

## CHAPTER 2

### “Introduction to the Formal Method” (1927)

*Boris Eichenbaum*

The organization of the Formal method was governed by the principle that the study of literature should be made specific and concrete . . .

[The Formalists’] basic point was, and still is, that the object of literary science, as literary science, ought to be the investigation of the specific properties of literary material, of the properties that distinguish such material from material of any other kind, notwithstanding the fact that its secondary and oblique features make that material properly and legitimately exploitable, as auxiliary material, by other disciplines. The point was consummately formulated by Roman Jakobson:

The object of study in literary science is not literature but “literariness,” that is, what makes a given work a literary work. Meanwhile, the situation has been that historians of literature act like nothing so much as policemen, who, out to arrest a certain culprit, take into custody (just in case) everything and everyone they find at the scene as well as any passers-by for good measure. The historians of literature have helped themselves to everything – environment, psychology, politics, philosophy. Instead of a science of literature they have worked up a concoction of homemade disciplines. They seem to have forgotten that those subjects pertain to their own fields of study – to the history of philosophy, the history of culture, psychology, and so on, and that those fields of study certainly may utilize literary monuments as documents of a defective and second-class variety among other materials.<sup>1</sup>

To establish this principle of specificity without resorting to speculative aesthetics required the juxtaposing of the literary order of facts with another such order. For this purpose one order had to be selected from among existent orders, which, while contiguous with the literary order, would contrast with it in terms of functions. It was just such a methodological procedure that produced the opposition between “poetic” language and “practical” language. This opposition was set forth in the first *Opojaz* publications (L. Jakubinskij articles), and it served as the activating principle for the Formalists’ treatment of the fundamental problems of poetics. Thus, instead of an orientation toward a history of culture or of social life, toward psychology, or aesthetics, and so on, as had been customary for literary scholars, the Formalists came up with their own characteristic orientation toward linguistics,

a discipline contiguous with poetics in regard to the material under investigation, but one approaching that material from a different angle and with different kinds of problems to solve. . . .

The comparison of poetic language with practical language was made in general terms by Lev Jakubinskij in his first article, “On Sounds in Verse Language.”<sup>2</sup> The formulation of the difference between the two language systems ran as follows:

The phenomena of language ought to be classified according to the purpose for which the speaker uses his language resources in any given instance. If the speaker uses them for the purely practical purpose of communication, then we are dealing with the system of *practical language* (discursive thought), in which language resources (sounds, morphological segments, and so forth) have no autonomous value and are merely a *means* of communication. But it is possible to conceive and in fact to find language systems in which the practical aim retreats to the background (it does not necessarily disappear altogether), and language resources acquire autonomous value.

It was important to establish this difference as a foundation for building a poetics.

The natural conclusion from all these observations and principles was that poetic language is not just a language of “images,” and that sounds in verse are not at all mere elements of external euphony serving only to “accompany” meaning, but that they do have autonomous value. The stage was set for a reexamination of Potebnja’s general theory with its basic assertion that poetry is “thinking in images.” This conception, which was the one accepted by the theorists of Symbolism, made it requisite to regard the sounds of verse as the “expression” of something standing behind a poem and to interpret them either as onomatopoeia or as “painting with sounds.” Andrej Belyj’s studies are especially illustrative of this. Belyj found in two lines of Pushkin the complete “picture in sounds” of champagne being poured from a bottle into a glass and in Blok’s repetition of cluster *rdt* the “tragedy of turning sober.”<sup>3</sup> Such attempts, verging on parody, to “explain” alliterations were bound to provoke on our part energetic opposition in terms of basic theory and our endeavors to demonstrate concretely that sounds in verse exist outside any connection with imagery and have an independent speech function.

L. Jakubinskij’s articles linguistically substantiated the autonomous value of sounds in verse. Osip Brik’s article “Sound Repetitions”<sup>4</sup> brought actual material to the fore (excerpts from Pushkin and Lermontov) and arranged it in various typological classes. After disputing the popular notion of poetic language as the language of “images,” Brik came to the following conclusion:

However the interrelationship of sound and image may be regarded, one thing is certain: sounds and sound harmonies are not merely a euphonic extra but are the result of an autonomous poetic endeavor. The orchestration of poetic speech is not fully accounted for by a repertoire of overt euphonic devices, but represents in its entirety the complex production of the interaction of the general laws of euphony. Rhythm, alliteration, and so forth are only the obvious manifestation of particular instances of basic euphonic laws.

