CHAPTER 1

Introduction
Formalisms

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It has become a commonplace of literary study that to study literature is to study language, yet prior to the formalist movements of the early twentieth century – Russian Formalism and American New Criticism – the study of literature was concerned with everything about literature except language, from the historical context of a literary work to the biography of its author. How literary language worked was of less importance than what a literary work was about. Two movements in early twentieth-century thought helped move literary study away from this orientation. The first movement was the attempt on the part of philosophers of science like Edmund Husserl to isolate objects of knowledge in their unmixed purity. The Russian Formalists, a group of young scholars (Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky, Boris Eichenbaum) who wrote in the teens and twenties, were influenced by this approach. For them, literature would be considered not as a window on the world but as something with specifically literary characteristics that make it literature as opposed to philosophy or sociology or biography. Literature is not a window for looking at sociological themes or philosophic ideas or biographical information; rather, it is a mural or wall painting, something with a palpability of its own which arrests the eye and merits study. The manipulation of representational devices may create a semblance of reality and allow one to have the impression of gazing through glass, but it is the devices alone that produce that impression, and they alone are what makes literature literary.

The second movement was the attempt on the part of idealist philosophers like Benedetto Croce to develop a new aesthetics, or philosophy of art, which would rebut the claim of science that all truth is grounded in empirical facts knowable through scientific methods. Art provides access to a different kind of truth than is available to science, a truth that is immune to scientific investigation because it is accessible only through connotative language (allusion, metaphor, symbolism, etc.) and cannot be rendered in the direct, denotative, fact-naming language of the sciences. The American New Critics (Cleanth Brooks, William K. Wimsett, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate) were influenced by the new aesthetic philosophies. For them, literature should be studied for the way literary language differs from ordinary practical language and for the unique truths conveyed only through such literary language.

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The Russian Formalists were interested both in describing the general characteristics of literary language and in analyzing the specific devices or modes of operation of such language. Perhaps their most famous general claim is that literary language consists of an act of defamiliarization, by which they mean that such literature presents objects or experiences from such an unusual perspective or in such unconventional and self-conscious language that our habitual, ordinary, rote perceptions of those things are disturbed. We are forced to see things that had become automatic and overly familiar in new ways. Shklovsky cites the example of Tolstoy, who presents a meditation on property from the point of view of a horse, or who recounts the story of a flogging in such a blank manner that the then accepted practice seems strange and novel to the otherwise inured reader.

More specifically, the Formalists were interested in analyzing literature into its component parts and in describing its principal devices and modes of operation. This analysis took two main forms in the two major genres of prose narrative and poetry, concentrating in the first on the operations of narrative and in the second on sound in verse. The Formalists noticed that narrative literature consisted of two major components: the plot, by which they meant the story as narrated within the pages of the book (with all the attendant arrangements of chronological sequence, point of view, etc.), and the story, by which they meant the sequence of events in the order and the actual duration in which they ostensibly occurred. Once this simple distinction is made, one can begin to analyze all of the features of story-telling, the many devices such as point of view, delayed disclosure, narrative voice, and the like that go into the creation of the imaginary story through the manipulation of plot or story-telling devices. One can, for example, begin to study a novel like *The Scarlet Letter* for its narrative strategies instead of for the ways in which it depicts Puritanism.

In the analysis of poetry, the Formalist focus was on the qualities of poetic language that distinguish it from ordinary practical language, the distinction between the literary and the non-literary being more pronounced in this genre. Whereas ordinary language must subordinate its rules of operation (grammar) to the practical goal of communicating information, poetic language is distinguished by the foregrounding of such devices or motifs as euphony, rhythm, alliteration, consonance, repetition, and rhyme which obey a very different logic from that required to communicate information. A meteorologist might say that "precipitation in the Iberian peninsula is concentrated in the central plateau," and in light of that practical use of language, the internal rhyming of "the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain" will seem impractical and unnecessary, but it is such devices that make poetry a distinct linguistic undertaking, a mode of language use with autonomous rules of operation which, unlike grammar, are not subordinated to a practical function. While practical speech facilitates access to information by making language as transparent as possible, poetic speech contorts and roughens up ordinary language and submits it to what Roman Jakobson called "organized violence," and it is this roughening up of ordinary language into tortuous "formed speech" that makes poetry poetry rather than a weather report.

