Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

Part 3: The Linguistic Turn

Lecture 6: New Criticism/Russian Formalism

1) **New Criticism**
   a) **Background**
   b) **Basic Assumptions**
   c) **Problems**

2) **Russian Formalism**

3) **Formalism Today**

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1) New Criticism

a) Background

- **the emergence of literary studies as an academic discipline (= 'new' criticism!)**

    → rejection of subjectivism/impressionism, positivism and aestheticism as modes of reading dominant in the 19th century (cf. Abrams' 'objective' theories)
    → non-literary factors (author, context, reality) are relegated to status as 'background' knowledge
    → development closely linked to the emergence of modernism
    → influence of WWI
    → the term 'New Criticism' was coined by J.E. Spingarn in 1910, but the theoretical outline was only formulated later

GB

('practical criticism'):

I.A. Richards	*The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (1929)
William Empson	*Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951)
[F.R. Leavis	*The Great Tradition* (1948) → combination of moral and literary criteria as the basis of adequate aesthetic judgement]

US

('Southern Agrarians'; critique of modernization / "New Criticism"):

Allen Tate **John Crowe Ransom**	*The New Criticism* (1941)
W.K. Wimsatt/ **Robert Penn Warren**	*Understanding Poetry* (1938)
W.K. Wimsatt/ **Monroe C. Beardsley**	*The Verbal Icon* (1954)
Cleanth Brooks	*The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947)

[R.S. Crane, Elder Olson]

b) Basic Assumptions

Organic theory of literature and art:

- based on Romantic theory (esp. Coleridge)
- literature has its origins in natural processes of human consciousness
- decoding of meaning is possible for all readers (vs. difficulty of modernist art)
  → it can (and must) be taught!
- the text as an organic and self-sufficient unit (cf. emphatic understanding of
  the work of art in modernism)

Method:

- close reading
  → intrinsic approach: the reader will have to 'enter' the text in order to
                            unlock its meaning from the inside; it is not
                            necessary to consider external factors
  → formalistic approach: detailed analysis of literary form is a prerequisite
                            for successful readings, but: unity of content and
                            form (Cleanth Brooks: "The Heresy of Paraphrase")

'Normal' vs. 'Poetic' Language:

- 'normal' language:
  reference, denotative meaning → truth of correspondence (to reality)
  (also: scientific language use!)
- 'poetic' language:
  reference/correspondence 'disturbed' by connotative and metaphorical levels
  of meaning brought about by emotional and intentional language use
  → truth of coherence/acceptability) ('innere Stimmigkeit')

Text:

- structure ('prose core', logical content) + texture (connotative level)
- internal necessity ↔ irony (internal contradictions, tension, ambiguity, paradox)
- the text as an object which can (and must) be appreciated and decoded without recourse to authorial intention (Wimsatt/Beardsley: "The Intentional Falacy")
- enactment of dramatic situations/social relationships:
  speaking voice/persona/narrator → ostensible/apparent addressee/narratee
  vs.   implied author → implied reader
  vs.   actual (empirical) author → actual (empirical) reader
- meaning resides in the text, not in the reader
  (Wimsatt/Beardsley: "The Affective Fallacy")
- reading = understanding from the inside!

c) Problems

- internal contradictions: emulation of natural sciences methodology *and* rejection of
  natural sciences which are seen as a main cause for the fragmentation of modern life against which the organic understanding of the work of art is pitted
- ahistorical understanding or art, literature and language which insists on the importance of literature as the most valuable form of human knowledge but fails to acknowledge the historical conditions which frame writing and reading
- epistemological naiveté which clings to traditional notions of an objectively 'given' reality which is imitated by language (and literature, cf. Abrams' mimetic theories)
- the approach encourages an emphasis on innovative readings which illustrate the inexhaustable 'richness' of literary texts

Importance:

- the approach encourages an intimate engagement with textual features
- literature is taken seriously on its own terms for the first time

2) Russian Formalism

Founding Moments:

1915 Moscow Linguistic Circle (Roman Jakobson et al.)
1916 Petrograd : 'OPOIAZ' = Society for the Study of Poetic Language
                                     (Viktor Shlovskii, Boris Eikhenbaum et al.)

