Critical Theory in Russia and the West

The traditional view that the rise of Western theoretical thought in the 1960s and 1970s could be traced back to the Soviet 1920s is increasingly being challenged. For a long time this was acceptable to Russian theorists and Western specialists alike, because it directly associated the academic prestige of contemporary Western theory with the intellectual climate of post-revolutionary Russia. However, in recent years there has been a gradual retreat of theory from the high ground of Western humanities, and at the same time new work has emerged to suggest new unexpected parallels and to undermine others.

This book, with contributions from some of the best-known and most visible specialists in the field, re-examines the significant transfers, cross-fertilisations and synergies of critical theory between Russia and the West, from the 1920s through to the present day. It focuses primarily on those tendencies which have had the most significant contributions over the last century and looks ahead at what is most likely to determine future dialogues between Russia and the West in the humanities.

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Preface

This volume is not a nostalgic act of revisiting the celebrated past of literary and critical theory. Instead, it is an attempt to think through, by highlighting the work of several key thinkers, the encounters – materialised and failed – between Russian and Western critical theory in the twentieth century, and to re-examine the impact these encounters have had on the field of theoretical reflection and its diverse cultures. As we observe the scene of theory over the last century, we insist on an approach that historicizes its dialogues, salient and silent; we emphasise contextual inscription over detached inference; we explore theoretical thinking as a dynamic event that generates uncertainty and teaches us to cope with it – not as the use of a fixed apparatus of epistemological techniques.

The articles in this volume discuss Bakhtin and Jakobson, Shpet and Gadamer, Jakobson and Cassirer, Shklovsky and Lotman, Said and Arendt as thinkers in transit and as theorists subject to dialogue. The theoretical paradigms we undertake to examine range from hermeneutics and phenomenology to gender studies and post-colonialism. The contributors endeavour to identify and analyse several defining tensions in twentieth-century theory: organicity and construction; the crises of mimesis; the emancipation of literary theory from aesthetics and its secondary turn to philosophy; the fate of theory in the multiple restructurings of the public sphere, particularly in the Soviet and the post-Soviet space. We are led by a strong belief in the need to acknowledge the essentially heteroglot texture of theory and to follow its itinerary within and through cultural borders. As will be evident from the range of articles in this volume, literary and critical theories have articulated their claims differently at different historical junctures and in different cultural settings; the body of theory that emerges is a fluctuating entity, resulting from the mobilisation of competing perspectives, involving growth, modification, loss, as well as a complex adjustment of meaning, as theory travels across time and traditions and enters into exchange with other historically significant patterns of thinking about literature and culture. As we hope to demonstrate, the discoveries of twentieth-century theory are not an inert or stable repository of knowledge or wisdom, as their treatment and application, particularly since the 1980s, would imply; instead, they derive from the elusive, often diffuse, and certainly never quite finalised work of mediation and critical translation. This process, at times concealed in the blind spots of complex
institutional transmissions, ought to provoke engaged scepticism, as opposed to
passive reception or mimicry, and a clear-sighted realisation that twentieth-century
theory is not for its readers today an inexhaustible seam of new-for-old revelation,
but rather a particular and no less valuable form of sublated experience.

Galin Tihanov and Alastair Renfrew
Acknowledgements

Chapter 4

Chapter 6

Note on transliteration
We have used the Library of Congress system of transliteration, without diacritics. At the same time, whenever possible, both in the main text and in the index, we have endeavoured to render Russian names in their standard Anglophone form, e.g. Dostoevsky rather than Dostoevskii.
1 The resurrection of a poetics

Alastair Renfrew

The figure of thought that dominated the theoretical work of the so-called Russian Formalists, exerting a centripetal force on often disparate positions, was paradox. Paradox is most commonly, and deservingly, associated in this context with Viktor Shklovsky, for whom it became a form of rhetorical signature and, perhaps even more than that, the dominant device that drove all his critical, theoretical and occasional writings. Shklovsky’s identification with the paradoxical, which programmes for itself a certain degree of intellectual – and pragmatic – room for manoeuvre, is confirmed in his conduct ‘in life’, where what others might have characterised as dangerously contradictory behaviour in fact allowed him scope to negotiate his way to a venerable dotage on the cusp of the demise of the Soviet project.

The most celebrated manifestation of this unspoken device for life, as well as art and criticism, comes in Shklovsky’s preface to *Khod konia* [The Knight’s Move], where it appears to contradict the book’s primary contention that ‘art has always been free of life’ (Shklovsky 2005: 22), and to relate more explicitly to Shklovsky’s own situation than to art and literature:

Don’t think that the knight’s move is a coward’s move.
I’m no coward.
Our tortuous road is the road of the brave, but what are we to do if we see with our own two eyes more than honest pawns and dutiful kings?

(Shklovsky 2005: 4)

What is true of life is, however, also true of the history of literature, which is for Shklovsky not linear, but progresses through a series of oblique – and implicitly unrecognised – legations, ‘not from father to son, but from uncle to nephew’ (Shklovsky 2000: 318).1

This reference to literary history or evolution makes it immediately clear that a taste for and reliance upon paradox was far from being restricted to Shklovsky, whose temperament and writings tend to encourage and confirm the association to the exclusion of others. Iurii Tynianov, for example, would enter print for the first time with the following sentences, the sentiment of which would run like a conceptual magistral through all his theoretical (and historical) writings:
When we speak of ‘literary tradition’ or ‘succession’, we usually imagine some kind of direct connection between the younger and older representatives of a given literary trend. In fact it’s much more complicated than that. There is no direct continuation, but rather a departure from, a pushing away from a given point – a struggle.

(Tynianov 1977: 198)

Similarly, Boris Eikhenbaum, a more reluctant breed of modernist, would adopt Shklovsky’s (and Tynianov’s) rhetoric in his article ‘Literaturnyi byt’ [Literary Environment], his contention that, in this ‘literary struggle’, ‘we don’t see all the facts at once’ (Eikhenbaum 2001: 49) echoing Roman Jakobson’s invocation of a confused and suspicious police officer, seizing everybody and everything in his desiring search for the truth (Jakobson 1979: 305).

This consistent recourse to the paradoxical might be related to two ostensibly contradictory narratives of the Soviet 1920s: the first turns on the key Formalist device of ‘laying bare’ [obnazhenie], closely related to Formalism’s master device, ‘estrangement’ [ostranenie], which implies that the primary function of criticism is to de-automatise perception, or, in Shklovsky’s own formulation, to lift ‘the glass armour of habituation’ [stekliannaia bronia privychnosti] (Shklovsky 1990: 38). The paradox here is of course that the article from which this comes, ‘The Resurrection of the Word’ [Voskreshenie slova] (1914), is regarded as a foundational document in the Formalist conception of a unique ‘poetic language’, the key article of faith for many later attempts to insulate the literary artefact from the complicated business of perception of the world that contains it. Closer inspection reveals, however, that it is implicit in each of Shklovsky’s words that poetry is conceived in explicitly functional terms, albeit a functionality of a higher order: poetry, in its heroic work of de-automatisation, serves not itself, but language globally, and the entirety of the life contexts in which it operates – ‘estrangement’ seeks to reveal and renew both text and world. And this aligns Formalism with a narrative to which it has too often been seen as contradictory in an absolute sense, the broadly Marxist dialectics that equates criticism with critique, and might be differentiated from Shklovsky’s position more by virtue of its directly explicit conception of the function of text in the revelation of the world, than by any fundamental epistemological distinction. The certainty with which ‘Marxism’ has been characterised as being what ‘Formalism’ is not – ideologically or otherwise – is not the least of the many paradoxes a re-examination of the Soviet 1920s invites us to consider.

The most powerful dimension of the Formalist taste for paradox is, however, the curious mixture of blindness and insight with which they apprehended the paradoxical nature of their own situation. On one hand, and in refutation of the key tropes invoked in Viktor Erlich’s seminal account of the ‘demise’ of Formalism (Erlich 1980 [1955]), certain figures – Shklovsky and Osip Brik chief among them – were keenly aware of the political and institutional context in which they were operating, and harboured ambitions of achieving some kind of hegemonic position for a ‘sociologised’ Formalism among the range of competing critical doctrines. This is balanced – or perhaps obviated – by the parallel ‘historicization’ of Formalist
theory itself, manifest in Eikhenbaum’s theory of literary byt and the theory of literary evolution to which we have already referred in Tynianov, as well as Shklovsky’s own sociological and historical turn in his 1928 book on Tolstoy. The pretensions of Shklovsky and Brik might be characterised in retrospect as hubristic, but it would be misleading to see them as naive: awareness of present circumstance could not be so easily parlayed into presentiment of what was to come.

