
Examine the ways in which Formalism can be seen as a
Precursor to Structuralism.

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Structuralism is indebted to Formalism in two major ways, to its attempt at a scientific approach to literary criticism, and to its ideas with respect to the organisational representation of narrative. Formalist criticisms, particularly the narratological analyses of Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky, created a new critical awareness of the role of language in literature. This shifted the major concern of literary criticism from the content of an individual text to its formal organisation. In their ‘debunking of earlier paradigms and [...] wealth of insights into the nature of the literary process’,¹ Formalist approaches to narrative ‘provided a fertile ground for new syntheses’ such as Structuralism.² For example Formalist studies of plot recognise a dual distinction between real life (*fabula*) and its textual representation (*syuzhet*). The shift in critical focus, whereby plot became ‘a compositional rather than a thematic concept’, as well as these insights into the dual nature of the text, was taken up in many ways by the French Structuralists, for example by Gerard Genette in his studies of narrative temporality.³ However, Structuralism is a definitively propter hoc phenomenon of Formalism, and not merely a historical post hoc phenomenon. Both theories are products of their times and so have differing methods of analysis and criteria of evaluation. Despite this, Structuralism maintains the focus on the scientific analysis of the literary work and its organisation, and of the language of a text, which Formalism first developed. It thus constitutes ‘a balanced and judicious restatement of the original Formalist tenets’.⁴

¹ Peter Steiner, ‘The Developmental Significance of Russian Formalism’, in Raman Selden, ed., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, viii: From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.270.

² *Ibid.*

³ Boris Eichenbaum, ‘The Theory of the Formal Method’, in Simon, Peter, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd Edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010), p.935.

⁴ Victor Erlich, ‘Russian Formalism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 627-638 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973), p.637, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2708893>, last accessed 10/03/2017.

Firstly then, the ‘cluster of diverse theories’⁵ that go by the name of Formalism were united by ‘the goal they pursued: to change the scholarly practice of their discipline.’⁶ Initially at least, they aimed to shift the focus of literary analysis from the content of a text, to a consideration of its form and formal arrangement. More than this though, ‘[T]he modernist commitment of the Opoyaz spokesmen’ led them to a uniquely scientific analysis of literary texts.⁷ Boris Eichenbaum characterises Formalism as highly oppositional to vague and unsystematic earlier criticisms.⁸ He wrote that ‘[Formalists] had to oppose the subjective aesthetic principles espoused by the Symbolists with an objective consideration of the facts.’⁹ Thus, united by the idea of ‘liberating poetic diction from [the] fetters’¹⁰ of its subjugation to the tyranny of the symbol, Formalists reacted against earlier criticisms by asserting the preeminence of scientific analysis and applying its values to the study of literature.¹¹

Similarly, the Formalist focus on form can be understood as a critical reflection of the increasing self-awareness of the literature of the time. The work of Joseph Conrad in particular is an early example of this increasing self-consciousness. *Heart of Darkness* constantly foregrounds its own textuality both by the narrative framework and the interjections of the narrator Marlow into his own tale. For example, the omniscient narrator’s early statement that for Marlow ‘the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a

⁵ Steiner, p.270.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Erlich, p.638.

⁸ Eichenbaum, pp.925-51.

⁹ Eichenbaum, p.928.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ One might see this as a continuation of Enlightenment ideas that progress in the modern world must be scientific by nature. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984).

haze'¹² introduces the 'self-conscious articulation of the possibilities of telling stories', and so encourages an analysis of the different ways in which a story might be told.¹³ In contrast, Realist and Symbolist approaches preceding the development of Formalism were focused on a personal interpretation of the resonance of a text's content. For Percy Shelley, the 'principle of analysis'¹⁴ concerned looking at the 'algebraical representations [that is, symbols] which conduct to certain general results.'¹⁵ However, the Russian Formalist's reactionary critical approach dispensed with these subjective analyses and focused exclusively on the language and organisation of a text. For example, Propp and Shklovsky recognised the dual split between the 'real' events (*fabula*), and their representation in the text (*sjuzhet*). Thus the Formalists created a new critical awareness that a narrative is always a distorted rearrangement of the events it describes.¹⁶ Again, Conrad provides an early reflection of the prevalence of this idea in literature. In *The Secret Agent*, 'London itself is [...] temporally unstable and fraught with non-synchronicities [...] Mechanistic clock time is juxtaposed against organic temporal markers of the sun and the heavens'.¹⁷ Thus Russian Formalism's focus on the form and organisation of the language of a text, as well as their scientific attitude, is a reflection of the Modernist zeitgeist.

However, in contrast to Formalism, Structuralism developed in an age less concerned with the dangers of the associative, philosophical vagaries of Symbolist criticism.