In contrast to Belyj's works, Brik's article contained no interpretations of what particular cases of alliteration were supposed to mean; the article limited itself to the supposition that repetition in verse is analogous to tautology in folklore, that is, that repetition in these instances plays some aesthetic role in its own right. "It is likely that we are dealing here with various manifestations of the same general poetic principle – the principle of simple combination, the material being either the sounds of the words, or their meaning, or both." This sort of predication of one device applied to a wide range of material was very characteristic of the early period of the Formalists' work. . . .

The Formalists simultaneously freed themselves from the traditional correlation of "form-content" and from the conception of form as an outer cover or as a vessel into which a liquid (the content) is poured. The facts testified that the specificity of art is expressed not in the elements that go to make up a work but in the special way they are used. By the same token, the concept of "form" took on a different meaning; it no longer had to be paired with any other concept, it no longer needed correlation.

In 1914, before the *Opojaz* alliance and during the days of the Futurists' public demonstrations, Sklovskij published a pamphlet, *The Resurrection of the Word*.<sup>5</sup> Relying in part on Potebnja and Veselovskij (the question of imagery had then not yet acquired crucial meaning), he advanced the principle of the palpableness (*oscutimost*) of form as the specific criterion of perception in art:

We do not experience the familiar, we do not see it, we recognize it. We do not see the walls of our rooms. We find it very difficult to catch mistakes when reading proof (especially if it is in a language we are very used to), the reason being that we cannot force ourselves to see, to read, and not just "recognize," a familiar word. If it is a definition of "poetic" perception or of "artistic" perception in general we are after, then we must surely hit upon this definition: "artistic" perception is a perception that entails awareness of form (perhaps not only form, but invariably form).

It should be evident that *perception* figures here not as a simple psychological concept (the perception of the individual human beings) but as an element of art in itself, since it is impossible for art to exist without being perceived. A concept of form in a new meaning had now come into play – not just the outer covering but the whole entity, something concrete and dynamic, substantive in itself, and unqualified by any correlation. This signaled a decisive departure from the principles of Symbolism, which had held that something already "substantive" was supposed to emanate "through form." It also meant that "aestheticism" – a delectation with certain elements of form consciously divorced from "content" – had likewise been overcome.

This, however, did not yet constitute an adequate basis for concrete work: To supplement the points established by the recognition of a difference between poetic language and practical language and by the recognition that the specificity of art is expressed in a special usage of material, the principle of the palpableness of form had to be made concrete enough to foster the analysis of form itself –

form understood as content. It had to be shown that the palpableness of form results from special artistic procedures<sup>6</sup> acting on perceivers so as to force them to experience form. Sklovskij's "Art as Procedure,"<sup>7</sup> a kind of manifesto of the Formal method, set the stage for the concrete analysis of form. Here the removal from Potebnja and Potebnjaism and by the same token from the principles of Symbolism was made perfectly explicit. The article opens with objections to Potebnja's basic stand on imagery and on the relationship of the image with what it is meant to explain. Sklovskij points out among other things that images are almost always static.

The more light you shed on a literary period, the more you become convinced that the images you had considered to be the creation of a certain particular poet had been borrowed by him from other poets, virtually unchanged. All that the work of poetic schools amounts to is the acquisition and demonstration of new procedures for deploying and elaborating verbal materials; in particular, it amounts much more to deploying images than creating them. Images are handed down; and poetry involves far more reminiscence of images than thinking in them. In any case, imagistic thinking is not that factor whose change constitutes the essence of the momentum of poetry.

Further on, the difference between the poetic and the prosaic image is pointed out. The poetic image is defined as one of the means of poetic language – a procedure equal in the task it fulfills to other procedures of poetic language: parallelism (simple and negative), comparison, repetition, symmetry, hyperbole, etc. The concept of the image was relegated to a position within the general system of poetic procedures, and so it had lost its overriding importance for theory. Concomitantly, the principle of artistic economy, a principle deeply embedded in the theory of art, had been refuted. Sklovskij countered by advancing the procedure of "making it strange" (*ostranenie*) and the procedure of impeded form, "which augments the difficulty and the duration of perception, since the process of perception in art is an end in itself and is supposed to be prolonged." Art is conceived as a way of breaking down automatism in perception, and the aim of the image is held to be, not making a meaning more accessible for our comprehension, but bringing about a special perception of a thing, bringing about the "seeing," and not just the "recognizing," of it. Hence the usual connection between the image and the procedure of "making strange."