In longer historical perspective, however, and in relation to the broader theoretical and disciplinary context as opposed to the then immediate ideological one, the verdict on Formalist misconstruction can only be less equivocal. What motivated the initial focus on ‘poetic language’, in isolation from and false contradistinction to a global concern with revelation or ‘laying bare’, becomes clear when we examine in detail the nature of the evidence Jakobson wished his literary policeman to ignore:

*Byt*, psychology, politics, philosophy. Instead of a literary science, a conglomerate of home-grown disciplines emerged. It was somehow forgotten that all these belong to their corresponding scientific areas – the history of philosophy, the history of culture, psychology, etc., and that these disciplines might quite naturally utilise literary artefacts as defective, second-rate documents.

(Jakobson 1979: 305–6)4

It is the urge to ‘professionalise’ literary study, the pragmatic implications of which cannot be understood in isolation from the ostensibly theoretical impulse to ‘specify’ (the historical hallmark of all brands of Formalism), that determines its emergence as a discipline in and of itself. ‘Literary theory’ as such is therefore born from the confluence of two distinct imperatives: one philosophical or ‘purely theoretical’, catalysed by the other, the ideological-pragmatic imperative to locate self and discipline within the context of the cultural and institutional climate of the youthful Soviet state. The history of theory, from its very beginnings, is a history constrained by questions of discipline (whether acknowledged or repressed); and in reconstructing aspects of that history, we are obliged to jettison all illusions of ‘direct continuation’ between successive trends and schools in literary theory, and to proceed on the assumption that they are connected as much by the imperatives of struggle as by the imperatives of dialogue.

**One**

Viktor Vinogradov may not have shared the Formalist taste for paradox, but he was not slow in identifying and responding to it. In his 1930 book *O khudozhestvennoi prose* [On Literary Prose] – which, along with Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art* (1929), might be said to herald the post-Formalist age – Vinogradov obliquely confirms our earlier point regarding Shklovsky’s deceptive valorisation of ‘life’ and ‘art’, arguing that the Formalist project, founded on a misapplied ‘linguistic contraband’, has led to a situation in which, ‘under the flag of “the study of poetic language”, [. . .] “poetic language” remains least studied of all’ (Vinogradov
Alastair Renfrew

1980: 66). Tynianov is in fact accused of the ‘cruelest’ excesses in this respect, his implication of unmediated correlation between ‘literary phenomena and sociolinguistic systems’ in the articles ‘O literaturnom fakte’ [On the Literary Fact] and ‘O literaturnoi evoliutsii’ [On Literary Evolution] (see Tynianov 1977) constituting an illegitimate transfer [perenos] of a working hypothesis of linguistics into literary studies (Vinogradov 1980: 89). More broadly, Tynianov’s work is for Vinogradov little more than a translation [pereskaz] of Saussure into literary-historical terms, a failing that is incidentally repeated not only in the early work of both Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum, but also, and quite incredibly from our present perspective, in Valentin Voloshinov’s Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1929) and Bakhtin’s Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art (Vinogradov 1980: 65).

A detailed reconstruction of the polemics of the 1920s may partly explain why Vinogradov should group together such apparently diverse opponents, and moreover accuse them of the Saussureanism of which, for them, Vinogradov himself was a typical exponent; the key to understanding those polemics lies once again, however, not in questions of doctrine, but rather of discipline. The reason ‘poetic language’ has been ‘least studied of all’ in a philological landscape dominated by Formalism is that, for Vinogradov, ‘poetic language’ is an illegitimate object for the literary scholar, as opposed to the linguist: ‘I would be so bold as to relate the entire area of poetic stylistics to linguistics’ (Vinogradov 1980: 294). This may be Vinogradov’s over-determined response to the Formalist tendency to appropriate linguistic categories, while at the same time characterising linguistics as pertaining to the natural sciences, and not, like the theory and history of literature, the human sciences, but it certainly confirms that the ‘struggle’ that informs the later phase of Formalism, at the level of doctrine as much as of rhetoric, is a struggle above all for disciplinary pre-eminence.

This in turn casts a different – and, inevitably, paradoxical – light on the motivations and effects of Formalist ‘specification’, of discipline-building through principled exclusion. Linguistics emerges, in contradistinction to Philosophy, Psychology, Politics and History, which Literary Studies must expel in order to found itself, as the one ‘cognate’ discipline that Literary Studies seeks to colonise, to absorb into itself as a fundamentally specific guarantee of its own particularity. Early Formalism, in its orientation towards ‘poetic language’ or Jakobson’s literaturnost, as Tzvetan Todorov has noted, programmes the ‘negative effect’ of excluding from literary study ‘biography, social context, the history of ideas’ (Todorov 1973: 463), and, consequently, of predetermining its long-term ability to avoid the ‘second-rate’ status Jakobson predicts for it if it proves incapable of the wholesale assimilation of linguistic principle and method. It also casts new light on the context in which Bakhtin was moved to complain in 1924 that the ‘undoubted productiveness and significance’ of the work of ‘representatives of the so-called formal or morphological method’ (Bakhtin 1990: 261) is fatally undermined by that fact that

poetics clings tightly to linguistics, fearing to take more than a single step away from it (in the case of the majority of the formalists and of V. M. Zhirmunsky),
The resurrection of a poetics

and sometimes even directly striving to become only a division of it (in the case of V. V. Vinogradov). For poetics, as for any specialised aesthetics, in which it is necessary to take account of the nature of the material (in the present case – verbal) as well as general aesthetic principles, linguistics is of course necessary as a subsidiary discipline; but here it begins to occupy a completely inappropriate leading position, almost precisely the position which should be occupied by general aesthetics.

(Bakhtin 1990: 261)

Bakhtin’s reverse take on the paradox of Formalist specification is that a simplistic conception of the linguistic material as the basis for verbal art will culminate only in the ‘impoverishment’ [обеднение] of the object of poetics, and even ‘the replacement [подмена] of this object [. . .] with something quite different’ (Bakhtin 1990: 260). Linguistics emerges as the potentially ‘fatal’ exception to Literary Studies’ programmatic resistance to the claims of other disciplines. Literary Studies, in the act of establishing its foundations, appears instead to have found ways in which, over a longer or shorter period, to abolish itself.

This is the broad context in which we must approach the question of the immediate ‘legacy’ of Formalism, the ways in which, long before the ‘revival’ of the 1960s in and beyond Russia, the specific problematisations of the literary artefact and literary history initiated by the Formalists were developed on Russian soil. It is not possible in the present context to offer anything like a complete account of this process, so we will restrict ourselves to a discussion of three key indicative problems, which might appear at first glance to be unrelated: the problem of skaz; the question of the ‘symbolic’ quality of the word; and the problem of literary evolution.

The first of these, the problem of skaz, locates us firmly within the classical locus of early Formalism. Skaz is associated above all with Eikhenbaum, whose ‘Kak sdelana “Shinel”’ [How ‘The Overcoat’ is Made] (1919) and ‘Leskov i sovremennia proza’ [Leskov and Contemporary Prose] (1925) establish skaz as, essentially, a particular species of narrative focalisation, which draws attention to the speech characteristics of the conditional narrator and in which the ‘dominant’ becomes an ‘orientation towards the spoken word’ [установка на устное слово] (Eikhenbaum 1927: 220). The most consistent theoretician of skaz in this early period, however, is not Eikhenbaum, but Vinogradov, whose work on literary stylistics in the 1920s it comes to dominate (Vinogradov 1925; 1926; 1980: 42–54). For Vinogradov, however, the apparent mimicry of oral narration is only a secondary effect, through which is glimpsed the possibility of a developed typology not only of the forms of prose narrative, but, crucially, in their relation to the multitude of language systems that condition and contain the ‘individualised’ speech characteristics of a given conditional narrator. Vinogradov imagines the identification of the full range of manifestations of the collision of oral speech and the historical forms and conventions of literature, which he calls ‘narrative monologues’; he gestures, in other words, towards a stylistics that is not only implicitly typological, but which finds its typological scheme on the processes that are
initiated or become visible in the encounter and interaction of, essentially, ‘literature’ and ‘not literature’.

