

# English 782

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## **Brian McHale, ENGL 782, Spring 2002, Current Directions in Literary Study**

English 782, Current Directions in Literary Study  
Spring 2002, Tues. & Thurs. 7-9:50pm, 336 Stansbury  
The Formalist Tradition Revisited  
Instructor: Brian McHale  
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Office hours: Monday 2-4pm and by appointment

### **Objectives.**

This course aims to engage critically with the Russian Formalist legacy in twentieth-century literary and cultural theory. We will begin with the Moscow and St. Petersburg Formalist circles of the teens and twenties, focusing especially on Shklovsky and Jakobson, and continuing through the Formalists' intellectual heirs in subsequent decades: Prague School Structuralism in the thirties, Paris Structuralism in the sixties, Soviet Semiotics in the seventies, Tel Aviv School Poetics from the sixties through the nineties, and related late-century developments such as narratology and possible worlds theory. Our approach will be generally chronological and historical, but we will also pay attention to untimely anticipations, continuities and revivals. Rationale, or, Back to the Future. Dating as it does from the teens of the last century, Formalism may not appear at first glance to constitute a new direction" in our discipline. Why revisit it now? There are a number of reasons:

Contemporary theorists too often treat the Formalists as straw men, to be ritually abused and dismissed, sometimes without appearing to know much of anything first-hand about the Formalist project or its achievements. Apart from intellectual bad faith, this also involves the risk of reinventing the wheel.

Many developments in contemporary theory rest on Formalist foundations, if only in the negative sense of beginning from a critique of Formalist positions. Omit the Formalist tradition, and the narrative of twentieth-century theory lapses into incoherence, lacking some of its key episodes.

Certain theorists who regularly figure in contemporary theoretical discourse cannot be fully or adequately understood without taking into account their relationship, often a conflicted one, with the Formalist tradition. This is certainly the case with Mikhail Bakhtin and his circle (Medvedev, Voloshinov, Bakhtin's brother Nicholas), whom we will read in this course in relation to their Formalist contemporaries and competitors.

The Formalist legacy is actually still alive. Much new research is being conducted by younger scholars, both within our discipline and across disciplines, in areas that the Formalists and their successors pioneered, in particular narratology. The American Language poets, who flourished as a school from the seventies through the nineties, were avid and attentive readers of the Russian Formalists, and incorporated Formalist ideas in their own manifestos and poetic practice. Hypertext literature and its criticism, and digital-culture studies in general, have drawn inspiration from Formalism and its heirs. Some, at least, of the Formalist figures are worth reading in their own right, as classics of twentieth-century intellectual history, in the same way that one reads Freud, whatever one's reservations about the "scientific" value of his findings. Jakobson, Bakhtin and Levi-Strauss certainly belong to this category; possibly also Shklovsky, Mukarovsky, Tynjanov, Lotman, Barthes and others.

### **Obligations.**

This is a reading-oriented course. The reading-load will be relatively heavy, but other assignments will be correspondingly light. Students will be graded on three assignments:

Each student will take responsibility for leading our discussion of the texts assigned for one of our class meetings. Note that this is not a presentation but a discussion. You should strive to elicit discussion from your classmates, rather than to say the last word on the day's readings yourself. You might, for instance, draw our attention to aspects of the readings that you either did not understand or did not agree with; or you might draw our attention to connections among the various texts under consideration; and so on. On days when we are reading several essays by the same or different writers, you may opt to focus on only one essay, or to integrate two or more of them, or to synthesize all of them. You should aim for a discussion of about 30 minutes in length. You will also be responsible to "prime the pump"; for our discussion by posting questions or comments to our online list in advance of our class-meeting. I will give you written feedback on your leadership of the discussion, and you will receive a letter-grade for it, worth one-third of your final grade.

Each student will present an oral book-review of one of the supplementary readings listed below on the schedule of readings. These supplementary readings are of various kinds: strictly supplemental, in the sense of being more of the same; historical or theoretical syntheses; commentary or critique; and so on. Your objective here is to give your fellow-students a clear and comprehensive sense of a book that they will probably not have the chance to read. Make sure to (1) outline the book's organization; (2) summarize its thesis or argument(s); (3) characterize its approach; (4) identify the corpus or subject-matter it addresses; and (5) comment on its failings and successes. You should consider preparing a hand-out for your fellow-students, including the book's full title, author, and publication date, its table of contents, and possibly synopses or relevant quotes from the text. Your oral book-review should run about 15 minutes. I will give you written feedback, and you will receive a letter-grade, worth one-third of your final grade.

Each student will write a case-study, 10 to 12 pages in length, applying one or more of the theoretical approaches examined in the course to a primary literary (or paraliterary, cinematic, televisual, etc.) text of your own choosing. You should discuss possible topics with me, by e-mail or in person, before the final week of class. This case-study will be due no later than Thursday of exam week (9 May 2002), and will be worth one-third of your final grade.