The break with Potebnjaism was definitely formulated in Sklovskij's "Potebnja."<sup>8</sup> He repeats once again that the use of images and symbols does not constitute the distinguishing feature of poetic language as against prosaic (practical) language.

Poetic language is distinguished from prosaic language by the palpableness of its construction. The palpableness may be brought about by the acoustical aspect or the articulatory aspect or the semiological aspect. Sometimes what is palpable is not the structure of the words but the use of words in a construction, their arrangement. One of the means of creating a palpable construction, the very fabric of which is

experienced, is the poetic image, but it is only one of the means . . . If scientific poetics is to be brought about, it must start with the factual assertion, founded on massive evidence, that there are such things as "poetic" and "prosaic" languages, each with their different laws, and it must proceed from an analysis of those differences.

These articles may be considered the summation of the initial period in the Formalists' work. The main accomplishment of that period consisted in establishing a number of theoretical principles to serve as working hypotheses for a further concrete investigation of facts; it also surmounted popularly held theories derived from Potebnjajism. As is evident from the articles cited, the basic efforts of the Formalists were directed neither toward the study of so-called "form" nor toward the construction of a special "method," but toward substantiating the claim that verbal art must be studied in its specific features, that it is essential for that purpose to take the different functions of poetic and practical languages as the starting point. As for "form," all that concerned the Formalists was to shift the meaning of that badly confused term in such a way as to obviate its persistent association with the concept of "content," a term even more badly confused than form and totally unscientific. It was important to do away with the traditional correlation and by so doing to enrich the concept of form with new meanings. As matters further evolved, it was the concept of "procedure" that had a far greater significance, because it stemmed directly from the recognition of the difference between poetic and practical languages.

Before I turn to the Formalists' endeavors in literary history, I want to bring to a conclusion my survey of the theoretical principles and problems contained in the *Opojaz* works of the earliest period. In that article by Sklovskij already discussed, there is another concept that played a major role in the subsequent study of the novel: the concept of "motivation" (*motivirovka*). The determination of various procedures of plot formation (serial construction, parallelism, framing, concatenation, and others) established the distinction between the elements of a work's construction and the elements comprising the material it uses (the story stuff, the choice of motifs, of protagonists, of themes, etc.). This distinction was then stressed especially heavily, because the main task was to establish the unity of any chosen structural procedure within the greatest possible diversity of material. Older scholarship had operated exclusively with material conceived as the "content" and had relegated everything else to "outer form," which it regarded as a matter of interest only to fanciers of form, or even as a matter of no interest at all. That is the derivation of the naive and touching "aestheticisms" by which our older critics and historians of literature discovered the "neglect of form" in Tjutcov's poetry and simply "poor form" in writers like Nekrasov or Dostoevskij.

What saved the situation was the fact that form was forgiven these writers out of deference to the profundity of their ideas or attitudes. It was only natural that the Formalists, during their years of struggle and polemics against traditions of that sort, should have directed all their efforts toward promoting the significance of structural procedures and subordinating everything else as *motivation*.

The concept of motivation enabled the Formalists to approach literary works (in particular, novels and short stories) at even closer range and to observe the details of their construction. And that is just what Sklovskij did in his next two studies, *Plot Unfolding* and *Sterne's Tristram Shandy and the Theory of the Novel*.<sup>9</sup> In both of these works he scrutinized the relationship between procedure and motivation, using Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as material for a study of the construction of story and novel outside the context of literary historical problems. *Don Quixote* is viewed as a point of transition from story collections (like the *Decameron*) to the single-hero novel, structured on the procedure of concatenation, with a journey serving as motivation.

That *Don Quixote* was the novel singled out for special attention had to do with the fact that procedure and motivation are not so integrated in it as to produce a fully motivated novel with all parts fused together. The material is often merely interpolated and not infused; the procedures of plot formation and the techniques of manipulating material to further the plot stand out sharply, whereas the later development of novel construction goes "the way of ever more tightly wedging fragments of material into the very body of the novel." In the course of analyzing "how *Don Quixote* is made," Sklovskij, among other things, points out the hero's pliability and infers that this very "type" of hero came about "under the impact of devising the construction of the novel." Thus, the predominance of the construction, of the plot over material, was stressed.

