Lecture 11

Russian Formalism

Hello and welcome back to yet another lecture in this series on literary theory. In this lecture we are going to discuss Russian formalism. As you will remember, we had talked about a linguistic turn in the domain of literary theory in the twentieth century when we were discussing New Criticism. This lecture on Russian Formalism will be a continuation of our exploration of that linguistic turn. But before we proceed with our discussion of Russian Formalism I would like to clarify something about the way in which I have organized my lectures in this course. Some of you might have noticed in my previous lecture on New Criticism that almost my entire discussion was focused on the writings of two theorists namely T. S Eliot and I. A. Richards. I did briefly touch on the works of Empson and Wimsatt and Beardsley but there were other critics whom I did not discuss at all. For instance, I did not discuss the works of F.R. Leavis or Cleanth Brooks or John Ransom Crowe. And I do admit that this is going to be one of the limitations of this lecture series. The time constraint of each lecture will allow me to take up for discussion only certain representative figures and certain important aspects of a particular theoretical position. In preparing these lectures my aim has been to make you understand some of the key theoretical concepts better so that you can actually put them into practice, rather than to provide you with a comprehensive list of theoreticians and a superficial account of all their major works. In doing so, I also assume that you will be using my lectures as a starting point for your own explorations in this field of literary theory. So for instance if you did find my elaboration of some of the aspect of the new critical theory interesting, I would definitely expect that you would go beyond the theoreticians that I have discussed and read more not only about the other New Critical Theorists that I have not had time to talk about but also about the other theoretical texts

by Eliot and Richards that I have not been able to discuss. So please keep in mind that none of these lectures provide an exhaustive listing of all the theoreticians and theoretical positions of a particular literary critical tradition. Rather, you are meant to use these lectures as samplers or aids for your more elaborate study of the field. With this clarification in place let us now move to our discussion on Russian Formalism.

History and Salient Aspects

What is today known as Russian Formalism emerged as a school of literary theory from within two intellectual circles one situated in Moscow and the other in Petrograd or what is now known as Saint Petersburg during the years 1915 and 1916. The two intellectual circles primarily constituted of linguists and literary historians and their main focus was to discuss and debate the essence of literariness of literature. In other words, what is it that enables us to identify a work as literary? In the words of Roman Jakobson, a major Russian formalist: "The subject of literary scholarship is not literature in its totality but literariness i.e. that which makes of a given work a work of literature". We will have to return to the theoretical works of Roman Jakobson to study them in more details during the course of this literature, but right now let me give you a brief overview of the ways in which the Russian formalists attempted to explore this peculiar quality that made something into a work of literature. There are three related points that they made in this regard. The first point is that the source of literariness is neither the author, nor the context nor the theme or subject of literature. The second point which follows from the first one is that the source of literariness of a piece of literature is its language. The third point is that this literary language is different from non-literary uses of language and the difference is caused by how language is structured in literature and how this structure follows its own peculiar sets of rules and laws.

Now let us take each of these three points separately. As mentioned, according to the Formalists, the source of literariness of a piece of literature, poetry for instance, is not the poet, nor the subject on which the poem is written, nor even the context within which the poem was produced. The source of literariness of the poem is precisely what constitutes a poem – that is language or words on the page. Now while discussing the New Critics we have already seen how words on the page was prioritized by someone like I.A. Richards for example. So this might look like a familiar argument. But let us try and see the logic behind the assertion of the formalists that literariness can only emerge from language use and nothing else. If, for instance, we follow the Romantic theory and try and locate literariness in the personality of a poet or an author then the problem that we encounter is that we are not able to distinguish between the literary and non-literary creations of that author. If Wordsworth's personality is what it is that makes something poetical then how are we to distinguish between his poems and his laundry lists because after all both are products of the same mind and the same personality. Similarly, a particular theme or a subject cannot also be the source of literariness of a poem. Thus, it is as possible to write a medical thesis on the beatings of human heart as to write a poem. Therefore, the subject alone cannot help us make a distinction between literature and non-literature. The social, cultural or historical context too is ruled out by the formalists from their study of literariness because of similar reasons. The same historical milieu might frame the production of various kinds of literary as well as non-literary pieces. So the context too cannot be the determinant of literariness. What is left is what actually constitutes a poem in its most basic and most physical form—words on the page. Now here we of course encounter another problem. Language which is used by a poet to create poetry is also used by her to speak about more mundane things which are not counted as literature. Here the formalists will argue that what makes the language of her

poetry literary and thereby different from her other non-literary uses of language is the special ways in which the language of her poetry is structured. So the primary focus of Russian Formalism boils down to this issue of how language is uniquely structured in literary works which make them identifiable as literature. And since the effort of the formalists was to turn literary theory into a science of literature, their exploration of the structuring of literary language took the form of finding the rules that shaped and controlled the structuring processes.