Two Phases:

   1) 1915-1920 in Russia ('pure' formalism)
   2) 1921-1930 movement towards Czechoslovakia and Poland under pressure
          from Marxism/Stalinism
            → emergence of structuralism

Basic Assumptions:

   • close ties with avantgardistic poetry of the day
   • rejection of unsystematic, subjective and impressionistic ways of dealing with
    literature inherited from the 19th century
   • scientific approach focused on 'literariness' which can be found on the level of
    form rather than content (strong influence of the emerging discipline of modern
    linguistics)
   • not 'what', but 'how' a text means

Viktor Shklovskii, 'Art as Device' (1916)

normal language:
habitual, automatic response, mechanical recognition, reference to reality
vs.
poetic language:
a new perception and awareness of things, self-referentiality

→ art as a device of *ostranenie*/defamiliarization
→ a text is the sum total of its devices, form and content, *fabula* (story) and *siuzhet*
   (plot) cannot be separated
→ aesthetics of deviation
→ defamiliarization forces the reader to slow down and effects a more strenuous, but
   also more rewarding engangement with the text and, by implication, with the world
>> art/literature as a dynamic process, defamiliarization implies the level of reception
   and historical dimension marked by the evolution of literary forms

Iurii Tynianov, *The Problem of Verse Language* (1924)

- a text is a dynamic system of mutually defining elements with a characteristic hierarchy of dominating and subordinated features
- the literary tension between foregrounding and automatization must be maintained by constant innovation/evolution
- forms and genres can never be static
- 'the tradition of breaking with tradition' as a literary principle, which is, however, increasingly viewed in larger contexts (the literary system   extra-literary systems)
- moves away from Shklovskii by seeing literary evolution as part of or interrelated with the evolution of society ('On Literary Evolution' 1927)

Tynianov/Jakobson, 'Problems of the Study of Literature and Language' (1928)

- 'structuralist manifesto': end point of Russian formalism
- literature as part of a complex network of systems all correlated with one another
- each system is governed by its own immanent laws and correlated to other systems through a set of specific structural laws
- literary history can only be investigated by addressing these correlations
- 'structure' replaces 'form' as focus of attention
- literature as a self-determining but nevertheless social phenomenon

3) Formalism Today

"Beyond the 'Resolved Symbolic'" (Birns 2010, 11-44):

De Man suggested that the main problem with the New Criticism was that it adhered to a bastardized, diluted version of the Romantic idea of 'organic form'. […] De Man's essay suggests that New Criticisms limitations were based in its adherence to what we will call the 'resolved symbolic'. […] The reading de Man opposed at once raises the poem's meaning above the ordinary life, making the text 'symbolic' and metaphorical, and insists it has a coherent, indissoluble meaning, making the text determinate and 'resolved'. (15)

Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarch, Network (Levine 2015):

If a literary critic today set out to do a formalist reading of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, she would know just where to begin: with literary techniques both large and small, including the marriage plot, first-person narration, description, free indirect speech, suspense, metaphor, and syntax. Thanks to rich recent work on the history of the book, she might also consider the novel's material shape – its size, binding, volume breaks, margins, and typeface. But unlike formalists of a couple of generations before, she would be unlikely to rest content with an analysis of these forms alone. Traditional formalist analysis – close reading – meant interpreting all of the formal techniques of a text as contributing to an overarching whole. A contemporary critic, informed by several decades of historical approaches, would want instead to take stock of the social and political conditions that surrounded the work's production, and she would work to connect the novel's form to the social world. She would seek to show how literary techniques reinforced of undermined specific institutions and political relationships such as imperial power, global capital, or racism. Along the way, our critic would most likely keep her formalism and her historicism analytically separate, drawing from close reading methods to understand the literary forms, while using historical research methods to analyze sociopolitical experience. These would seem to her to belong to separate realms and to call for different methods.

But would our critic be right to distinguish between the *formal* and the *social*? […] This book makes a case for expanding our usual definitions of form in literary studies to include patterns of sociopolitical experience […] Broadening our definition of form to include patterns of sociopolitical experience has, as we will see, immediate methodological consequences. The traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context dissolves. Formalist analysis turns out to be as valuable to understanding sociopolitical institutions as it is to reading literature. Forms are at work everywhere. (1-2)

>> Affordances of Form:

(affordance = potential uses or actions latent in materials or designs
[*Angebot/Aufforderung*])

- Forms constrain
- Forms differ
- Forms overlap and intersect
- Forms travel
- Forms do political work in particular historical contexts

> Forms: containing, plural, overlapping, portable and situated. (4-6)

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