If we bracket for a moment the term ‘monologue’, it is clear that this grand project of systematisation is related to – and perhaps even provoked – Voloshinov’s attempt to identify ‘the forms of the utterance’ – and in particular ‘free indirect speech’ [svobodnaia kosvennaia rech’] and ‘quasi-direct speech’ [nesobstvennaia priamaia rech’] – in the final part of Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (Voloshinov 1986: 109–59), and we will return to the significance and effects of this line of communication presently. For Bakhtin, too, the stylistically implied ‘orality’ of skaz narration is not the main point; but where Vinogradov has sought what is primary not in orality per se, but rather in the stylistic and narrative possibilities of its encounter with ‘literature’, Bakhtin goes further in arguing that ‘skaz is above all orientation towards the speech of another, and only then, as a consequence, towards oral speech’ (Bakhtin 1984: 191). Where, for Vinogradov, orality is essentially secondary, one possible marker of varying types of stylistic encounter, for Bakhtin it is less even than that: the presence of stylistic markers of ‘orality’ in the literary text is only a contingent, surface indicator that the encounter in question is not between ‘styles’ or ‘narrative devices’, but rather between voices, ‘worldviews’. The stylistic profile of ‘orality’ is a surface indicator of the active presence of an otherness that will demand of stylistics that it acknowledge an entirely different object – ‘discourse orientated towards the discourse of others (double-voiced discourse)’ (Bakhtin 1984: 199) – or itself accept a secondary role as no more than a branch of the ‘subsidiary’ discipline of linguistics.7

Although Bakhtin’s re-inflection of skaz is ostensibly directed at Eikhenbaum and the Formalists, it is Vinogradov who replies, albeit in a book that, with an ironic nod to Bakhtin’s own situation, would never see the light of day. Vinogradov regards the contention that the speech of the other lies at the heart of skaz and guarantees its significance for literary studies as ‘historically and theoretically inaccurate’ (Vinogradov 1980: 331), but offers an alternative that itself founders on the rocks of historical paradox. Vinogradov – perhaps reading Bakhtin’s reference to chuzhaia rech’ entirely literally, ‘indirect speech’ as opposed to the ‘speech of another’ we are obliged to prefer – judges that Bakhtin has underestimated the significance of the differentiated relationship between ‘author and hero’. These are of course the precise terms in which, as Vinogradov could not have known, Bakhtin had earlier attempted – in ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’, written as early as 1922–1923, but not published until 1979 – to re-conceptualise the architectonics of the literary text, and from which his conception of skaz essentially derives (Bakhtin 1990). For Vinogradov, however, Bakhtin’s insistence on the possibility of a ‘one-dimensional’ authorial image, essentially unaffected by any of the ‘empirical possibilities’ the encounter between author and hero offers, is merely ‘naive’ (Vinogradov 1980: 332).9

Naive or not, Bakhtin’s and Vinogradov’s conceptions of skaz share an expansiveness that is lacking in Eikhenbaum’s; where Vinogradov glimpses in skaz the possibility of reconstructing the full historical range of narrative forms in their ongoing evolution, Bakhtin imagines an ‘alternative’ history of literary form, one
in which a series of quite different architectonic relations – or live encounters with otherness – will be revealed beneath the surface of all compositional forms as the real force that drives literary evolution. Both positions are, however, linked by a common acceptance that skaz – like any other ‘surface’ literary phenomenon deserving of attention – holds the key to ‘new methods for the artistic representation of the world’, in a formulation of Vinogradov (1980: 52) that might have been culled from any number of places in Bakhtin (see for example Bakhtin 1984: 7).

This relates directly to the second problem – the question of the symbolic quality of the word – which not only further illuminates the complexity of the polemical resistance and oblique influence that characterise Vinogradov’s and Bakhtin’s relation to Formalism, but also serves to emphasise the limitations of all three positions, the point at which each is forced to confront the aporiae in its own theoretical – and philosophical – foundations. The paradox here is that, for all the claims and counterclaims of denuded Saussureanism, none of the Formalists, the Bakhtin school, or Vinogradov attempt to formulate a coherent theory of the sign.

The ‘canonical’ Formalist position on this question might even be described as paradoxically militant: the formulation ‘the word is a thing’ [slovo – veshch’] (Shklovsky 1983: 8) implies an uncompromising commitment to materialism, to a form of scientific positivism, even as its author and his colleagues were being accused of the contradictory sin of idealism. Shklovsky’s article of faith is designed to deny all possibility of referentialism, any sense in which literature can be approached as representing or describing an exterior, pre-existent ‘reality’; not only is ‘the word’ (not the sign) a material part of that reality, it is definitively transformative, even constitutive of it, a material phenomenon par excellence, whose laws by implication remain to be discovered.

Tynianov will later attempt to rescue this central principle from the wreckage of Formalism as any kind of unified movement by theorising the relationship between ‘verbal material’ and the material in general (see Renfrew 2006: 21–44), an undertaking that is largely ignored by Bakhtin’s apparently straightforward contradiction of Shklovsky’s original dictum: ‘the word is not a thing’ [slovo ne veshch’] (Bakhtin 1984: 202) does not, however, presage an attempt to conceive of the word in anything like Saussurean terms. Even in Voloshinov’s treatment of the question in Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, where the basic terminology is at least manifest, the theory of the sign [znak] sketched there owes nothing to Saussure’s insulation of the signifier from any notion of a pseudo-direct contact with the referent; instead it is an attempt to conceptualise the sign on an entirely different material basis than that imperfectly imagined by Shklovsky, as the ‘living word’ that will both mediate and embody lived experience in subsequent revisitations authored by Bakhtin himself. Despite fundamental differences in their respective conceptions of their object, what both (or, indeed, all three) of these approaches share is an outright rejection of any simplistic idea of language (discourse) as an essentially symbolic form. Alone on the territory that stretches out beyond the unconsummated encounter between materialism and idealism, the Bakhtin school and later Formalism alike, albeit in provisionally different ways, understand that encounter as the herald of a (productive) crisis in western theories of representation.
This rejection is not, however, echoed in Vinogradov, who despite his shared recognition of the crisis of representation, turns in his search for an alternative to no less than the symbol \([\textit{simvol}]\). The symbol is described by Aleksandr Chudakov as Vinogradov’s answer to the question of what is the ultimate ‘unit of analysis’ \([\textit{edinitsa analiza}]\) in the concrete literary work (Vinogradov 1980: 296), the part that can safely be disassembled from the whole – in the artificial process of abstract analysis – without deformation of its meaning. This operation might appear at first glance to be little more than a manifestation of the spirit of linguistics in literary studies, and, moreover, to contradict the direction in which Vinogradov’s work was developing in its search for a new conceptual basis for literary representation; the second of these difficulties, at least, is obviated by the realisation that what Vinogradov intends by the term ‘symbol’ does not correspond to any accepted definition of the term current in the late 1920s, or indeed since. ‘Symbol’, for Vinogradov, is merely a way of describing the word in literature, with specific emphasis on the semantic transformations the word or lexeme undergoes in the process of its incorporation into the literary work; the contingent formulation ‘symbol’ signals the possibility (necessity) not only of a semantics of the literary text (system), but one that is adequate to the changing historical relationships between ‘the literary’ and the ‘non-literary’, and which affords access to the particular process of mutual accommodation that will ultimately define the literary system at any given point in its evolution.