While literature for the Formalists is characterized by invariant patterns, recurring devices, and law-like relations, it also changes over time and varies from one historical epoch to another. The Formalists account for such change in two ways. They claim that literary evolution is the result of the constant attempt to disrupt existing literary conventions and to generate new ones. And they argue that literary change is the result of the autonomous evolution of literary devices.

A more traditional concept of the content/form distinction might lead one to conclude that literature changes when the world changes because literature merely gives form to ideas and realities that lie outside the literary realm and constitute its cause or

motivation. But for the Formalists, literary devices owe no debt to such motivations; they evolve autonomously of them and are motivated entirely by literary origins. For literature to be literature, it must constantly defamiliarize the familiar, constantly evolve new procedures for story-telling or poetry-making. And such change is entirely autonomous of the social and historical world from which the materials of literature are taken. Cervantes' satiric novel *Don Quixote*, for example, makes fun of the popular romantic novels about knights and quests which constituted the dominant form of story-telling in his day. It emerged not because of changes in the world or in Cervantes' life but rather as a result of a specifically literary evolution. The new device of the problematic hero was made possible and necessary by the development of the novel form itself.

You will find a major Russian Formalist, Roman Jakobson, placed under Structuralism in this anthology because there is a strong historical as well as methodological link between the two intellectual movements. Many of the original Formalists were linguists, with Jakobson being the most influential. He left Russia in 1920 and traveled to Czechoslovakia, where he was part of the linguistic circles that inspired French Structuralism in the 1940s and 1950s. The Structuralists, whose work was particularly influential in France through the 1960s, share a methodological interest with Formalist linguistics in that they saw culture in general as constituted by the same rules of operation that one finds in language. Although the Russian Formalists were suppressed by the Stalinist government in Russia in the 1920s, news of their work was borne West by East European émigrés such as René Wellek, Julia Kristeva, and Tzvetan Todorov, where it helped shape French Structuralism as well as such literary critical schools as poetics, stylistics, and narratology.

The impulse towards formal analysis was not limited in Russia to the group of thinkers usually clustered under the rubric Russian Formalists. Vladimir Propp was a scholar of folktales who wrote at the same time as the Formalists and who analyzed the component features of folktale narratives. A wide range of tales could be shown to share the same sequence of narrative motifs, from "the hero leaves home" to "the hero receives a magic token" to "the hero is tested in battle." The work of Mikhail Bakhtin, while it is historically at odds with the Formalists in its emphasis on the social and ideological features of literature, shares their concern with describing those formal elements that make a literary genre such as the novel distinct from other literary forms. His work also represents an expansion of the original Formalist undertaking to include not only genres but also extra-literary uses of language such as that of the carnival, which Bakhtin saw influencing the work of certain writers such as François Rabelais.

While the Russian Formalist movement was scientific and rational, the other major formalist school – American New Criticism – was anti-scientific and interested in the non-rational dimension of art. Both critical movements nevertheless shared an interest in what it is about literary language that makes it different from the ordinary use of language, and both considered the proper object of literary study to be literary texts and how they worked rather than authors' lives or the social and historical worlds to which literature refers. Two well-known terms that are part of a New Critical legacy – the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy – name this act of delimiting the object of literary study and separating it from biography or sociology. According to the intentional fallacy, meaning resides in the verbal design of a literary work, not in statements regarding his or her intention that the author might make. According to the affective fallacy, the subjective effects or emotional reactions a work provokes in readers are irrelevant to the study of the verbal object itself, since its objective structure alone contains the meaning of the work.

While the Russian Formalists were concerned with elucidating the modes of operation of entire genres such as the novel, the New Critics concentrated their energies on individual literary works, especially poems. "Close reading" is the term most often used to describe their method. The purpose of such close reading was not, however, the analysis of literary devices or motifs considered as an end in itself. It was instead the elucidation of the way literature embodies or concretely enacts universal truth, what the New Critics called "concrete universals."