¹² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, quoted in Robert Burden, *Heart of Darkness: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism* (Houndmills: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1991), p.53.

¹³ Robert Burden, *Heart of Darkness: An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism* (Houndmills: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1991), p.53.

¹⁴ Percy Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', *English Essays: Sidney to Macaulay: The Harvard Classics*, (New York: Bartleby.com, 2001) last accessed 15/03/2017, <<http://www.bartleby.com/27/23.html>>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁷ Adam Barrows, "'The Shortcomings of Timetables": Greenwich, Modernism, and the Limits of Modernity', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 56, Number 2, Summer 2010, pp. 267.

¹⁸ Consequently, its proponents ‘emphasised the interdisciplinary nature of their research’.¹⁹ However, despite broadening its critical gaze, Structuralism still maintained Formalism’s scientific focus on the text; Roman Jakobson wrote, in 1929, that ‘Structuralism is the leading idea of present-day science in its most various manifestations’.²⁰ The Structuralists’ use of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic semiology, for example, is illustrative of this combination, although, interestingly, many of the ideas which Structuralists derived from Saussure have distinct similarities with those they took from Russian Formalism. For example, Structuralists were interested in Saussure’s investigations into ‘the underlying structure of language’.²¹ They took up his key idea that the ‘two elements [of a linguistic sign, the *signifier* and the *signified*] are intimately united, and each recalls the other’ and applied it to literature, thus showing how a work’s meaning and the arrangement of its form are intrinsically related.²² However this idea also has direct consonance with the integration of form and content in the plot, developed in the narratological analyses of Propp and Shklovsky. Thus Structuralism combined aspects of Saussure’s linguistic study of semiotics with Formalism’s scientific approach. David Lodge for example, in a later assertion of the value of Structuralist criticisms, illustrates how Hemingway, ‘through oppositions between nature and culture, joy and ennui’,²³ ‘establishes the thematic core of the story’²⁴ in ‘[t]he first paragraph without [using] a single narrative nucleus.’²⁵ Lodge’s analysis exemplifies both the scientific nature of Structuralism’s approach to the formal construction of a text —

¹⁸ See Steiner, pp.267-70.

¹⁹ Steiner, p.267.

²⁰ Roman Jakobson, quoted in Steiner, p.267.

²¹ Fernande M. Degeorge, ‘From Russian Formalism: To French Structuralism’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1977), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40245981>> last accessed 15/03/2017, p. 21.

²² Ferdinand de Saussure, ‘Course in General Linguistics’, in Simon, Peter, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd Edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010), pp.852-3.

²³ David Lodge, *Working with Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1981), p. 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the use of biological metaphors such as ‘narrative nucleus’²⁶ is noticeable in this context — and its concomitant use of ‘Romantic deductivism’ to show how these structures create meaning.²⁷ Structuralist criticisms embody the Formalists’ ‘characteristic attitude towards the understanding and the study of technique’ while also bringing an awareness of other critical positions to their analysis of the text.²⁸

The various ‘strictly empirical [Formalist] analyses of the text’s form and composition’, informed by an increased consideration of the language of the text, gave rise to other aspects of Structuralist approaches.²⁹ In this case Formalist ideas, not attitudes, are taken up by Structuralist criticism. For example, Shklovsky repositions poetic imagery within literary critical discourse. For him ‘[poetic] imagery becomes a part of the system of poetic devices and loses its theoretical dominance’.³⁰ This shows not just a disdain for the earlier belief in the symbolic image as the central communicative literary device, but also an awareness of language, albeit a distinctly ‘poetic’ form of it, as the central feature of literary analysis; ‘Practical language uses words to accomplish a goal, [...] poetic language is oriented towards the words themselves.’³¹ Formalists thus shifted the focus of literary study onto the form of a text, the function of the ‘words themselves’, and away from its content.³² The ‘linguistic patterns’³³ in a text therefore become not ‘merely a means of communication’,³⁴ but also ‘acquire independent value’ in and of themselves.³⁵ The Russian Formalists

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Steiner, p.268.

²⁸ Eichenbaum, p.926.

²⁹ Susana Onega, ‘Structuralism and narrative poetics’, in Patricia Waugh, ed., *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.265.

³⁰ Eichenbaum, p.933.

³¹ Gary Saul Morson, ‘The Russian Debate on Narrative’ in Waugh, ed., *Literary Theory and Criticism*, p.215.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Eichenbaum, p.929.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

developed an awareness, later taken up by the French Structuralists, that, through the organisation of these patterns, texts create meaning.