In other words, Vinogradov’s conception of the symbol is generated by the same underlying, fundamental question of how various forms of speech are introduced into the literary work, that is, the problem of literary evolution. The semantic transformations that can be observed as the symbol (word, not sign) migrates from one sphere of use to another might be described in precisely the same terms, in fact, as Vinogradov describes the forms of \(\textit{skaz}\) narration

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\text{the crucible in which the synthesis of outmoded forms of literary narration and the genres and mythology of ‘folk’ or professional-class forms of speech – various kinds of oral monological speech – is forged; the crucible in which new forms of literary and artistic speech are prepared. (Vinogradov 1980: 301)}
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We might be forgiven, as Chudakov notes elsewhere, for mistaking the meaning, if not the style, of such passages for the later work of Bakhtin, particularly in view of the fact that the term ‘symbol’ quickly gives way in Vinogradov’s work to the more prosaic ‘word’ \([\textit{slovo}]\), the term determinedly favoured by the Bakhtin school as an indicator of the status of verbal material as more than just ‘a thing’. The more salient point, however, is that the problem of \(\textit{skaz}\) and the problem of the symbolic nature of the word both turn out to be motivated – in the pure, ‘Formalist’ sense of the term – by the problem of literary evolution, to be sub-functions of the problematic set in motion in Russian literary theory of the 1920s by Tynianov’s ‘The Ode as an Oratorical Genre’ (Tynianov 2003).

Vinogradov and Bakhtin emerge as more sophisticated developers of responses to the same question, and, in the end, all the key problematics of the period emerge
as facets of a unified project not only to theorise ‘the literary’, but to do so in a manner that is inseparable from – and constitutive of – a history of social, literary and linguistic forms. Vinogradov, the Bakhtin school, the Formalists – and in particular Tynianov – would, in perhaps any other location and time in the later history of theory, have been identified as belonging to the same ‘school’ or ‘movement’, the differences between their theoretical positions being born of disciplinary orientation, with all its attendant – and still unresolved – conflicting conceptions of the nature of the object of study, and hence of methodology.¹⁰

Two

Julia Kristeva’s intervention on the legacy of the Soviet 1920s implies a beguiling, but ultimately illusory sense of linearity. Her 1967 article ‘Word, Dialogue, and Novel’, a key moment in the transmission of Bakhtin’s ideas to the western environment, specifically identifies the superiority of Bakhtin’s conception of skaz over that of Eikhenbaum (acknowledging the role of Vinogradov only in passing). It acknowledges the significance of the disciplinary contest between linguistics and literary studies; and, in a manner that is half right about Bakhtin because it is only half right about Formalism itself, it identifies Bakhtin’s work as ‘one of [Formalism’s] most remarkable accomplishments, as well as one of the most powerful attempts to transcend its limitations’ (Kristeva 1980: 64). In emphasising Bakhtin’s determination to ‘situate [. . .] the text within history and society’ (Kristeva 1980: 65), however, Kristeva underestimates the extent to which the Formalists had already in the second half of the 1920s sought radically to historicize their own project – and in so doing mistakes the surface polemic between Bakhtin, Vinogradov and the Formalists for a deep-lying theoretical incommensurability.

In her second intervention on Bakhtin and the legacy of Formalism, the 1970 article ‘The Ruin of a Poetics’, first published as an introduction to the first French-language edition of Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, this ‘historicization’ becomes the dominant in Kristeva’s reading of Bakhtin. In a manner that has both informed our earlier discussion and remains pregnant with theoretical potential, Kristeva associates Bakhtin’s identification of a crisis of representation in western culture with the need to ‘study meaning in all its verbal materiality’ (Kristeva 1973: 107), a lesson learned through observation of the omissions of Formalism. For Kristeva, notwithstanding the ‘sub-Sassurean’ accusations of Vinogradov and others, the Formalist failure to develop an explicit theory of the verbal sign prevents meaningful confrontation of the problem that nonetheless runs like an unacknowledged hallmark through the various phases of the Formalist project – the relationship between the materiality of what is represented and the materiality of what represents, text and speech. The Formalists remain prisoners of the false dichotomy of ‘content’ and ‘form’, and, therefore, of ‘a reasoning entrapped in representation’ (Kristeva 1973: 105).

This is, initially at least, the central force that draws Kristeva to Bakhtin: as Kristeva has implied in the earlier article, this entrapment within the logic of representation, understood in broadly referential or mimetic terms, but which at the same
time resists the demands of historical materiality (embodiment), is what Bakhtin intends by the term monologic. In the attempt to go beyond this postulate, however, armed with an apparently abundant surplus of historical vision, Kristeva manages at the same time to acknowledge – and herself fall victim to – the operation of historical paradox, and to describe the most audacious and unexpected of ‘knight’s moves’ in deceptively linear terms. The undeniable value of Kristeva’s central argument about a crisis of representation in western culture, which persists in our own post-postmodern moment, is undermined by the particular nature of her response to that crisis, her identification of the precise lack that has brought poetics to ‘ruin’.

The Bakhtin school’s response to skaz, to the problem of the sign, to textuality and historicity, to typologies of narrative and the problem of literary genre, are all founded on a conception of radical otherness. This prompts Kristeva, in search of a way of describing ‘the dialogism inherent in the denotative or historical word’, to turn her attention to what she calls ‘the psychic aspect of writing as a trace of dialogue with oneself (with another), as a writer’s distance from himself, as a splitting of the writer into subject of enunciation and subject of utterance’ (Kristeva 1980: 74). It is from here a short step to seeing the relationship of ‘author and hero’ as analogous to the relationship of ‘the object of psychoanalysis’ to self and world; in each, the ‘subject of utterance is both representative of the subject of enunciation and represented as object of the subject of enunciation’, a procedure which, in a perfect statement of post-structuralist, psychoanalytic inheritance, ‘abolishes distinctions between signifier and signified’ (Kristeva 1980: 76). Bakhtinian carnival is for Kristeva the mode in which the free, ‘ambivalent’ word that contains its own otherness has been historically perceptible; beyond this ‘intuition’ of an alternative to the causality and rationalism encoded in western conceptions of representation, however, Bakhtin – and his contemporaries – could not go, historically located as they were in ‘a time when the Freudian break-through was not an accepted part of language theory’ (Kristeva 1973: 105). Bakhtin’s nascent ‘theory of the language-user and of meaning as a productive activity in language’ was fated to remain ‘vague and approximative, but rich in intuitive foreshadowings of the Freudian position’, which, when separated from ‘the worn-out ideological husk’ that surrounds it, becomes, in a curious turn of phrase that nonetheless dramatises the pervasiveness of non-linearity in the history of theory, ‘a hitherto unknown precursor, unaware of its role’ (Kristeva 1973: 106–7).

Apart from a perhaps understandable, but ultimately fatal lack of historical specificity, to which we will presently return, the problem with this reading is that it entirely misrepresents the kernel of Bakhtin’s theoretical position. Kristeva equates the plurality of the Bakhtinian speaker/writer, the sense in which ‘Man never coincides with himself’, with a different kind of radicalism, with the global undermining of any authoritative ‘limit’ (Logos, God). This is a process in which the writer (speaker) ‘is neither nothingness nor anybody [. . .] an absence, a blank space [. . .]. At the very moment when the writer appears, we experience emptiness’ (Kristeva 1980: 74).

Similarly, in order to assuage fears that Bakhtin’s conception of voice may be ‘furtively influenced by theology’ and ‘not without some transcendental echoes’,
Kristeva is driven to the over-determined error of asserting that voice ‘is not the phoné which comes down to us from Greek texts and is identical with the speaker: it is a disembodied phoné, which has lost its truth and is anxious about the locale of its emission’ (Kristeva 1973: 110). Anxious, perhaps, but also grimly and intentionally determined to protect the specificity, the identity-giving uniqueness of its ‘being as event’, without in the process entirely isolating itself from the environment in which it has its being. Voice in Bakhtin is the opposite of disembodied, and its sensitivity to and indeed partial determination by the Other – while certainly opposed to the unitary, the monolithic, the ‘monologic’ – implies also the opposite of ‘absence’ and ‘anonymity’.