### **Texts**

Primary texts for this course are essays or book-length monographs by members of the Formalist group or their intellectual heirs. Many of the essays are "classics" in their field. I have tried to maintain a rough balance between theoretical and analytical/descriptive studies and, among the descriptive studies, between analyses of poetry and of narrative genres. With one or two possible exceptions, essays will be available from the electronic reserve for this course; I will supply you with a password to access the reserve. In a few cases, photocopied texts may be made available to you. You should obtain your own copies of the five books I have ordered for this course, namely: Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*; Genette's *Narrative Discourse*; Barthes' *S/Z*; Dolezel's *Heterocosmica*; and *Narratologies*, edited by David Herman.

### **Schedule of Readings**

Jan 14 Introduction.

Text: Roman Jakobson and L.G. Jones, "Shakespeare's Verbal Art in 'The Experience of Spirit'"

[21 MLK Recess]

28 Russian Formalism (1): Shklovsky.

Text: Victor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*.

Supplementary reading: Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*

Wise GR1.A65 v.09 or Colson GR550.P7613

Feb 4 Russian Formalism (2): Jakobson.

Texts: Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance," "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry," "Baudelaire's Les Chats"

(with Claude Levi-Straus), "Yeats' Sorrow of Love' through the Years"; (with Stephen Rudy).  
Michael Riffaterre: "Describing poetic structures: Two approaches to Baudelaire's 'Les Chats'"  
Supplementary reading: Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism*.  
Wise PG30266.F6E7

#### 11 Russian Formalism (3).

Texts: Boris Eichenbaum, "The Theory of the Formal Method," "Literary Environment" and "How Gogol's *The Overcoat* Is Made." Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics." Jurij Tynjanov, from *The Problem of Verse Language*.  
Supplementary reading: P.N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*.  
Wise PN98.F6 M413

#### 18 Bakhtin.

Texts: Mikhail Bakhtin, "Characteristics of Genre ... in Dostoevsky's Works" and "Types of Prose Discourse," from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp.106-137 and 185-204. Nicholas Bachtin, "English Poetry in Greek: Notes on a Comparative Study of Poetic Idioms," *Poetics Today* 6, 3 (1985): 333-356. Julia Kristeva: "Word, Dialogue and Novel" and "The ruin of a poetics."  
Supplementary reading: V.N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.  
Wise B809.8.V59413 1973

#### 25 Towards Structuralism: Jakobson and Tynjanov.

Texts: Roman Jakobson, "On Realism in Art" and "The Dominant." Jurij Tynjanov, "On Literary Evolution" and "The Literary Fact." Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynjanov, "Problems in the Study of Literature and Language." Itamar Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Theory," *Poetics Today* 11, 1 (Spring 1990): 9-26.  
Supplementary reading: Jurij Striedter, *Literary Structure, Evolution and Value*  
Wise PN861.H3

#### Mar 4 Prague Structuralism: Mukarovsky and Vodicka.

Texts: Jan Mukarovsky, "Standard Language and Poetic Language," "Art as a Semiotic Fact," *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*. Felix Vodicka, "The Concretization of the Literary Work."  
Supplementary reading: F.W. Galan, *Historic Structures*.  
Wise PN98.S7 G34

#### 11 Soviet Semiotics: Lotman and Uspensky.

Texts: Jurij Lotman, from *The Structure of the Artistic Text*; "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth-Century Russian Culture." Boris Uspensky, from *A Poetics of Composition*.  
Supplementary reading: Ann Shukman, *Literature and Semiotics*.  
Wise PN98.S7 S5

#### 18 The Tel Aviv School.

Texts: Hrushovski [Harshav], "Theory of the Literary Text and the Structure of Non-Narrative Fiction: In the First Episode of War and Peace," *Poetics Today* 9, 3 (1988): 635-666; "Poetic Metaphor and Frames of Reference," *Poetics Today* 5, 1 (1984): 5-43. Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg, "The King Through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process," *Poetics Today* 7, 2(1986): 275-322. Itamar Even-Zohar, "The 'Literary System' and 'Reality' and Realemes in Literature," *Poetics Today* 11, 1 (Spring 1990): 27-44 and 207-218.  
Supplementary reading: Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction*.  
Wise PN3383.N35 S7

#### [25 Spring Break]

#### Apr 1 Paris Structuralism (1): Genette.

Text: Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*

Supplementary reading: Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*.  
Wise PN98.S7 C8

[8 Class Cancelled]

15 Paris Structuralism (2): Barthes.

Texts: Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" and *S/Z*

Supplementary reading: Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-house of Language*  
Wise P123.J34

22 Possible Worlds: Dolezel.

Text: Lubomir Dolezel, *Heterocosmica*.

Supplementary reading: Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*. [personal copy]

29 Narratology.

Texts: David Herman (ed.), *Narratologies*. David Darby, "Form and Context: An Essay in the History of Narratology," *Poetics Today* 22, 4 (Winter 2001): 829-852.

Supplementary reading: Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. [personal copy]

May 9 **Written case-study assignment due.**