In this lecture we will follow this search for rules of literariness by focusing on two major formalists, Viktor Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson. But before we move on to these two theorists, let me briefly dwell upon the relation between Formalism and the contemporary Russian politics. Now soon after the establishment of the two circles of Formalist critical theory, Russia underwent the Bolshevik Revolution and in 1917 the Russian monarchy was replaced by a communist government. During the next decade or so the Russian government came up with its own theories about how literature should be created and what role it should play within the society. The officially sanctioned literature was supposed to portray the realities of economic class dynamics within the society, the goodness of the proletariat and of course the qualities of a communist regime. Formalism with its exclusive focus on the literariness of language and its refusal to consider the social and political contexts in studying literature made it particularly unpopular with the government of the day. So much so that formalism as a school of thought was officially suppressed in the 1930. In fact, Formalism became a major force in the wider field of Western literary studies much later from when the two schools of Formalism actually flourished in Russia. And the Russian formalists only gained widespread recognition after 1965 when Tzvetan Todorov published in French from Paris the translation of a selected number of works by the formalists. So as you can see here, political events can not only aid the emergence of

literary theories but can also suppress them. With this in mind, let us now proceed to a discussion of the two formalists that we have selected, and we shall start with Viktor Shklovsky.

Viktor Shklovsky

The dates of Viktor Shklovsky are 1893 to 1984 and the concept that he is most famously known for is “defamiliarisation”. According to Shklovsky, defamiliarisation is the process that structures language in literary pieces and gives them the quality of literariness. In his important 1917 essay titled “Art as Technique”, Shklovsky observes how in our regular exposure to the world around us we grow accustomed and habituated not only to our surrounding material reality but also to the ideas, concepts and narratives that we encounter very frequently. Our perception regarding these material things as well as these ideas are dulled to such an extent that we stop mentally processing them at all. For instance, the house in which I grew up was very close to a railway crossing and as children we were so habituated to the sound of trains passing through that crossing day in and day out that we often did not even notice the sound. Because of such regular exposure our minds had stopped processing the sound altogether as something that was disturbing or intrusive. Indeed, we were only reminded of these sounds when some guest who had come to visit would complain about it.

Thus, as Shklovsky argues, perception when it becomes habitual turns into something that is automatic and not thought out. In his own words:

> 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.

Now this process of perception disappearing into the area of the unconsciously automatic has a profound effect on the language that we use in our day to day life. This language too echoes the deadening of our perception and in our familiar settings we therefore use expressions and phrases that are usually half formed and incomplete. But even more importantly, whereas our deadened perception results in a language use which reflects that deadening, our ordinary use of language also contributes to the dulling of our perception by repeatedly exposing us to certain words and phrases. Thus for instance thanks to 24 x 7 news channels we have grown so habitutated to words like rape, murder and war, they do not often allow us to perceive with full force the horror and violence that each of these words actually signify.

Shklovsky argues that the literature is unique and different from our more mundane modes of communication because it structures the language in such a way that it defamiliarises for us things and ideas to which we have become so accustomed that we have left perceiving them fully. The language of literature returns us back to a state of innocence where we perceive what we already know as if we are perceiving them for the first time. It does so by making strange what is already familiar so that we cannot recognize it easily. In his essay, Shklovsky explains this technique by borrowing an example from one of Tolstoy's writings where he defamiliarises the idea of flogging by describing it as follows: "to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches". According to Shklovsky, this language is literary because by spelling out in such gruesome details what the act of flogging actually involves, it makes strange that action and helps us perceive it with a vividness that is usually not available when we just encounter the familiar word "flogging".

Now one of the ways in which Shklovsky applied this theory of defamiliarisation to the domain of literary criticism was by suggesting a distinction between story and plot. According to Shklovsky, a story is a straightforward narration of a sequence of events which do not use the technique of defamiliarisation and cannot be therefore considered to be literary. He suggests that a story becomes literary only when the technique of defamiliarisation is applied to the sequence of events and they are converted into something that is not easily recognizable and therefore break the hold of dull habituation. This defamiliarised sequence of narration is what Shklovsky identifies as a plot. So it is by converting a story into a plot that a narration gains the quality of literariness.