Kristeva was not of course aware in the late 1960s of the essentially hybrid nature of Bakhtin’s Dostoevsky book, forged as it was from the encounter between the neo-Kantianism of his then unpublished texts ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ and Toward a Philosophy of the Act and the alternative ‘historical materialism’ of the Formalism Kristeva so glibly under-rates. Neither is she attentive to the transformations the book has undergone between 1929 and its re-issue in 1963, and the extent to which carnival, least of all related to the problematics that emerge in the 1920s, has been forcibly inserted into a work already unbalanced by the epochal tensions it struggles to contain. Most decisive, however, is the dramatic irony of the later re-appearance of Voloshinov’s Freidizm: Kriticheskii ocherk [Freudianism: A Critical Sketch], first published in 1927, and in French translation in 1980, which casts a different light on Kristeva’s indomitable puzzlement at the absence of any reference to Freud: indeed, ‘the [Dostoevsky] book contains not a single reference to psychoanalysis’ (Kristeva 1973: 109). More forcefully even than ‘Author and Hero’ or Toward a Philosophy of the Act, Voloshinov’s book confirms in explicit terms what no later reader of Bakhtin could doubt: that the Freudian ‘unconscious’ was an utterly inimical resolution to the problems generated by the collision of idealism and materialism; that it represents, for the Bakhtin school, the worst of all possible worlds, combining the deficiencies of positivist abstraction and a particular form of ‘transcendence’. The unconscious, for Bakhtin and his colleagues, represents the final end point of the same trajectory that Formalism has been accused of unwittingly tracing for itself, driven by a ‘fear of meaning, which, with its ‘not here’ and ‘not now’ is able to destroy the materiality [veschnost’] of the work and the fullness of its presence in the here and now’ (Bakhtin/Medvedev 1985: 105).

Kristeva later admits that Bakhtin’s ‘other’ has little in common with the ‘bifurcated “other” of psychoanalysis’ and that, unaware of Voloshinov’s book and the possibility of Bakhtin’s authorship, she had ‘introduced a deliberate “working” distortion into her reception of Bakhtin’ (Al Mualla 1995: 7). The acknowledgement that Bakhtin is ‘from the outset far from psychoanalysis’ is somewhat undermined by the persistence with which he is described as ‘dialectic’ (Al Mualla 1995: 7), but nothing is more eloquent of Kristeva’s unrepentance than her compromised scepticism with regard to Voloshinov’s Freudianism, ‘a remarkably naive, rudimentary critique of psychoanalysis’, which, if it is indeed the ‘work’ of Bakhtin, represents what is irremediably ‘alien’ to Kristeva (Al Mualla 1995: 7). Kristeva’s nostalgia for linear succession in the history of theory is complete in the implication that a
Bakhtin who cannot be forced to seek resolution of the crisis of representation in the depths of the Freudian unconscious is, like Formalism before him, a ‘stage that has been passed’, a corpse in the desert, from which meagre sustenance might be stripped for the long voyage into the post-structuralist void.

Three

This journey – as the relationship between the Soviet 1920s and the rise of theory in the West in the 1960s and 1970s might have led us to expect, even if the evidence of the last 30 years had not provided such dramatic confirmation – did not proceed along the lines anticipated by Kristeva. ‘Word, Dialogue, and Novel’ originated in an invitation to present a seminar paper extended by Roland Barthes, who was introduced to Bakhtin’s work for the first time by Kristeva. Barthes had previously defined structuralism simply as ‘a way of analysing cultural artefacts that originates in the methods of linguistics’ (cited in Culler 1983: 78), and had insisted that ‘the linguist is not responsible for deciphering the sentence’s meaning but for establishing the formal structure that permits this meaning to be transmitted’ (Barthes 1972: 256–7).

These positions underpin Barthes’ most significant work to that point, ‘Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives’, first published in French in 1966, which might also be described, with certain reservations, as his last work of ‘pure’ structuralism (Barthes 1977: 79–124). The work that is most closely associated with the inauguration of the post-structuralist age, S/Z, emerged from a seminar conducted by Barthes through 1968 and 1969, and, while it would be premature to associate the shift in Barthes’ thinking with his encounter with (Kristeva’s) Bakhtin, it is nonetheless possible to identify S/Z as confirmation of a certain trajectory in Barthes, which can be traced forward to two 1973 essays, the published fruit of Barthes’ research programme for 1970–1971. ‘The Division of Languages’ and ‘The War of Languages’ propose an entirely different conception, among much else, of the relationship between linguistic and literary or narrative analysis:

Confronting discourse, linguistics has remained, one might say, at a Newtonian stage: it has not yet experienced its Einsteinian revolution; it has not yet theorized the linguist’s place in the field of observation.

(Barthes 1986b: 118)

Linguistics, which is concerned only with messages, could say nothing […] but what is very simple, very banal; it would by no means exhaust the meaning of [an] expression.

(Barthes 1986a: 106)

These remarks preface Barthes’ embarkation in pursuit of what Todorov, in definition of Bakhtin’s central project, would later term ‘translinguistics’. Barthes’ immediate concern within this broad area is the stratification of any given national idiom:
Linguists know that a national idiom [. . .] includes a certain number of species; but the specification which has been studied is geographic (dialects, patois), not social; doubtless such a thing is postulated, though minimized, reduced to ‘fashions’ of expression (argots, jargons, pidgins); and in any case, it is assumed, idiomatic unity is reconstituted on the level of the speaker [. . .] This construction [. . .] nicely corresponds to a certain ideology – from which Saussure himself was not exempt – which sets, on one side, society (idiom, language) and, on the other, individual (idiolect, style).

(Barthes 1986b: 112)

This can be related to Kristeva’s ‘Word, Dialogue, and Novel’ and yet more clearly to ‘The Ruin of a Poetics’, in which her beguilement by the ‘subject of psycho-analysis’, her insistent conception of discursive practice in terms both of ‘doubling’ and, potentially, erasure, does not of course blind her to the ‘plurivocity’ of discourse in Bakhtin:

The word/discourse does not have a fixed meaning (the syntactic and semantic unity are shattered by the voices and accents of the ‘others’); it does not have a fixed user in order to maintain the fixity of the meaning [. . .]; it has no unitary listener to hear it [. . .]. The word/discourse is scattered in a thousand facets, in a multiplicity of contexts.

(Kristeva 1973: 109)

In a sense, ‘The Ruin of a Poetics’ thus signals its own alternative or ‘surplus’ (albeit harnessed for the moment to what will turn out to be the negation of that surplus, psychoanalysis).

The roots of both these positions can, however, be observed in Bakhtin’s earlier, if by now extremely familiar description of the mechanics of stratification:

The centripetal forces of the life of language (embodied in a ‘unitary language’) act in the midst of an actual [immanent] heteroglossia. At every given moment of its becoming, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects [. . .] but also, and this is the essential point, into socio-ideological languages: the languages of social groupings, ‘professional’ languages, ‘generic’ languages, the languages of different generations, etc. From this point of view, the literary language is itself just one of these ‘languages of heteroglossia’, and is in its turn stratified into various languages. [. . .] Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject is a point susceptible to both centripetal and centrifugal forces. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and separation intersect in the concrete utterance, which satisfies the demands of its ‘own’ language as an individualized embodiment of speech, but which also serves heteroglossia, in which it is an active participant.

(Bakhtin 1981: 271–2: trans. modified)

This convergence of analysis is, tellingly, accompanied by an important shift in another aspect of Barthes’ conception of language: where he is elsewhere consistent
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in his determination to oppose speech and writing. Barthes here joins Bakhtin in proclaiming that it is uniquely literature which offers access to the stratified language produced by conflicting discourses, and proceeds to differentiate the novelistic practice of Balzac, Flaubert and Proust in terms of their respective techniques for the incorporation and representation of ‘social languages’. Barthes’ exemplification of how the ‘division of languages’ is accessible to us on the material of Balzac, Flaubert and Proust thus parallels Bakhtin’s exemplification of the dialogism that is initiated by the penetration into the text of ‘social heteroglossia’ on the material of Dostoevsky and Dickens.

For Barthes, the point at which the conflicting imperatives of the social and the individual meet, where we can ‘observe’ as idiom and idiolect collide, ‘has a name [. . .] it is the Text’ (Barthes 1986a: 110). The Text, or the practice of writing (and of reading), is, as Barthes remarks elsewhere, the ‘methodological field’ which has usurped sociolinguistic analysis with regard to a stratified/divided language (Barthes 1977: 157). This bears a remarkable similarity to Bakhtin’s description, given earlier, of the point of convergence (and conflict) of the demands of the speaker’s ‘own’ individualized language and those of social heteroglossia. Bakhtin is quite explicit that these forces are present and active in the ‘real life’ of speech, but he is also clear that a certain kind of literary production affords us access to the effects of these forces, and this he calls Novel. Questioning whether there is a single plane upon which all the diverse ‘languages’ of heteroglossia can be juxtaposed, Bakhtin gives the following remarkable answer:

There is in fact a common plane [obshchaia ploskost’] which methodologically justifies our juxtaposition: [. . .] the languages of heteroglossia [. . .] can all be juxtaposed, complement one another, contradict one another, be dialogically interrelated. [. . .] they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of people, first and foremost in the creative consciousness of novelists.

