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Author(s): Ann Shukman

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Soviet Semiotics and Literary Criticism

Ann Shukman

E VOLUTION, wrote Tynyanov, “does not go by plan but by leaps and bounds; it is not a development, but a dislocation.” For nearly a generation from the end of the 1920s there was no speculative or theoretical thinking about literature in the Soviet Union. The great debates of the twenties were stilled. The formalist theoreticians turned to textual scholarship (Eikhenbaum, Tomashevsky, Vinogradov), to the cinema and journalism (Shklovsky, Osip Brik), or to the novel (Tynyanov). Socialist realism had won the day, and its doctrine lay like a heavy stratum over the once rich and varied seams of independent speculative thought. The decade up to the war did, however, produce some isolated works of originality and brilliance (from the scholars who worked with the linguist N. Ya. Marr), and the great tradition of stylistics continued, putting into the practice of Pushkin scholarship the theoretical insights of the previous decade. Bakhtin, too, worked on, though his major works of this period were not to see the light until many years later.

Evolution, said Tynyanov, is an interrupted line. The evolution he had in mind, the sudden flowering of Russian literature in the nineteenth century, was an organic process that owed little to outside pressures. The evolution of Russian literary theory in the twentieth century, however, has suffered its jolts, interruptions, and dislocations at the hands of a Stalin, a Zhdanov, or a Suslov; it is a process deliberately thwarted and, for a time at least, wholly suppressed.

The reemergence of literary theory in the early sixties came about in a quite unexpected and uniquely Soviet way. If certain areas are sensitive to investigation, or even taboo, the energy of speculative thought will be deflected into areas which are neutral, perhaps “scientific,” or even technologically useful. It was by such a deflection into science and technology that a whole new and original school of literary semiotics came into being in the Soviet Union.

In the vacuum left in Soviet intellectual life after the death of Stalin and the lack of strict ideological control, certain long-neglected subjects such as pure logic and theoretical linguistics began by the end of the 1950s once more to burgeon. This process was hastened by the new technological needs of cybernetics, machine translation, and

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communications theory. The technological demands opened the door to new theory as well as practice. The movement snowballed: mathematicians, logicians, cyberneticists, and theoretical linguists grasped at the opportunities that opened before them. Interest quickly passed from practical language to that epitomized and multi-valent phenomenon of language that is literature and which, besides, for every Russian, is supreme bearer of cultural value. The semiotics movement, as an offshoot of linguistics (in the Hjelmslevian tradition) and of communications theory (the works of Shannon were widely cited), seemed to offer the theoretical and practical framework with which to return to the theoretical study of literature and the other arts.

Soviet semiotics has continued to bear the marks of its origins. On the one hand it has maintained its links with technology and practical issues: the understanding of culture in terms of information theory as a communications network, a general concern with statistics, with quantification, with the logical and mathematical expression of relationships—all this has continued. So, too, has the emphasis on function rather than on essence, on empirical and historical evidence rather than on purely abstract constructs. (It is perhaps for this reason that there have been very few purely theoretical studies.) On the other hand, Soviet semiotics has maintained the universalist traits of its origins: in the stifled conditions of Soviet intellectual life, semiotics arose as virtually the *only* voice to concern itself seriously with problems of culture and the theory of the arts. It then came to claim *all* fields of culture as its domain and hence cultural universals as its central topic.

Broadly speaking, the semiotics movement went through three main periods of development:

1. The first years, when semiotics attracted mostly specialists in linguistics and allied subjects, the years of experimentation and technological commitment. This period included the Moscow Symposium on the structural study of sign systems of 1962 which was attended by many scholars of very varied disciplines. Semiotics at this time was not clearly demarcated from linguistics.

2. The establishment of the Moscow-Tartu semiotics group, 1964–1970. From 1964 regular biennial summer schools have been run by Tartu University. During this period Soviet semiotics developed some of its marked features: the concentration on “secondary modeling systems,” i.e., those cultural systems (literature, the arts) which are “secondary” in relation to language, which is held to be the “primary” modeling system. Linguistics as such is largely excluded from consideration. This second period was predominantly con-

cerned with the study of particular cultural systems (myth, ritual, religion, as well as folklore and the arts) rather than with cultural universals. The leading figures of the Moscow-Tartu group are Yu. M. Lotman, Vyach. Vs. Ivanov, V. N. Toporov, B. A. Uspensky, and A. M. Piatigorsky, among others.

3. The period since 1970. This period has been marked by bolder speculative thinking on the nature of culture as a whole and on the question of cultural universals. This has been accompanied by increasing interest on the part of members of the group with the history of Russia and specifically Russian topics.

