

## *Art as Technique :* **Viktor Shklovsky and Russian Formalism**

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### *SUMMARY*

Viktor Shklovsky was one of the leading figures of a critical and literary movement called Russian formalism. The members of this group felt that form, rather than content, was the most important aspect of any literary work. Formalist method called for detailing and organizing the literary laws and methods that were unique to literature. The most important theoretical statement of Shklovsky is in his work: “*Art as Technique.*” In this work he sets forth his influential theory of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is the process whereby an author makes his words or technique seem strange and different to the reader, thereby forcing the reader to see the material in a radically fresh and new way. Finally, formalism is tested by using it to view a short story by Akutagawa, “*In a Grove*” (Yabu no Naka).

Modern literary theory began in Russia around 1915 and is called Russian formalism. There were two centers in Russia: one group in Moscow and one in St. Petersburg. The Moscow group was concerned more with the linguistic study of language, while the St. Petersburg group focused more on the language of literature. Both groups kept in close contact and shared ideas.

The leader of the St. Petersburg school was Viktor Shklovsky. He and the members of his group were critical of the traditional method of critical analysis that viewed a literary work from a biographical, historical, or ethical approach. Shklovsky wanted to put the study of literature on a firmer, more scientific basis. The members of his group felt that the study of literature called for detailing and organizing the laws and methods that were unique to literature, and that were overlooked in a traditional approach to literary criticism.

The formalists divided language into two kinds: poetic language and practical language. Practical language is the language we use everyday to state facts such as “the sun is rising”, as opposed to a poetical account, for example, from Hamlet: “Awake the god of day.” What was important was not what was said, but how it was said. Formalists were most interested in form over content, and in the literary techniques used, such as imagery, rhythm, syntax, and so on.

Formalism contributed some valuable ideas to the study of literature, such as the concept of defamiliarization (which will be explained in the next section), and the contrast between story and plot. Story was

seen as the action in a text, with events arranged chronologically and causally, from beginning to end. Plot is the artistic arrangement of the story that may or may not follow a chronological or causal order.

The artistic rearrangement of the story into a plot results in the literary quality of the text. To illustrate the difference between story and plot, imagine a novel starting with an old woman telling about her experiences falling in love when she was a young girl. The story begins chronologically with the woman's youth, but the plot starts with the woman in her old age.

Intellectuals of the Russian Communist Party felt that formalists paid too much attention to the form of literature, and not enough attention to economic and political considerations. Marxists increasingly criticized formalism, and by the end of the 1920s formalism was completely silenced. Although formalism was suppressed in Russia, it spread to Czechoslovakia and became influential as the Prague school of criticism. In the 1960s many formalist text were translated into French and greatly influenced the new critical method of structuralism that was closely tied, like formalism, to linguistics.

Russian formalism is in some ways very similar to what is called American New Criticism which developed later and independently in America. Both formalism and New Criticism share an interest in form over content, but New Critics stress the aesthetic part of literature rather than the organizing and scientific direction of Russian formalism.

The main importance of formalism was in its shifting attention away from the traditional methods of criticism that were biographical, historical and ethical, towards a close study of the language of literature. Formalism was also influential in providing some of the concepts of language that were later used by structuralist theorists.

The insistence of formalism looking only at the work itself proved to be the Achilles' heel of the movement. Much of modern criticism can be seen as a reaction against the formalist method of ignoring other parts of criticism, for example ignoring the cultural, psychological or economic questions raised by a literary work.

Now that we have looked at Russian formalism in general, let us look in more detail at the life of Viktor Shklovsky and his most important theoretical statement *Art as Technique*. Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984) was the leader of the St. Petersburg group of formalist critics. After graduating from St. Petersburg University, Shklovsky formed The Society for the Study of Poetic Language. Their purpose was to carefully examine and describe literary techniques used by writers. By the 1930s Shklovsky was under constant attack by Marxist theorists, and had to keep a low profile in order to escape the Stalinist purges that led to the death of many "anti-government" thinkers. After the death of Stalin, Shklovsky began writing again and re-issued some of his most important writings. He also wrote a history of The Society for the Study of Poetic Language.

