

Cold War Networks and the Scholarly Byt: How Russian Formalism Became an American Thing

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Victor Erlich's critically acclaimed *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (hereafter *RF*) was first printed in 1955 by the Dutch publisher Mouton as one of the first volumes in the series Slavistic Printings and Reprintings (SPR from now on).¹ Generations of students in the US and Europe have been introduced to the theories of Viktor Shklovskii, Iurii Tynianov, Boris Eikhenbaum, and Roman Jakobson thanks to Erlich's monograph, and Slavists are well acquainted with SPR and Mouton, responsible for printing many fundamental works in the field between the 1950s and the 1980s. In 1955, however, Erlich's career was only beginning, Mouton and SPR had just been established, Russian formalism was virtually unknown in western countries, and publications dealing specifically with literary theory were not a priority in Slavic Studies.

It is not a secret that Slavic Studies was established as a byproduct of the Second World War and the Cold War.² It was a section of the so-called "area studies" emerging in the 1940s, at a time when gaining knowledge of different cultures was considered a key geopolitical asset, and Russian and East European Studies were expected to "vaccinate students against facile Communist propaganda."³ Area studies were designed to equip new generations of Americans with the needed international competence to "have a great influence in the moulding of enlightened public opinion" on foreign relations.⁴ As curricula in area studies privileged an "interdisciplinary" approach and offered supplemental training to students who had already completed their education in a single discipline, literature was interesting only insofar as it helped gain insight into a given cultural milieu.⁵ As a pioneering scholar of Russian Studies like Edward J. Brown lamented at the end of the 1950s, studies dealing with literary questions were scarce.⁶ When Erlich joined the Slavic

1. Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine* (The Hague, 1955).

2. For a history of the establishment of the field in the 1940s, see especially David C. Engerman, *Know your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America's Soviet Experts* (Oxford, 2009).

3. Cyril Black, "The Development of Slavic and Eastern European Studies in the United States" in Royden Dangerfield, ed., *Area Study Program: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Champaign, IL, 1955), 17.

4. Robert B Hall, *Area Studies: With Special Reference to their Implications for Research in the Social Sciences* (New York, 1947), 38.

5. Cyril E. Black, "Contributions of the Joint Committee on Slavic Studies to Research Advancements in the Field," *Items (SSRC)* 9, no. 4 (December 1955): 40–42.

6. Edward Brown, "Literature," in Harold H. Fisher, ed., *American Research on Russia* (Bloomington, 1959), 131. At the time of writing, Brown taught at Brown University.

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department at the University of Washington at the beginning of the 1950s, he defined the teaching of literature there “unmistakably amateurish.”⁷ The publication of *RF*, a monograph entirely devoted to a little-known topic in literary theory, was thus an event of historical importance.

This article investigates the initial moment in the reception of Russian formalism in western countries—the 1955 publication of Erlich’s monograph—from a novel perspective, a timely endeavor considering that the discourse on formalism is fast changing. Recent scholarship has been critically assessing the reception of Russian formalism and has been pushing the intellectual and geographical boundaries in which formalism has been confined in a bid to bring it closer to current scholarly interest.⁸ Above all, the conception of Russian formalism as an intransigent promoter of the “autonomy of literature” has come under attack. If Galin Tihanov argues that formalism developed when a particular way conceptualizing literature (a regime of relevance where literature is autonomous) was at its zenith, he also shows how—within formalist texts—this first regime of relevance often intersected the opposite principle, which accorded value to literature by virtue of its embeddedness in a social milieu.⁹ In the latest intellectual history of Russian formalism, Jessica Merrill demonstrated that formalism did not conceptualize poetic language as distinct from social thought. In another recent article, she showed how the labeling of formalism as a pre-structuralist, “intrinsic” method of literary analysis was consolidated in North America in the 1960s and 1970s by pruning away all sides of formalism that did not match the description.¹⁰

The times are ripe to look back to the history of the academic discourse on the topic and to reevaluate forgotten sides of formalism. Here, I will address the academic reception of Russian formalism from the perspective of the 1955 publication of Erlich’s *RF* and will further explore some of the questions that have been previously highlighted especially by Merrill and Tihanov, to whom I am deeply indebted. Methodologically, however, my article will differ profoundly from what has been done until now in this direction. If both Merrill and Tihanov move within the boundaries of intellectual history, I hold that this approach alone, while absolutely necessary, might not be sufficient to lay bare the radical historicity (to borrow Tihanov’s terminology again) of specific

Engerman too argues that Slavic literary studies was marginal in the 1950s and mostly focused on sociological rather than literary questions: *Know your Enemy*, 129–52.

