oriented toward oral delivery.

The genetic approach was not merely a heuristic device for the mechanistic Formalists; they believed that the process of making art is intimately connected to the process of its perception. As Šklovskij wrote, “art is the way to experience the making of a thing while what was made is not really important in art.” The perception of the work is thus nothing but the re-presentation of the intentional creative process which gave birth to the perceived work. And because the device is the “main hero” of this process, it should be the focus of attention for the student of literature. It is here that the inductive and comparative methods enter the scene. The

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literary work is dissected into such elementary devices as repetition, parallelism, gradation, and retardation, and the existence of these devices is ascertained through a comparison of the most heterogeneous materials—folksongs, tales, high literature, even film stories. The results then serve as a verification of the original premise of mechanism of Formalism about the heteromorphism of art and byt.

Earlier I noted the unenthusiastic response that Šklovskij's theory of literary history elicited among the Formalists. The same applied to his poetics. The first disagreement with the mechanism of the model concerned the ontological status of the device. According to Šklovskij, the device was the smallest universal and virtually independent element of artistic form migrating from work to work. Viktor Žirmunskij objected that it does not exist independently but only as a part of the work and its actual value is always determined by the immediate whole in which it belongs: "The poetic device is not an independent, self-valuable, quasi-natural-historical fact. The device as such—the device for the sake of the device—is not an artistic element but a conjuring trick... The same device, from the formal point of view, very often acquires a different artistic meaning depending on its function, i.e., on the unity of the entire artistic work and on the general thrust of all the other devices." 49

Žirmunskij's comment implies a second objection to inductive poetics, namely, its disregard for the holistic nature of the literary work. The mechanism of the model conceives of the work as a mechanical aggregation of its parts. This seems to be the gist of Šklovskij's slogan that the "content (soul) of the literary work equals the sum total of its stylistic devices." 50 The critics of this notion pointed out that the literary work is not a mere aggregate, but that it possesses a certain inward quality which belongs to it only as a whole and which is lost when it is mechanically dissected into its parts. "The search for the minimal atom of the text betrays a

materialistic quasi science,” wrote Boris Larin condescendingly. “Every adolescent can dissect a frog believing that he is Harvey. In the same way it is easy for everyone to follow a little matrix and list on file cards the words in a pre-Petrian tale, the epithets of Puškin, or ‘sound repetitions’ in verse, or to separate the speeches from conversations in Don Quixote. The results of such an analysis can, of course, be utilized in many ways, but what I am aiming at is the inadmissibility of these oversimplified methods in obtaining the material of study itself. In stylistics we must not for a moment lose sight of the interrelation of elements, the wholeness of the artistic text.” 51

Indeed, though at times Šklovskij appears to be aware of the Gestaltqualität in the work of art, he has difficulty in finding its locus. As Victor Erlich has pointed out, Šklovskij’s confusion over the word “form” has its roots in this problem. “The Russian Formalist leader seemed to fluctuate between two differing interpretations of the term: he could not make up his mind as to whether he meant by ‘form’ a quality inherent in an esthetic whole or an esthetic whole endowed with a certain quality.” 52 It is thus not surprising that Šklovskij’s work is riddled with contradictory statements concerning the holistic nature of the literary work. He insists upon its integral nature, stating that “nothing can be subtracted from a literary work,” 53 but then declares that “the unity of the literary work [is] . . . a myth.” 54 Though most of the Formalists probably would have subscribed to the first statement, only a very few would have agreed to the second. To see the literary work not as a conglomerate of devices but as an intrinsically unified whole required another perspective—a metaphor quite unlike that offered by the mechanistic Formalists.

53. Šklovskij, Literatura i kinematograf, p. 16.