Poetry, they argued, differs from ordinary practical speech, which uses language denotatively (one word for one thing), in that poetry uses language connotatively or in a way that evokes secondary meanings. Such language use allows poetry to be both concrete and specific as well as universal and general. An urn can be both an ordinary object *and* a metaphor for the eternal durability of art. Poetic language thus reconciles the ordinarily opposed elements of the concrete and the universal, the specific word and general meaning, body and spirit. Such reconciliation is possible in connotative poetic tropes such as paradox, irony, and metaphor, tropes which either join ordinary objects to universal meanings (metaphor, symbol) or reconcile seemingly opposed elements (irony, paradox). Cleanth Brooks, for example, notices in a famous close reading that Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is full of paradoxes such as "Cold pastoral" and "unheard melodies" which imply both life and death at once, the paradoxical cohabitation of what is vivid and moving with what is frozen and still. This is so, Brooks argues, because the poem is about how art, figured in the urn, is more vivid than life itself, even though it seems lifeless. Although dead, it possesses eternal life.

The practical denotative language of science cannot name such truth because such language is limited to the naming of positive empirical facts that can be grasped by the senses. The realm of universal meaning, however, is beyond sensory experience and cannot be analyzed using scientific methods. It can only be alluded to indirectly in poetic language and cannot be paraphrased in literal, denotative speech. For the American New Critics, therefore, the description of literary devices such as metaphor, irony, and paradox was inseparable from a theory of universal meaning that was a polemical response to modern positivist science. While the Russian Formalists sought a value-free mode of critical description, one that would scientifically specify what it is about literature that is literary, the New Critics informed the study of literature with a concern for traditional religious and aesthetic values of a kind being displaced by science, in this case, the values of Christian theology and idealist aesthetics (that is, an aesthetics rooted in the idea that universal truth is available through art of a kind that is not determined by material social and historical circumstances). Those values have receded in importance with time, and the legacy of the New Criticism that has remained most abiding is the concern with the close reading of texts and with the analysis of the operation of literary language in all its complexity.

Formalism has become a standard approach to literature as well as to other cultural artifacts such as film and television. The specific kinds of form and procedure vary across media. Film formal analysis is concerned with the way images are constructed through set design, art direction, camera work, framing, composition, and the like. Because the production schedule usually is more compressed, television is inclined to be more constructed around narrative, character, and story than image aesthetics, although the pervasive presence of cinematographers and directors trained in film schools in television production means that television narratives are seldom lacking in compositional complexity. Story-telling has become more of an issue in television as well because

of the emergence of long-form narratives such as *True Detective* and *Forbrydelsen* (aka *The Killing*) in which a single story line is pursued through multiple episodes. *True Detective* especially invites attention to story construction because of the use of a double narrative that operates as testimony and flashback to connect the present to the past. The dual narrative structure is appropriate to a story about both personal and professional redemption and self-remaking. It is, as Sean O'Sullivan in his essay below would say, "broken on purpose." *Forbrydelsen* (the Danish original of the US show *The Killing*) operates more as what television narrative theorist Jeff Rush would call a spiral that loops back on itself as it moves forward, recapitulating some of the same conflicts as it moves progressively closer to its goal of solution and revelation. Each serial honors the conventions of the detective story. A somewhat monomaniacal detective sacrifices personal relations and opposes obstructive institutions as he or she tenaciously pursues a goal only he or she has the vision to see. The device of institutional obstruction is common to each, and often, the narrative tension is more provoked by the conflict with dim-witted superiors than by the interaction with suspects. While the formal dimension of both shows is weighted towards narrative issues such as obstruction, deflection, frustration, and delay, the visual style of each is characterized by highly thematic and often quite melodramatic shot selection and combination conjoined with a sound design that emphatically evokes emotional distress, empathy, and concern. *True Detective*, which dwells on the role of the cultural environment in crime, often relies on long shots that emphasize the size of the environment in comparison with the detectives. In one of the key moments in the first episode of *Forbrydelsen*, the camera stays on the detective, Sarah Lund, as she rotates her head, thinking about what might have happened at the crime scene. Her colleagues have told her there is no use in continuing the search; they should give up and go home, but Lund lingers, thinking, looking around. The sound accompaniment is strongly pronounced, and it evokes the process of thoughtful reflection in its slow cadence and rising and falling notes. When her rotation finally stops, there is a cut to what she sees: people coming down a road with bicycles and fishing poles. No one amongst the many police searching, she realizes, has thought to search in that direction, and it is there they find a canal containing a car and a body. The narrative is set in motion by a piece of visual story-telling that emphasizes her singularity of vision and its contrast (and conflict) with the hurried irresponsibility of her police comrades and superiors.