(Bakhtin 1981: 291–2; trans. modified)

Whatever their substantive differences, Bakhtin’s Novel shares the fundamental status Barthes accords to the Text: it, too, is the most appropriate ‘methodological field’ for a project that has exceeded the resources of sociolinguistics, a perennially evolving body of source material which does not so much describe as embody the stratifying and ultimately dialogizing processes of social heteroglossia.

Barthes even appears to share Bakhtin’s recognition that the concrete practice of writing has been rather more limited in this respect than might have been hoped, and that, despite an undeclared contrary belief, the likes of Flaubert and Dostoevsky remain more apparently exceptional than the implied universality of this conception of discourse would suggest. Other writers, Barthes argues, have remained ‘outside’ the language represented in their fiction, despite the ‘perspicacity’ with which that language has been observed, ‘in other words, contrary to the acquisitions of modern, relativist science, the observer does not utter his place in the observation [. . .] the language observed is monologic’ (Barthes 1986b: 115).
And Barthes is no less clear about the nature of the alternative to this ‘monologism’, in fact or at some unspecified future point, on the other side of an anticipated revolution of the word: ‘only writing can mix languages [. . .], can constitute what is called a heterology of knowledge, can give language a festive dimension’ (Barthes 1986a: 110).

It may be superfluous to point out that hétérologie is the most accurate French term for Bakhtin’s raznoiazychie [heteroglossia], and that the French word that provokes the term ‘festive’ in Richard Howard’s translation of Barthes is in fact carnivalesque (Barthes 1994: 1613).17

Four

Whilst acknowledging the treacherous ease with which Bakhtin has too often been ‘burdened with the credit for having [. . .] always already anticipated and surpassed the most significant theoretical trends of recent decades’ (Shepherd 1989: 91), it is difficult on this analysis to resist the notion that the heightened vogue Bakhtin enjoyed in the 1980s and 1990s was fuelled by this definition of him as a post-structuralist before his time. John Sturrock is even prepared to make the explicit claim that Bakhtin’s and/or Medvedev’s critique of Russian Formalism ‘inaugurate[s] the age of post-Structuralism’ (Sturrock 1993: 136), while Vitalii Makhlin, working in a different tradition and with an entirely different theoretical motivation, argues that Bakhtin had effectively problematised structuralism ‘even before its appearance’ (Makhlin 1992: 209). This, consistent with the figures of paradox, shift and non-linear succession that have driven the current essay, implies not only an alternative to straightforward, positivist models of direct filiation or ‘influence’, but also a quite particular effect of that non-linearity. Bakhtin, in other words, was partially and indirectly instrumental in conditioning the context of his own reception.

This is exemplified in the work of Kristeva’s compatriot and Barthes’ student and later colleague, Tzvetan Todorov, whose attitude towards the legacy of Formalism is very different to that of Kristeva. For Todorov – whether in 1965, when his collection of Formalist writings was published in French translation (Todorov 1965), or in the 1970s, when the Formalists remain of live significance for western literary theory (Todorov 1974) and poetics itself is the object of a desired ‘renaissance’ (Todorov 1973) – Formalism may not provide in ready-made form all of the resources required to contain Bakhtin’s and Kristeva’s ‘crisis of representation’, but neither is it merely a ‘stage that has been passed’. Rather than reach for a conceptual framework that will immediately deny the terms of any referentiality, Todorov returns to the problematic that, for Medvedev and Bakhtin, is emblematic of the ‘failure’ of Formalism; if it is indeed Medvedev’s The Formal Method – as opposed to Barthes’ S/Z – that ‘inaugurate[s] the age of post-Structuralism’, then the problem that defines that age is the problem of genre.

Todorov’s 1978 book Genres du discours, published in English translation in 1990, approaches the problem from the precise standpoint we have associated with Tynianov and Vinogradov, questioning the security of the boundaries between literature and non-literature, and examining first the latter, the coherence of which we
have been guilty of ‘taking for granted’ (Todorov 1990: 9). Todorov, like Barthes, bases a theory of textuality on a renovated theory of language: ‘language produces sentences; but sentences are only the point of departure of discursive functioning. Sentences are articulated among themselves and uttered in a given sociocultural context; they are transformed into utterances, and language is transformed into discourse’ (Todorov 1990: 9).

Todorov goes on to claim that ‘there is no reason to limit [the] notion of genre to literature alone; outside of literature the situation is no different’ (Todorov 1990: 10); in a momentary retreat ‘within’ literature, however, he is unable ‘to discover a common denominator for all “literary” productions (unless it is language use)’ (Todorov 1990: 10).

We can observe the precise point of continuity between Barthes and Todorov in Barthes’ earlier identification of a key concomitant of his ‘divided’ language (discourse): ‘every sociolect involves “obligatory rubrics”, great stereotyped forms outside which the clientele of this sociolect cannot speak (cannot think)’ (Barthes 1986b: 123).

Todorov utilises these ‘obligatory rubrics’ in the search for something more meaningful than ‘language use’ as transgressient to the literary and non-literary domains:

Each type of discourse usually labelled literary has non-literary ‘relatives’ that are closer to it than any other types of ‘literary’ discourse. For example, certain instances of lyric poetry and prayer have more rules in common than that same poetry and the historical novel of the War and Peace variety. Thus the opposition between literature and non-literature gives way to a typology of discourses.

(Todorov 1990: 11)

This constitutes the basis, for Todorov, of a coherent field of study, for the time being parcelled out among semanticists and literary critics, sociolinguists and ethnologists, philosophers of language and psychologists [. . .]; in it, poetics will give way to the theory of discourse and to the analysis of its genres.

(Todorov 1990: 12)

This could of course be traced back to Voloshinov’s Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, in which he crowns the Bakhtin school’s theory of discourse, somewhat in the manner of Barthes, by turning his attention to its developmental significance: ‘a common social psychology is mainly given in the extremely diverse forms of the “utterance”, in the form of small speech genres, both inner and outer, which up to this time have not been studied at all’ (Voloshinov 1986: 20; trans. modified).

We have glimpsed in the first section of this essay the initial course of development to which this programmatic statement was subjected in the triangular polemic between Tynianov, Vinogradov and the Bakhtin school, which in other
circumstances might indeed have been regarded as evidence of a broader ‘school’ or ‘movement’; but it was left to Bakhtin, in the netherworld of the end of the Stalin period at the beginning of the 1950s, to indicate the direction in which these insights might have developed. Discussing the reasons why ‘the general problem of speech genres has never been formulated’, Bakhtin reminds us:

It is the literary genres that have most often been studied. But [ . . . ] they have been studied on the basis of their literary-artistic specificity, in their differentiation from one another (within the bounds of literature), and not as definite types of utterance which differ from other types, but which share with them a common verbal (linguistic) nature.

(Bakhtin 1986: 61; trans. modified)

The sense in which Bakhtin prefigures Todorov is clear, and becomes quite compelling in the following:

It is particularly important here to turn our attention to the essential (but not functional) distinction between primary (simple) and second-order (complex) speech genres. The second-order (complex) speech genres – novels, drama, scientific research of all kinds, the larger publicistic genres, etc. – arise in conditions of more complex and relatively highly developed and organised cultural intercourse (largely in written form): artistic, scientific, and socio-political. In the process of their formation they absorb into themselves and re-work various primary (simple) genres, which arose in conditions of direct verbal intercourse. These primary genres, on entering into the structure of the complex, are transformed and acquire a particular character: they lose their direct relation to [reality] and to the real utterances of others; for example, a [sample] of domestic dialogue or a letter in a novel, while preserving its form and domestic meaning only on the plane of the content of the novel, enters into actual reality only through the novel as a whole, that is as a literary-artistic event and not one of domestic life.