As mentioned above, Structuralists both used and diversified this Formalist preoccupation with linguistic patterning, particularly so in their analyses of narrative chronology. The temporal nature of the experience of reading literature is noted in various Formalist criticisms: Cleanth Brooks wrote that ‘the essential structure of a poem [...] is a pattern of resolved stresses [...] developed through a temporal scheme’³⁶ while Peter Brooks remarks how all narratives are read with the sense of an ending, that is to say, time bounded.³⁷ This consciousness that the ‘plot is teleological [...] it drives us forward towards an end through a series of anticipations and resolution’³⁸ implicitly raises questions about textual time which are later answered in Genette’s consideration of the ‘double temporal sequence’³⁹ of narrative.⁴⁰ Genette wrote that ‘[t]he [temporal] status of written literary narrative [...] is even more difficult to establish [...] it can only be “consumed,” and therefore actualised, in a time that is obviously reading time’.⁴¹ Genette continued his analysis of temporal order within narrative discourse by using Propp and Shklovsky’s distinction, in their analysis of plot, between narrative events in the *fabula* and their representation in the *syuzhet*. In his study of the ‘relations between the time of the story and

³⁶ Cleanth Brooks, ‘The Heresy of the Paraphrase’, in Peter, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, p.1223.

³⁷ See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*.

³⁸ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p.22.

³⁹ Christian Metz, *Film language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor, (New York, 1974), p.18, quoted in Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Jane E. Lewin, trans., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

⁴⁰ Saussure, in a similar vein, had noted different temporal modes of analysis, the difference ‘between a study involving a slice in time (synchrony) and an evolution developing in time (diachrony).’ Saussure, quoted in DeGeorge, p.21.

⁴¹ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Jane E. Lewin, trans., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p.34.

the (pseudo-) time of the narrative' he clearly used their model to structure his own analysis of temporal representation.⁴² For example this excerpt from Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

While he was speaking the hands on the face of the clock behind the great man's back - a heavy, glistening affair of massive scrolls in the same dark marble as the mantelpiece, and with a ghostly, evanescent tick - had moved through the space of seven minutes. (143)⁴³

can be explained, using both Formalist and Structuralist terms, by the temporal distortions in the passage. In the *fabula* the central narrative movement, *scene*, is confused when, in the *sjuzhet*, a *pause* is interpolated within a section of *summary*. In other words, the narrative voice describes the clock which is delineating the passing of time, simultaneously decreasing the narrative pace with atemporal description even as the statement 'had moved on through a space of seven minutes'⁴⁴ vainly seeks to increase it.⁴⁵ A Structuralist critic might go on to say that the preponderance of the language in this section characterises Sir Ethelred and explains 'the very public oratorical mode in which this politician expects to be addressed' and thus, more generally, sheds light on his opinion of his own social position.⁴⁶ This analysis shows not only how Genette has integrated Formalist ideas of narrative representation into his critical system, but also how a Structuralist approach expands upon these ideas. Like the Formalists before him, Genette's analysis of the nature of temporality is an attempt at objective, scientific criticism, however he uses both the critical vocabulary and the ideas of Propp and Shklovsky and also of Saussure's linguistic semiology and this

⁴² Genette, p.35.

⁴³ Alistair Brown, 'The Language of Time in *The Secret Agent*', <<http://www.thepequod.org.uk/essays/literit/agent.htm>>, last accessed 08/03/2017.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ N.B. *The Secret Agent* is an interestingly prescient text for these later critical ideas. In its temporally complex and fragmented plot, Conrad self-consciously uses the *fabula*/*sjuzhet* split and a scrambled chronology as a means of creating a complex narrative. 'Indeed, more generally, the novel's relationship to the incontrovertible historical fact of the Greenwich bomb plot exposes the way in which an event known to have taken place in public, historical time has its effects distorted by the very acts of recording which preserve it in history.' Brown, 'The Language of Time in *The Secret Agent*'.

⁴⁶ Brown, 'The Language of Time in *The Secret Agent*'.

leads his analyses to consider not just the form of a text but, more generally, the way in which it, in this case, creates a specific kind of characterisation.

To conclude, Structuralism developed as ‘a scientific attitude that proceeds from the knowledge of [the] increasing interrelation of science and philosophy’.⁴⁷ It used the empirical scientific attitude to the study of literature so characteristic of Formalist analyses. In this sense Formalism can be seen as a precursor to Structuralism. In another sense, Structuralism also incorporated and expanded on the implications of the ideas of Formalist analyses, particularly so in the field of narratology; Structuralist analytic models are both structurally similar to Formalist ones, and also use the preceding Formalist analyses as starting points for their own investigations. Despite developing in different intellectual climates, Formalism can be seen as a precursor to, and not merely a historical antecedent of, Structuralism because of the similarities of both their attitudes to the analysis of a text, and of their ideas in its interpretation.

⁴⁷ Jan Mukařovský, quoted in Steiner, p.268.

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