7. Victor Erlich, *Child of a Turbulent Century* (Evanston, 2006), 147.

8. For formalism in Ukraine see Galina Babak and Aleksandr Dmitriev, *Atlantida sovetskogo natsmodernizma: Formal'nyi metod v Ukraine (1920-e-nachalo 1930-x)* (Moscow, 2021). On the reception of formalism in some European countries, see Michał Mrugalski, Schamma Schahadat, and Irina Wutsdorff, eds., *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory and the West* (Berlin, 2023). On the reception of Shklovskii’s notion of estrangement in film studies, see: Annie van der Oever, ed., *Ostrannenie: On “Strangeness” and the Moving Image: The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept* (Amsterdam, 2010).

9. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford, 2019), 35–36.

10. Jessica E. Merrill, *The Origins of Russian Literary Theory: Folklore, Philology, Form* (Evanston, 2022), 34; and Jessica E. Merrill, “The North American Reception of Russian Formalism” in Mrugalski, Schahadat, and Wutsdorff, eds., *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory*, 300.

conceptions of formalism.¹¹ The case of *RF* is emblematic of this, and not only because the monograph appeared at the height of McCarthyism. As there was no well-established discourse on literature proper and literary theory in the Slavic field in the 1950s, publishing venues for this type of scholarship had to be materially created, and ideas from adjacent fields of scholarly inquiry also had to be mobilized. *RF* was not made by Erlich alone: rather, it appeared thanks to the cooperation of several parties whose activity—to which an intellectual history would be blind—I set out to methodically trace through the notion of scholarly *byt*, which I develop by hybridizing Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (ANT from now on) and Eikhenbaum’s *literaturnyi byt*.¹²

Scholarly byt

While I am not the first to explore the connection between Latour and Russian formalism, it is not my intention to turn Eikhenbaum into a fully-fledged Latourian.¹³ Rather, I want to show both the points of contact between the two authors and the ways in which they complement each other to form a new conceptual framework, scholarly *byt*. If, as Tihanov put it, we face the need to rediscover formalism, then we need to see it anew, from a perspective that is productive for the present context, where the “intrinsic” sides of formalism are finally giving way to the exploration of the vitality of formalist ideas for other purposes.¹⁴

Latour’s ANT conceives of social phenomena as assemblages whose existence is ensured by the work of different actors invested in a collective project. Actors construct assemblages by weaving a net of relationships and, in so doing, leave visible traces of their activity.¹⁵ Assemblages are not the “reflection” of the network of actors but are linked to them in a complex fashion that needs to be analyzed case by case. Further, the categories of analysis, as well as the nodes of the network that are of significance, cannot be defined beforehand, but must emerge in the course of the research.

As ANT operates within a flat ontology, the analysis potentially encompasses and places on the same plane actors as diverse as institutions, social

11. Tihanov uses the term “radical historicity” all throughout the monograph, but especially in “Introduction: The Radical Historicity of Literary Theory,” in his *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*, 9–26.

12. A similar term, *nauchnyi byt*, has been employed by Jan Levchenko, *Drugaya nauka: Russkie formalisty v poiskakh biografii* (Moscow, 2012), 67. However, Levchenko does not define *nauchnyi byt* explicitly and concentrates on formalist networks and their practices in the mid-1920s. My perspective differs from his, and the similarity is purely terminological.

13. On the Latourian sides of Shklovskii’s thought see Serguei Oushakine, “Shklovsky and Things, or Why Tolstoy’s Sofa Should Matter” in Slav N. Gratchev and Howard Mancing, eds., *Viktor Shklovsky’s Heritage in Literature, Art, Philosophy* (Lanham, MD, 2019), 93–109.

14. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*, 27. On rediscovering formalism anew, see also Serguei Oushakine, “Sotsiologiya literaturnogo dela Borisa Eikhenbauma,” foreword to Boris Eikhenbaum, *Molodoi Tolstoi* (Ekaterinburg, 2020), 24.

15. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005), 30–31.

categories, ideas, people, and objects: in Latour's model, for instance, there is no reason to differentiate between a patron sponsoring a publication and a book "influencing" another work. They are both actors that, at a specific historical moment, were part of a specific network and produced an assemblage.¹⁶ For this reason, ANT seems the ideal framework to show the embeddedness of the academic discourse in a historical context, as the analysis can span questions of intellectual dependence, institutional or interpersonal ties, and beyond.