(Bakhtin 1986: 61–2; trans. modified)

Compare Todorov:

Three possibilities may be envisaged [ . . . ]: either the genre, like the sonnet, codifies discursive properties as any other speech act would; or else the genre coincides with a speech act that also has a non-literary existence, like prayer; or else it derives from a speech act by way of a certain number of transformations or amplifications (this would be the case for the novel, based on the act of telling). Only the third case actually presents a new situation: in the first two cases, a genre does not differ in any way from other speech acts. In the third case, on the contrary, we do not take discursive properties as a starting point, but we start rather with other already constituted speech acts, in a progression from a simple act to a complex one. This third case, too, is the only one that warrants
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being set apart from the other verbal actions. Thus our question about the origin of genres becomes the following: what transformations do given speech acts undergo in order to produce given literary genres?

(Todorov 1990: 21)

The striking similarities between Bakhtin’s and Todorov’s conception of how raw, ‘simple’ verbal material is transformed into the developed or ‘complex’, specifically within the frame of generic evolution, bear (at least) two very different explanations, both of which relate to our consistent concern with theoretical filiation and the sense in which the history of theory remains unwritten.

Bakhtin’s essay was written in 1952–1953, but remained unpublished until an extract appeared in 1978, followed by a ‘complete’ version in 1979. Both the need for caution regarding its completeness and its continuity with ‘Discourse in the Novel’ – written in 1933–1934, but not published in full until 1975 – were confirmed by Bakhtin himself in a 1966 interview, in which, following his rediscovery and the publication of Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics and Rabelais and his World, he claimed that another book would be complete in the summer of that year, from which an extract, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, had already been published in the journal Voprosy literatury in 1965 (see Bakhtin 1966). ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’ was an explicit return to the ground of ‘Discourse in the Novel’, which was itself forged in the truncated polemics of the late 1920s. Todorov was intimately familiar with the material published in 1975 and 1979, which became the basis for his 1981 book Mikhail Bakhtin: le principe dialogique (published in English translation in 1984). Genres in Discourse was, however, originally published in French in 1978, and was written, as Todorov tells us in his ‘Prefatory Note’, ‘between 1971 and 1977’ (1990: vii). It remains possible to conjecture that the consanguinity we have seen earlier may be explained by Todorov’s exposure to one or other variant of ‘Discourse in the Novel’, from which, abetted by the uneven rise of sociolinguistics over the intervening period, he was able to make extrapolations about the nature of discourse and its implications for (literary) genre that turn out to be parallel to those that led, 25 years before, to the unpublished ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’.19

There is however an alternative possibility, in which ‘Discourse in the Novel’ plays only an incidental role, and which invites us to imagine a history of theory poised – like Bakhtin himself, perhaps – between the implied teleological closure of Hegelianism and the radical openness of the dialogic. This is to imagine that it is Todorov’s broad familiarity with the problematics on which Formalism broke its teeth, and in which the developmental potential of the dialogues between Tynianov, Vinogradov and Bakhtin are grounded, that programmes the belated convergence we have observed. The encounter between Formalist and Marxist variants of pseudo-scientific positivism of the 1920s dialectically begets the not-quite-synthetic, ‘open’ not-quite programme Bakhtin and Vinogradov haul onto the unprepossessing territory of the Soviet 1930s. And this encounter is repeated in the 1960 and 1970s, in all but complete ignorance of the lengths to which distant ‘predecessors’ had progressed, as structuralism invents and then disavows itself. Kristeva, as we have seen – and in an act of the greatest implicit positivism –
characterises these encounters as sequential; Todorov is uniquely in a position to understand them as parallel—or even as synchronic, despite all conventional evidence to the contrary. Todorov is not primarily ‘influenced’ by Bakhtin, but rather by the same matrix of problems that Bakhtin and his colleagues and opponents encountered, developed and subsequently bequeathed.

If Todorov’s relationship with the theoretical past implies the need for a re-imagining of time and sequence, in which the ostensible alternatives ‘sequential’ and ‘parallel’ dissolve into one another and are supplanted by the sense of radical openness which defines the limits of the Bakhtinian project, the same is true for his relationship to his own theoretical present. While Barthes did not go on to write a book devoted specifically to Bakhtin, he is just as significant a moment in Todorov’s ‘Bakhtinianism’ as Tynianov or Vinogradov. This is manifest, as we have already seen, in the conjunction in Barthes’ thinking between the ‘division’ or ‘war’ of languages and an entirely reconceived approach to the problem of genre: rather than Bakhtin’s later writings providing a ‘missing link’ between the Formalist legacy and a (recurring) problematisation of Structuralism, it is in fact Barthes who reconnects Todorov, not to Formalism’s prior introduction of a series of fundamental problems in literary study, but rather to the point at which potential solutions to those problems begin to emerge from the surface partisanship of the 1920s (which is later entrenched in equally partisan constructions of its ‘history’). It is Barthes, in the act of attempting to go beyond the Structuralist paradigm, and partly as a result of mediated exposure to Bakhtin, who confirms once and for all that even the knight’s move, advanced in order to renew our sense of literary succession, is an inadequate—or incomplete—figure for the play of the history of theory.

Conclusion

If the limits of the Bakhtinian project are defined by a sense of radical openness, then it is at least ironic that those limits could not be comprehensively challenged within, as Bakhtin himself expresses it, ‘the immanent circle of literary studies. There must be a way out to other worlds’ (Bocharov 1993: 72). This does not simply concern Bakhtin’s problematic and ‘unfinalised’ relationship to literary studies, which in fact turns out to be a symptom of a cause that has been present throughout, and which can be most clearly identified by returning to Jakobson’s sarcastic, apophatic definition of literaturnost (Jakobson 1979: 305–6 and above). Todorov, as we have seen, later reflects that Jakobson’s ostensible exclusionism (ostensible, because linguistics is not thereby ‘excluded’) has prompted literary studies, in a repeated enactment of its own validity, ‘not to study that which is not properly literary’ (Todorov 1973: 463). Latterly, however, in precisely the period we have identified as ‘post-structuralist’, Literary studies has often appeared determined to study anything but what is ‘properly literary’, embarking on a series of one-sided engagements with precisely those disciplines Jakobson identifies as implicit threats—Philosophy and Psychology, latterly augmented by Political theory, Sociology and Anthropology. What is encoded in Jakobson’s ‘history of culture’ is even more germane, as history has borne increasingly on literary study (beyond its former
enclosure in the ‘history of literature’), and ‘cultural history’ has become the territory on which the scholar of literature and the historian might become indistinguishable. In a parallel and entirely consistent process, of course, ‘literary theory’ has ceded its place to ‘cultural theory’; literature becomes no more than simply a domain of culture.

A positive reading of this process would remark, as indeed did Barthes at the moment of post-structuralist succession, on the glittering promises of the new interdisciplinarity, which ‘is not the calm of an easy security, [but] begins effectively (as opposed to the mere expression of a pious wish) when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down’ (Barthes 1977: 155). The difficulty, however, is that when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down in an environment driven by the imperatives of struggle, the ensuing contest – the ‘war of disciplines’, to paraphrase Barthes – between disciplines of varying institutional purchase (which may be related also to variously motivated fluctuations in ‘vogue’) must produce casualties as well as victors. Jakobson’s prophecy may have come true, as Literary Studies has consented, in essence, to being colonised by its neighbouring disciplines – or, worse, to colonising itself on their behalf. Marjorie Garber describes this phenomenon as ‘discipline envy’, a condition she diagnoses in Literary Studies more than any other discipline (Garber 2001). Indeed, Garber’s analysis invokes without recognising Jakobson’s earlier caution: ‘If, at the beginning of any discipline’s self-definition, it undertakes to distinguish itself from another, “false” version of itself, that difference is always going to come back to haunt it’ (Garber 2001: 57).