I think a good example of this distinction between a story and a plot is provided by Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. This novel, first published in 1899 defamiliarises the idea of colonialism and its associated narrative of civilizing mission for the European audience. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, European colonialism of places like India and Africa was justified by the story that this was necessary to civilize the barbaric natives of these places in the global South. Conrad's novel makes strange this familiar story of the civilizing mission through a plot that traces the journey of its protagonist Marlow through the Congo valley. The easy understanding of the narrative of colonialism as a civilizing mission is impeded by the plot which presents in painful details the kind of barbarity unleashed by the so called bringing of European civilization in Africa. So as you can see here formalism though it might appear to be apolitical because it does not directly engage with the historical context of a work or the political ideology of its author can nevertheless function politically by pointing out the ways in which literature defamiliarises the ideas, concepts and narratives that are accepted within the society habitually and automatically.

Roman Jakobson

So from Viktor Shklovsky's theories of defamiliarisation let us now move to the work of the other major formalist Roman Jakobson. Jakobson was born in 1896 and was one of the leading figures within the Moscow circle of Russian Formalists. During the suppression of the formalist school of thought by the Russian government, Jakobson shifted to Prague where again he became one of the leading lights among a circle of intellectuals who formed what is known as the Prague School. At the verge of the outbreak of the Second World War, Jakobson, who was of Jewish descent escaped Europe and fled to America where he first taught in The New School and then at Harvard University. So the Anglophone academic sphere was exposed to the thoughts of the Russian formalist school not only via the works of Tzvetan Todorov but also via the presence of Jakobson in America.

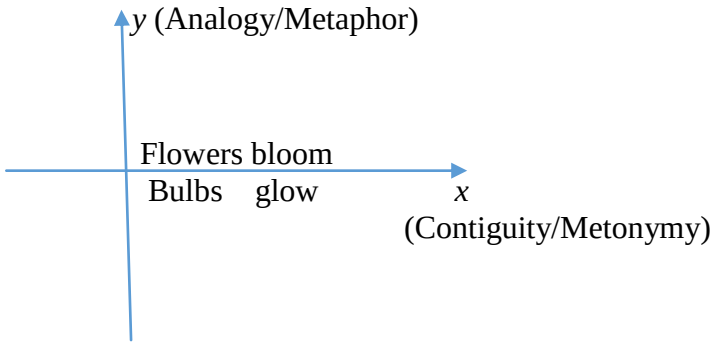
Jakobson was a linguist and his contribution to the field of literary theory was primarily through his efforts to identify what makes particular kinds of language uses more poetical than other. To understand Jakobson's theory of poetical language we need to start with his exploration of how the notion of equivalence works in language.

Consider for a moment these two sentences:

1. Flowers bloom
2. Bulbs glow

Now the words in each of these sentences are connected with each other in a relation of contiguity. Thus, in the first sentence flowers and bloom are associated with each other by being placed side by side and by being related in terms of a sequence. Let us call this relationship horizontal. Now if you consider the two sentences together, you will see that they can be very

easily mapped on to each other. And you will find that there is a relationship of similarity or analogy between them. Thus, the nouns “flowers” and “bulbs” are analogous to each other just as the two verbs “bloom” and “glow” are analogous. Let us call this relationship vertical. Now if we plot these two relationships in the form of a graph it will look something like this:



The “y” axis is the plane along which the vertical relationship of analogy functions. That is the relationship of similarity between the words flowers and bulbs and the words bloom and glow. Jakobson calls this “y” axis the axis of metaphoric relation. On the other hand, the “x” axis is the plane along which the horizontal relationship of contiguity functions. That is the relationship established through the sequence between the words Flowers and bloom, and the words Bulbs and glow. Jakobson calls this “x” axis the axis of metonymic relationship. Now according to Jakobson, language functions poetically when we transport the words related along the metaphoric or analogous axis on to the contiguous or metonymic axis. So for instance take the words flowers and bulbs. They are related along the y axis of analogy and metaphor. If I now transport the word flower on to the x axis of contiguity and metonymy and place it next to word Bulbs to create a sentence like “Bulbs flower” then this according to Jakobson will be an example of poetic language.

This poetic transformation is actually very easily understood. A sentence like “I pressed the switch and the bulb flowered over my head” sounds much more poetic than the sentence “I pressed the switch and the bulb glowed over my head”. Now here it is important to note that such poetic use of language which juxtaposes the metaphoric on to the metonymic plane can and does occur in our day to day speech as well. So this is a function not unique to poetry. But what makes the language of poetry distinct from our day to day language of communication is that in the former, the poetic function is used much more extensively which, to use Shklovsky’s concept, defamiliarises our everyday use of words and phrases and makes us perceive them afresh by disturbing their usual order.

With this we end our discussion on Russian formalism. In our next two lectures we will take up the works of a man who in spite of being associated with Russian formalism created several theoretical concepts that stand out for their uniqueness and far reaching applicability. And the name of this man is Mikhail Bakhtin. Thank you for listening.