The most suitable material for illustrating theoretical problems of this sort is, understandably enough, art which is not fully motivated or which deliberately tears away motivation and bares its construction. The very existence of works with an intentionally bared construction necessarily stands these problems in good stead as confirmation of the importance of their treatment and the real fact of their pertinence. Moreover, it is precisely the light shed by these problems and principles that elucidates the works themselves. And that was exactly the case with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Thanks to Sklovskij's study, this novel not only contributed illustrations for theoretical postulations but also acquired a new meaning of its own so that it attracted fresh attention. Against the background of a new-found interest in its construction, Sterne's novel became a piece of contemporary writing, and Sterne became a topic of discussion for people who, until then, had seen nothing in his novel except tedious chatter or curios, or who had viewed it from the angle of its much-made-of "sentimentalism," a "sentimentalism" for which Sterne was as little responsible as Gogol was for "realism."

Observing in Sterne a deliberate baring of constructional procedures, Sklovskij argues that the very design of construction is emphasized in Sterne's novel: Sterne's awareness of form, brought out by way of his violation of form, is what in fact constitutes the content of the novel. At the end of his study, Sklovskij formulates the distinction between plot (*sjuzet*) and story-stuff (*fabula*):

The concept of *plot* is too often confused with the depiction of events — with what I tentatively propose terming "story-stuff." The story-stuff actually is only material

for filling in the plot. Therefore, the plot of *Evgenij Onegin* is not the hero's romance with Tat'jana but the plot-processing of this story-stuff worked out by introducing intermittent digressions . . . The forms of art are to be explained by their artistic immanence, not by real-life motivation. When an artist holds back the action of a novel, not by employing intruders, for example, but simply by transposing the order of the parts, he makes us aware of the aesthetic laws underlying both procedures of composition.

It was in connection with the construction of the short story that my article "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made"<sup>10</sup> was written. The article couples the problem of plot with the problem of *skaz*, that is, the problem of a construction based on a narrator's manner of narrating. I tried to show that Gogol's text "is composed of animated locutions and verbalized emotions," that "words and sentences were chosen and linked together in Gogol on the principle of expressive *skaz*, in which a special role belongs to articulation, miming, sound gestures, etc." From that point of view the composition of *The Overcoat* proved on analysis to be built on a successive alteration of comic *skaz* (with its anecdotes, play on words, etc.) and sentimental-melodramatic declamation, thus imparting to the story the character of a grotesque. In this connection, the ending of *The Overcoat* was interpreted as an apotheosis of the grotesque – something like the mute scene in *The Inspector General*. Traditional arguments about Gogol's "romanticism" or "realism" proved to be unnecessary and irrelevant.

The problem of the study of prose fiction was therefore moved off dead center. A distinction had been established between the concept of plot, as that of construction, and the concept of story-stuff, as that of material; the typical procedures of plot formation had been clarified thanks to which the stage was now set for work on the history and theory of the novel; concomitantly, *skaz* had been advanced as the constructional principle of the plotless story. These studies exercised an influence detectable in a whole series of investigations produced in later years by persons not directly connected with *Opojaz* . . .

Things were somewhat different in the case of poetry. Vast numbers of works by Western and Russian theorists, the Symbolists' practical and theoretical experiments, debates over the concepts of rhythm and meter, and the whole corpus of specialized literature to which those debates gave rise between 1910 and 1917, and finally, the appearance of the Futurists' new verse forms – all this did not so much facilitate as complicate the study of verse and even the formulation of the problems involved. Instead of addressing themselves to the basic issues, many investigators devoted their efforts to special problems in metrics or to the task of sorting out the systems and views already amassed. Meanwhile, no theory of verse, in the broad sense of the word, was to be had; there was no theoretical illumination of the problem of verse rhythm or of the connection between rhythm and syntax or of sounds in verse (The Formalists had only identified a certain linguistic groundwork), or of verse vocabulary and semantics, and so on. In other words, the problem of verse, as such, remained essentially up in the air. An approach was needed which would steer away from particular problems of metrics and would

engage verse from some more fundamental point of view. What was needed, first of all, was a restatement of the problem of rhythm in such a way that the problem would not hinge on metrics and would encompass the more substantive aspects of verse language . . .

The start was made by Osip Brik's "On Rhythmic-Syntactic Figures."<sup>11</sup> Brik's report demonstrated the actual existence in verse of constant syntactic formations inseparably bound with rhythm. Therefore the concept of rhythm relinquished its abstract character and touched on the very fabric of verse – the *phrase unit*. Metrics retreated to the background, retaining a significance as the rudiments, the alphabet, of verse. This step was as important for the study of verse as the coupling of plot with construction had been for the study of prose fiction. The discovery of rhythmic-syntactic figures conclusively discredited the notion that rhythm is an external increment, something confined to the surface of speech. The theory of verse was led down a line of inquiry which treated rhythm as the structural base from which all elements of verse – nonacoustical as well as acoustical – derived definition . . .