The development of the semiotics movement was accompanied by a gradual change in the intellectual climate. Since the early sixties there has been a quiet reassessment of intellectual antecedents, in particular of the theoretical thinkers of the twenties. An outstanding feature of the work of the Moscow-Tartu group has been its work in publishing, or being instrumental in publishing, outstanding works of the past. Under the aegis of Ivanov, for instance, Bakhtin's *Rabelais* and Vygotzky's *Psychology of Art* have appeared. The formalists were boldly reassessed by Zholkovsky and Shcheglov in the Tartu semiotics journal. Lotman has revived interest in the Marrists. In this way the semiotics movement has been not only innovative but also a consolidating and stabilizing force in intellectual life, a leading force in the response to the dislocation of the Stalinist years. By the early 1970s, in spite of the criticism of an entrenched rear guard and the snipings of a quasi-Marxist, quasi-structuralist branch of literary officialdom, literary criticism in the mainstream of the traditions of the twenties is again possible. Most of the major works of the formalists have been republished; formalism again is a topic for discussion, no longer just a term of abuse. The semiotics movement was not alone responsible for this change in climate, but it has provided some of the impetus for reassessment and, by its very modernity, also provided the perspective against which the past traditions can be measured. If works such as those by Bocharov and Chudakov are not an offshoot of the semiotics movement, at least the possibility for their publication is due to the changed atmosphere that obtains today, a change in which the semiotics movement was a spearhead.

Soviet semiotics has certain features that distinguish it from its counterpart in the West. Although Soviet semioticians are conversant with developments in the West, and although their works are becoming increasingly well known, normal free intercourse and the exchange of ideas is still hampered. The leading figures of the Soviet movement have rarely, if at all, been allowed to attend international

meetings. But the particular bent that semiotics has taken in the Soviet Union is probably not due so much to this intellectual isolation as to the personalities and intellectual interests of the leaders of the group. From very early on semiotics attracted gifted scholars from many different disciplines and of particularly wide-ranging interests who frequently have made contributions in areas that are not within their professional field. Polymathy is almost a commonplace among Soviet semioticians.

V. N. Toporov, a linguist and Indo-Europeanist of international repute, includes among the enormous list of his published works studies in theoretical linguistics, on etymology, on the ancient languages of the world, on the Slavonic languages, on comparative religion and myths, as well as on Russian literature. Many of his works are written in collaboration with Vyach. Vs. Ivanov, a scholar of perhaps even vaster erudition and one of the leading spirits of the semiotics movement since its inception. Together, Ivanov and Toporov have written many studies of world mythology and have devised an elaborate theoretical apparatus for the reconstruction of proto-Slavonic texts. For both scholars semiotic theory is closely allied to its practical application: there is not only their reconstruction of the proto-Slavonic texts, but also their linguistic and ethnographical study of the nearly extinct Ket people of northern Siberia and their continuing interest in methodologies.

Toporov's interests latterly have turned increasingly to Russian literature (for example, the study included in this issue of *New Literary History*), and he brings to these analyses his skills as a comparatist as well as a semiotician. Ivanov's thinking has developed over the years from a strictly scientific approach (an understanding of semiotics as a branch of cybernetics, or as the study of the physiological and psychological mechanisms of human sign-making and sign-usage; his several studies on metrics in the light of probability theory) towards an increasing concern with the recent cultural history of his own country (his work for the reassessment and rehabilitation of Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and Eisenstein, for instance, whom he considers to be the true ancestors of modern Soviet semiotics). The study published here ("The Science of Semiotics"), which first appeared as the preface to the collected papers of the 1962 Symposium, well illustrates the scientific framework within which Ivanov envisaged semiotics during its first period.

A. M. Piatigorsky, now in London, brought to the semiotics group his learning as an orientalist specializing in Indian religions, and in particular Tantric Buddhism, as well as his interests in modern philosophy. One of the most original of the group, Piatigorsky, to-

gether with other orientalists such as L. Mäll, lent to Soviet semiotics a somewhat esoteric note, although at the same time their special knowledge gave added justification to the claims of the movement to speak in terms of cultural universals. Piatigorsky is the coauthor with the philosopher M. K. Mamardashvili of a remarkable study on the metatheory of consciousness which was published in the Tartu semiotics journal.