Shklovsky's most influential work was *Art as Technique* (1917). This work served as a kind of manifesto for the St. Petersburg formalist group. Central to *Art as Technique* was the idea of defamiliarization. For example, when we see something many times, or perform an action repeatedly, we cease to "see" the object, or we fail to remember our actions. That is because seeing and acting have become habits. They have become familiar, and we don't think when we do something habitually. The purpose of art is to defamiliarize words and actions so that they no longer seem familiar. We see them in a new and fresh way.

Shklovsky gives an example of habitual actions from the diary of the famous Russian writer, Leo Tol-

stoy. One day Tolstoy was dusting his room. When he approached his sofa he could not remember if he had already dusted it or not. Tolstoy was cleaning by habit, and his mind was elsewhere. He was cleaning automatically, and not really thinking about what he was doing. Everyone can give examples of certain times in his life when he has done something by habit and then could not remember having done it.

Shklovsky then gives us a particular example of defamiliarization from one of Tolstoy's stories. Tolstoy wants to make a point about private property. Tolstoy defamiliarizes the topic by changing the point of view of the story to that of the horse. Tolstoy examines the topic of ownership from within the mind of the horse. The horse is confused when a man talks about "his horse" or "his land." The horse wonders why the man can say such a thing, even though the man has never ridden on his back or set foot on the land. By making us see through the eyes of the horse, Tolstoy defamiliarizes the topic and makes the readers view the subject of ownership in a fresh and new way. In Tolstoy's famous novel, *War and Peace*, many battle scenes are shown in a different, unusual manner so that the real impact of the terrors of war are made clear.

Shklovsky then goes on to talk about the language of art. Artistic, or poetic language, is different from everyday speech. Poetic language is more difficult, less easy to understand, and "rougher." It is rougher because of a rhythm that is different from everyday conversation, and because such techniques like repetition of sounds force us to look at the language of the art work differently. Various literary devices defamiliarize the language for us and make the work seem strange and new.

When different literary techniques or literary words become too often used and so therefore lose their freshness, they cease to defamiliarize, and it is time to invent new techniques for expressing the material in a fresh way. Writers must always be searching for new literary forms.

What Shklovsky failed to see was the importance of the subject-matter (theme) of the artistic work. He focused so much on the language and the style of the work, he left little room for meaning. For Shklovsky, form was more important than meaning. Historical, economic, and psychological meanings are lost or barely mentioned, while all his attention tends to be focused on the language of the text.

To give a clearer idea of just how formalism works, it is helpful to actually use the theory when briefly viewing a work of art. Since this must be a brief glimpse only because of space limitations, I have chosen a short story by Akutagawa, *In a Grove* (Yabu no Naka) on which to use and examine some of the main tenets of formalist theory.

Certainly the most striking thing about Akutagawa's *In a Grove* is the division of the story into seven different sections, each with its own different point of view. The comparison of story vs. plot insight of the formalists is a very helpful way of approaching *In a Grove*.

The story begins the day the thief attacked the married couple. The plot begins the next day, the day the seven testimonies are given. A formalist would argue that what makes a text literary is its rearrangement of words and concepts so that the ordinary appears strange and unfamiliar, fresh and new. The plot rearranges the story in order to create the effect the writer wishes to make.

The power of *In a Grove* is created by the radical difference between the story and the plot. The story starts with a young married couple beginning a trip and ends with the last testimony given the following day. But the plot starts with the testimony of the woodcutter, and as each testimony is given the effect is created of weaving back and forth between the day of the attack and the day of the testimonies, each time retelling the events differently.

Since each testimony is different and each is given from a different point of view, the reader is forced to see the events in a multiple of different ways. This creates a newness of vision and adds power to the text's literary effect.

We can see the process of defamiliarization in different places in *In a Grove*. Perhaps the most striking instance is the use of a spiritual medium to narrate the words of the husband. By using the device of a spiritual medium, we can see beyond the grave and hear the voice of a dead man talking. This technique adds a supernatural strangeness to the testimony of the husband, and makes us see what has happened to him in a very unique way.

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