This is the proper context in which to view recent prognostications of the ‘death of theory’ – too numerous and, in certain cases, fatuous to catalogue. Torn between the invidious choice of a now patently unsustainable ‘immanent’ approach and the charms of interdisciplinary re-animation, Literary Studies has found itself too often stranded on no-man’s land, seeking solace in a return to ‘traditional’ literary scholarship or practising interdisciplinarity as little more in fact than a ‘pious wish’. And ‘theory’ has been fatally associated with both terms of that choice, in a mendant re-enactment of the foundational – and inevitably false – polarisation between ‘immanence’ (Formalism) and contextualisation (biographical, historical, social, ideological criticism). The former was seen in the end to promise nothing more than a long and inevitable desuetude; the latter – the diminished institutional and intellectual status routinely afforded to the (self-)colonised. What looked like a perfectly defensible direction of travel at the moment of literary theory’s modern foundation – and absolutely consistent with Formalism’s bid for ‘local’ hegemony among various critical positions in the Soviet 1920s – turns out, at a moment when conceptions of Literary Studies as a sovereign, autonomous discipline and of ‘literary theory’ as a viable descriptor have receded to the farthest horizon, to have contained the seeds of disciplinary destruction from the very outset. The establishment of Literary Studies as a theoretically and institutionally autonomous ‘discipline’ appears in hindsight as a curious form of intellectual protectionism, which, albeit later rather than sooner, would fatally harm the economy of the discipline it was designed to protect. So when, to paraphrase Tynianov, we speak of ‘the history of theory’ – and, moreover, in a manner that seeks to avoid meek acquiescence in diagnosis of its
demise – we are required above all else to seek some form of equilibrium between rejection of the protectionism of literary theory’s founding moment and engagement with cognate disciplines in ways that do not programme subsidiarity from the very outset.

The key to how we might pursue this equilibrium is latent, and sometimes quite explicit, in the various theoretical positions the present essay has sought to connect and inter-animate. Tynianov’s foundational theory of genre, developed by Bakhtin and Vinogradov and unevenly inherited by Barthes and Todorov, defines literary evolution as a process in which what is not literature, from speech to various functionally defined written forms, is incorporated and transformed in the literary genres, thereby, in turn, transforming and re-defining not only individual genres, but the entire system of what is accepted as ‘literary’ genre. This implies an evolving, complex and intimate relationship between literature and the social and ideological contexts that produce and determine non-literary written and oral forms, and establishes genre as the mechanism by which the effects of that relationship are perceptible. Genre thus plays a fundamental role not just in the evolution of literature, but also and therefore in successive determinations of what literature is – the question from which Formalism begins, and to which Tynianov and his successors provide an entirely different answer to the one implied by specification and literaturnost’.

An unremarked consequence of this – although it is implicit throughout the work we have examined – is that ‘what is not literature’ in disciplinary terms might be ranged alongside the oral and written forms associated with ‘life’ or ‘society’; and this allows us, within the broad frame of the role of genre in the evolution of literature, to pose the question of how the substance and discourse of other disciplines have been incorporated and transformed in the literary genres, and to chart the impact these processes have had on literary studies as a discipline. In short, to examine the evolution of genre in close relation to the evolution of discipline, or, yet more radically, to think for a time about discipline in some of the ways literary scholars have thought about genre.

It is immediately clear that this proposition is aimed towards the reversal of the process of self-colonisation implied by ‘discipline envy’. Barthes’ theory of the Text, Bakhtin’s Novel – even Kristeva’s intertextuality – can all be seen as preparing what is made explicit in Todorov’s anticipation: that ‘poetics’ will eventually ‘give way to the theory of discourse and to the analysis of its genres’ (Todorov 1990: 12). The discourse of History (as a discipline), of Philosophy, Political theory and Psychology may be regarded, in the ultimate projection of interdisciplinarity and consistent with the alternative, positive sense Garber attaches to ‘enjoy’ – emulation –, as generic forms of an entirely reconceived ‘literature’. If the knight’s move is indeed not the move of the ‘coward’, then Literary Studies’ radical response to the protectionism on which it was founded and the subsidiarity into which it has fallen must be to theorise discipline in a manner that might balance the demands of literary specificity and the co-extensive verbal generality of all forms of text.
Notes

1 Mothers, daughters, aunts and nieces would not figure in the thinking of any of the leading literary critics and theorists of the period in Soviet Russia.

2 For a thoroughgoing, and timely, re-assessment of Shklovskian ostranenie and its influence, see Boym 2005 and 2006, the former of which contains the original publication of Boym’s essay in the current volume.

3 For various approaches to the paradoxes – or indeed opportunities – of the late 1920s, see Galushkin 2000, Kujundžič 1997, Nikolaev 2004 and Renfrew 2006.

4 It is here Jakobson insists that, in order to become a ‘science’, literary studies must declare its only ‘hero’ to be the device (Jakobson 1979: 306), the unacknowledged prompt for Bakhtin’s later rejoinder that only genre can meaningfully fulfil this role (Bakhtin 1981: 8).

5 Voloshinov openly polemicised with Vinogradov in Voloshinov 1930a and 1930b; explicit examples of polemic with Vinogradov are scattered thinly throughout the work of Bakhtin, notably Bakhtin 1981 and 1984. For a pioneering study of the relationship between Bakhtin and Vinogradov, see Perlina 1988.

6 Cited from Aleksandr Chudakov’s commentary to Vinogradov 1980.

7 The charge is not a new one, originating in 1924 in ‘The Problem of Content, Material and Form’ (Bakhtin 1990: 261).

8 Provisionally entitled ‘Literatura i ustnaia slovesnost’, the contents of this book are reconstructed in Vinogradov 1980: 326–33.

9 Vinogradov argues that this has been shown by Karl Vossler, presumably in The Spirit of Language in Civilization, first published in German in 1925.

10 Voloshinov emphasises Vinogradov’s role in an ‘acute methodological struggle’ in contemporary literary studies (Voloshinov 1930b: 233; my emphasis), a struggle that is intimately related to Voloshinov’s – undeveloped – identification of ‘speech genres’ (Voloshinov 1986: 20). Compare Vinogradov’s own conciliatory attitude towards the then deceased Tynianov in the 1950s, long after the disciplinary struggle had lost much of its force (Vinogradov 1969).

11 This also provides us with the essential distinction between ‘intertextuality’ and dialogism, the confusion of which Kristeva has done more than anyone to promote: even if we allow that intertextuality does not in any sense depend on or absolutely imply ‘absence’, dialogism does depend upon – absolutely implies – a conception of the text as an embodied mediation of lived and living experience.

12 This is somewhat undermined, in turn, by Kristeva’s insistence that Bakhtin’s ‘interpersonal other’ is ‘the “other” of Hegelian consciousness [. . .]. I more or less turned the “Hegelian” Bakhtin into a “Freudian” Bakhtin. [. . .] [Bakhtin] is dialectic’ (Al Mualla 1995: 7).

13 The irony of this is brought out in Lesic-Thomas 2005, which, notwithstanding the occasional hostage to fortune, is uncommonly sensitive to the paradoxes of the history of theory.

14 Although see also ‘The Struggle with the Angel’ (Barthes 1977: 125–41), a segment of a book on biblical exegesis published in French in 1971.


16 See for example the late, reflective ‘Une sorte de travail manuel’ [1977], in Barthes 1994: 678–9, where Barthes admits that ‘I have long been inclined to oppose theoretically speech and writing [. . .] I am today less sure of this opposition. [. . .] But like any liberal, having once expressed the respect which is due to difference, I return to my vice’. Barthes explicitly attributes this later uncertainty to Flaubert and Gide. See also ‘Writing and Speech’ (in Barthes 1984: 66–9), which is strikingly close to both Tynianov and Bakhtin on the renewal of literature through the incorporation of speech.
I am indebted to Karine Zbinden for pointing out this coincidence of terms.

Todorov will later, explicitly following Bakhtin, develop a post-Aristotelian distinction between classes of object of representation, emphasising the primacy of ‘representation of discourse’ over ‘representation of the world’ (Todorov 1984).

This is of course to ignore, if only provisionally, the wealth of possible lines of ‘conventional’ historical inquiry, which might establish Friedrich Schlegel as a shared influence on both Todorov and Bakhtin; indeed, Todorov diagnoses in Bakhtin a ‘massive and uncritical borrowing’ from Schlegel (Todorov 1984: 86), to whom explicit reference is limited to the general question of Romantic irony (Bakhtin 1990: 39) and the grotesque (Bakhtin 1984: 37, 41–2).

The other line of potential influence is the speech act theory of Austen and Searle, which Todorov encounters through Bruss 1974 and Stierle 1972 (the latter of whom relies upon and critiques Jolles 1972). See also Bruss 1976.

Although we must not, on a more prosaic level, lose sight of the irony of Todorov following not Barthes, but Kristeva in all but equating ‘dialogism’ and ‘intertextuality’ (Todorov 1984).

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