Two scholars of a more traditional cast and less exotic fields of interest are Yu. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspensky. Lotman, who is now probably the best-known member of the group in the West (see his works now available in English: *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, 1970 [Ann Arbor, 1977]; *The Analysis of the Poetic Text*, 1973 [Ann Arbor, 1976]; *The Semiotics of Cinema*, 1973 [Ann Arbor, 1976]; and many articles), is a specialist in Russian history, literature, and thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His most recent work, not yet published at the time of this writing, is an extensive commentary on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Lotman came to semiotics not from a background of linguistics or logic, as the other members of the group mostly did, but through a search for a precise methodology of literary science. "The Study of Literature Must Be a Science!" was the title of a programmatic article written in 1967. But science for Lotman was not so much the cybernetic model that it was for Ivanov, nor the aim of quantification, though these ambitions do occur in his writings, as it was a structuralist concept of literature as a hierarchical system, definable in terms of oppositional relationships. The discovery of structuralist phonology through the works of Trubetzkoy and Jakobson had for Lotman in the early sixties the same revolutionary effect as did the discovery of the phoneme for Lévi-Strauss in 1945. The concepts of structuralism have provided Lotman with the tools with which to advance a theory of poetic language, a theory of semantics, and typologies of literature and culture. The relationary mode of thinking that structuralism afforded gave to Lotman the means for an ever-expanding, if not always logically coherent, theorizing: the relationship of elements within a work, the relationship of one work to another, the relationship of literature to other arts in a given culture—these are the topics of Lotman's works. The relational mode of thinking has, however, in Lotman's case come to be tempered by a strong historicist tendency: increasingly he is concerned with the placing of culture in the time-space coordinates of a given historical period. Lotman has passed through the school of synchronic structuralism to return with new insights into what were his first preoccupations as a scholar, literary history and the problems of periodization. Literature in his latest works is treated as but one manifestation,

one code, of the cultural network of a given period; and the literary theme, or literary character, is examined in relation to the evidence of the historical context as examples of the typical behavior patterns of the epoch in question.

The close collaborator with Lotman in many studies, particularly on the semiotics of culture (as in the paper published here) and on Russian cultural history, is B. A. Uspensky, a theoretical linguist (see his *Principles of Structural Typology* [The Hague, 1968]), and an authority on the history of the Russian language, on Russian Orthodoxy and the sects, on the icon (see his *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon* [Lisse, 1976]). Uspensky is the author of what is perhaps the most interesting work by any of the Moscow-Tartu group on the theory of literature, the book entitled in English *A Poetics of Composition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973). This work is a development in semiotic terms of that approach to literary analysis worked out by Bakhtin and Voloshinov which takes the text as the starting point and looks at it first as an utterance, or series of separated or overlaid utterances. Uspensky in linguistic terms looks at the problem of text-composition (it may be a literary text or a pictorial one) as different levels of points of view. By taking the notion of point of view as the primary unit of analysis, Uspensky introduced the possibility of including the aspect of the perceiving and uttering subject within the structure of relationships. One of the original features of the work of the Moscow-Tartu group has been the development of this pragmatic aspect of semiotics (in Uspensky's, and Uspensky's and Piatigorsky's, studies of the personality factors of sign-usage, in Piatigorsky's studies of the psychology of sign-usage). In these and in other studies, the problem of the incorporation of the perceiver's (researcher's) position and the influence this has on the material being studied are serious issues.

Among other outstanding scholars associated with the semiotics group are the logician Yu. I. Levin; the Slavist D. S. Segal, now in Israel; Z. G. Mints and B. F. Egorov, specialists in Russian literature; the orientalist B. I. Ogibenin, now in Paris; the leading folklorist E. M. Meletinsky; and many others. The movement, conscious of being an elite, attracted the best brains of the period from many different disciplines.

Of the scholars represented here, I. I. Revzin (who died tragically in 1974) was one of the outstanding theoretical linguists of his generation (see his *Models of Language* [London, 1966]), who made several excursions into the field of literary theory and general questions of semiotics. A. K. Zholkovsky is a theoretical linguist who specializes in problems of structural and generative semantics. Most of Zholkovsky's works on literature have been written in collaboration with Yu. K.

Shcheglov. Together, they have devised a theory of “generative poetics,” a set of procedures (“expression devices”) by which a text is “generated” from the “theme” or semantic kernel. The notion of “theme” has been further developed in relation to what the authors term “poetic world,” i.e., that system of invariants that makes up the semantic field of operation of a given poet and of which the “theme” is a particular extrapolation. The “theme—expression devices—text” model, which the authors insist is a semantic theory and not a description of the creative process, has been tested on a wide range of material, from Sherlock Holmes stories, to Somali folklore, to poems by Pushkin and Mandelstam. Boris Gasparov, a theoretical linguist from Tartu University, has contributed papers on frequency dictionaries as well as on the semiotics of music.