According to Tomatsevskij,

Verse speech is speech *organized* in its sound aspect. But inasmuch as sound aspect is a complex phenomenon, only some one particular element of sound is canonized. Thus in classical metrics the canonized element is the word stress, which classical metrics proceeded to subject to codification as a norm under its rules . . . But once the authority of traditional forms is even slightly shaken, the compelling thought arises that these primary features do not exhaust the nature of verse, that verse is viable also in its secondary features of sound, that there is such a thing as a recognizable rhythm along with meter, that verse can be written with only its secondary features observed, that *speech can sound like verse even without its observing a meter*.

The importance of "rhythmic impulse," a concept which had already figured in Brik's work, is affirmed by Tomatsevskij as the general rhythmic operational mode:

Rhythmic procedures can participate in various degrees in the creation of a rhythmic impression of artistic value: in individual works some one procedure or another may predominate; some one procedure or another may be the *dominant*. Focus on one rhythmic procedure or another determines the character of the work's concrete rhythm, and, with this in mind, verse may be classified as tonic-metrical verse (e.g., the description of the battle in *Poltava*), intonational-melodic verse (Zukovskij's poetry), and harmonic verse (typical of Russian Symbolism in its later years).

Verse form, so understood, is not in opposition to any "content" extrinsic to it; it is not forced to fit inside this "form" but is conceived of as the genuine content of verse speech. Thus the very concept of form, as in our previous works, emerges with a new sense of sufficiency.

## Notes

- 1 *Novejsaja russkaja poezija. Nabrosok pervyj* [Recent Russian Poetry, Sketch 1] (Prague, 1921), p. 11.
- 2 "O zvukax stixotvornogo jazyka" in *Sborniki po teorii poeticeskogo jazyka, Vypusk pervyj* (Petrograd, 1916).
- 3 See Andrej Belyj's articles in the collection of essays, *Skify* (1917), and in *Vetv* (1917), and in my article, "O zvukax v stixe" [On Sound in Verse] (1920), reprinted in the collection of my essays, *Skvoz literaturu* (1924).
- 4 "Zvukovye povtory," in *Sborniki po teorii poeticeskogo jazyka, Vypusk II* (Petrograd, 1917).
- 5 *Voskresenie slova*.
- 6 The Russian word "*priëm*" has usually been translated as "device" or "technique." We follow Striedter's suggestion that the word be translated as "procedure." See "Zur formalistischen Theorie der Prosa und der literarischen Evolution," in *Texte der Russischen Formalisten* (Munich, 1969) (cited by Jan Broekman, *Structuralism: Moscow, Prague, Paris* (Boston, 1974)).
- 7 "Iskusstvo kak priëm," in *Sborniki po teorii poeticeskogo jazyka, Vypusk II* (Petrograd, 1917).
- 8 "Potebnja," in *Poetika: Sborniki po teorii poeticeskogo jazyka* (Petrograd, 1919).
- 9 *Razvertyvanie sjuzeta and Tristam Sendi Sterna i teorija romana* (published separately by *Opojaz* in 1921).
- 10 "Kak sdelana 'Sinel' Gogolja," in *Poetika* (1919).
- 11 "O ritmiko-sintakticeskix figurax" (a report delivered to *Opojaz* in 1920 and not only never published but even, I believe, never fully completed).

## CHAPTER 3

## "Art as Technique" (1917)

Viktor Shklovsky

If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us. Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. In this process, ideally realized in algebra, things are replaced by symbols. Complete words are not expressed in rapid speech; their initial sounds are barely perceived. Alexander Pogodin offers the example of a boy considering the sentence "The Swiss mountains are beautiful" in the form of a series of letters: *T, S, m, a, b*.<sup>1</sup>

This characteristic of thought not only suggests the method of algebra, but even prompts the choice of symbols (letters, especially initial letters). By this "algebraic" method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette. The object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten. Such perception explains why we fail to hear the prose word in its entirety (see Leo Jakubinsky's article<sup>2</sup>) and, hence, why (along with other slips of the tongue) we fail to pronounce it. The process of "algebraization," the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort. Either objects are assigned only one proper feature – a number, for example – or else they function as though by formula and do not even appear in cognition:

I was cleaning and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember – so that if I had dusted it and forgot – that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.<sup>3</sup>