The Soviet semiotics movement burst into the intellectual life of the Soviet Union as a trend that was modernist, technological, Western. It represented a new enlightenment and a rationalist positivism. It talked the language of computers, of codes, models, binary oppositions. It claimed to extend positivist knowledge over all fields of human activity. There was talk in the early days of computer poetry; and Revzin, for one, devised an algorithm to show how it could be done. Culture was held to be a system of information exchange, to be accessible to the sciences of communication theory and information theory. A “secondary modeling system,” though the term has never been precisely defined, at least implied a scientifically rigorous tripartite relationship between the sign system, the reality that it continuously models, and the sign-user. It is the notion of system, and of interrelated systems, that is central to Soviet semiotic thought. System is often used synonymously with “code,” a term which again carries the connotations of communications theory. It is a curious feature of much Soviet semiotic thinking that no clear distinction is made between the empirical meaning of a term and its abstract meaning, between, that is, the system itself and the principles that define it. Monism is one of the hallmarks of Soviet semiotic thought. In part at least this is due to the urgency of practicality that invests much Soviet writing: when Ivanov and Toporov made their studies of the nearly extinct Ket people, this was no mere exercise in abstract theory but a pressing task; when Lotman writes of the dynamic model of culture, the principles of his theory are intimately related to the history, the culture, and maybe even the future of his own country.

The Soviet semioticians found in the terminology and concepts of information and communications theory the framework for an approach to vaster problems than were ever envisaged by Shannon or

Wiener. It is sometimes disconcerting to find in Soviet writings an unannounced semantic slip from the use of a term in its precise sense to its use in a more speculative sense. This is true of their use of the term *system* and even more so in their use of the term *opposition*. The notion of the binary opposition common to most structuralist thought came into Soviet thinking from the binary principle of computer language and from the phonological notion of opposition, i.e., a strictly defined and logically exclusive relationship. The connotations of this background have been maintained in Soviet thinking, but the opposition has come to be understood in a far wider sense. It is the principle of meaning formation (a sign can only be understood against a background, sign and background forming an oppositional pair). It is the source of definitions and the analytical tool in the study of culture, which is defined in opposition to nonculture, as “that which is regulated” in opposition to “that which is not regulated”; cultures may be typologically classified by the opposition text-oriented versus expression-oriented, etc. (see the article by Lotman and Uspensky in this issue). Oppositional pairs are the primary organizing principle of human thought (top versus bottom, inner world versus outer world, etc. (see Toporov’s study of Dostoevsky). In these senses “opposition” has the meaning “created structure” and as such is an extremely far-reaching methodological ploy, though hardly the scientific term it was in its first meaning.

The idea of opposition led the way to speculative, comparatist thinking. Lotman, for instance, has latterly come full circle to what is in effect an antipositivist position: noncommunication, he suggests in his recent writings, is as essential a part of culture as is communication; nonunderstanding, aberrations from the system, “noise”—these are essentials in the dynamic functioning of any culture, in which self-communication too has a part. The notion of the opposition has in this way been the link between the technological voice, now largely abandoned, and the speculative theory of culture that is both more encompassing and more coherent. Curiously enough, too, it is through the comparatist and relational mode of thinking that Soviet semiotic procedures have come back to the mainstream of Russian historicist thought.

The great Russian philological tradition, from which the formalist movement sprang and in which Lotman and many other leading figures were nurtured, is committed to the study of literature both in its relation to language and in its relation to the total cultural context, the climate of opinion, the leading ideas, of its period. Language, literature, and thought in their historical development are the proper topics of philology. The Russian formalists of the 1920s—and this is an

aspect of their work often overlooked in the West—were deeply committed to the historicist conception of literature as a continuing process, an ever-changing interaction of the old and the new, of archaisms and innovations. “Pure synchronism,” wrote Jakobson and Tynyanov in 1928, “now turns out to be an illusion; every synchronic system has its own past and future as inseparable structural elements of the system.” These words could as well come from the Moscow-Tartu semioticians of today.

The Russian philological tradition has produced many outstanding scholars who have allied the study of historical trends with close textual study. One of the foremost living representatives of this tradition is the medievalist D. S. Likhachev, who has written standard works on textology and on the poetics of medieval Russian literature (where he treats the convention of time, of literary etiquette, of characterization, and so on). His works on genre theory are allied to his wide erudition as a comparatist within the field of Slavonic languages, literatures, and arts. Although not associated with the semiotic school, Likhachev has, like them, been a bold spokesman for clear thinking in literary studies, as well as for the conservation of the national heritage of art and architecture. The Russian philological tradition gave rise not only to the theoreticians of the formalist school, but also to the school of stylistics. Enriched by the ideas of the Bakhtin school of discourse analysis, this tradition of stylistics finds expression in the best of modern critical writing such as the studies included here by Chudakov and Bocharov. A text-oriented criticism that is allied to wide erudition is typical of this approach: Chudakov studies Chekhov’s philosophical ideas as they are presented in the text; Bocharov’s interpretation of *The Queen of Spades*, like his other studies of Pushkin, comes from strictly textual evidence allied to a deep knowledge of his field and period. A firm theoretical grounding, combined with insight and scholarship—these are the hallmarks of the best Russian thinking about literature.

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