Unfortunately, ANT might prove hard to apply to contexts outside those practiced by Latour, who often relies on field work and can thus observe the emergence of networks in real time.¹⁷ His injunction to let informants and spokespersons speak for their group to guide the analyst in her research is simply impossible in cases like mine, and we are left groping in the dark.¹⁸ The field of potential nodes of interest is wide open, but where do we start: institutional affiliations, economic dependence, interpersonal relationships, similarities of ideas? How can the analysis be organized?

An unexpected aid comes from Eikhnenbaum's *literaturnyi byt*, if seen from the right perspective.¹⁹ Even if it was often met with harsh criticism, Eikhnenbaum's notion was not left unexplored by scholars. While the ways the notion has been interpreted vary significantly, the equation of *literaturnyi byt* with an archive-based reconstruction of the activity of literary groups and institutions is surely the most widespread practice, so much so that scholars often do not feel the need to define *literaturnyi byt* at all.²⁰

16. For Latour, that is, there is no reason to distinguish between human and non-human actors. See Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 10.

17. Think, for instance, of the field work conducted by Latour and Steve Woolgar at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, which resulted in the volume *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills, 1979).

18. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 31–32.

19. Eikhnenbaum's most famous article on the matter was published first in 1927 in the journal *Na literaturnom postu*. Here, I will be quoting from a later edition, Boris Eikhnenbaum, "Literaturnyi byt" in his *O literature: Raboty raznykh let* (Moskva, 1987), 428–36.

20. See, for instance, Igor' Pil'shchikov and Andrei Ustinov, "Poverkhnostnoe napriazhenie: Istoriiia kul'tury i kontseptsiiia 'literaturnogo byta' B. M. Eikhnenbauma" *Rhema.Rema*, no. 4 (2020): 9–22. An earlier example of this tradition is Vadim Vatsuro, *S.D.P: Iz istorii literaturnogo byta pushkinskoi pory* (Moscow, 1989). For a good overview of the Russian and English works inspired by Eikhnenbaum, see Alina S. Bodrova, "Literaturnye obshchestva v Rossii pervoi poloviny XIX veka: Problemy mezhdistsiplinarnogo opisaniia" *Russkaia literatura*, no. 1 (2021): 5–18. Regarding different interpretation of and methodological frameworks for *literaturnyi byt*, Oleg Proskurin interpreted it as the influence of literary models on real life behaviors: Oleg Proskurin, *Literaturnye skandaly pushkinskoi epokhi* (Moscow, 2000), 14. William Todd Mills III, one of the first to write on *literaturnyi byt* in the west, used a Jakobson-inspired framework: William Todd Mills III, *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, and Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986). More recently, Benjamin Musachio uses *literaturnyi byt* to explore the question of "how to become a writer" in the late Soviet period, "Where Writers Were Made: The Soviet Writerly Family Houses of Creativity," *The Russian Review* 81, no. 4 (October 2022): 705–23.

My interest in the matter, on the other hand, stems from Eikhenbaum's specific conceptualization of the interplay between what he calls evolution, a mode of analysis that traces homogeneous relationships (literary text to literary text) and genesis, which, on the contrary, studies heterogeneous relationships (literature to non-literature).²¹ The evolution/genesis dichotomy speaks to the fact that literature is both autonomous and not autonomous. It is influenced both by previous literature and by the interaction with extra-literary sources and other circumstances. This was already implicit in the formalists' interest in the creative potential of non-literary genres like journals and personal correspondence, but is taken to the next level by Eikhenbaum.²² In the preparatory materials for a class he taught at Leningrad State University in 1929–30, Eikhenbaum argues that, beyond strictly literary considerations, the course should also consider the material conditions that allow for the production of literature and actively shape its direction, and—which is crucial and rarely mentioned—of non-literary genres (mostly biographical or autobiographical in his notes) whose features can, at some point, become literary.²³ In other words, Eikhenbaum calls for the students' attention to be focused on a very heterogeneous set of forces (writers, literary circles, publishers, patrons, but also extra-literary genres like diaries, family letters, and so on) whose activity shapes the course of literature.

From this perspective, *literaturnyi byt* starts becoming interestingly “flat.” Literature is now embedded in a web of forces that influence its course, and, what is more, the nature of these forces is so varied (are they institutional, political, interpersonal, or “intellectual”) that it cannot be a priori predicted. Eikhenbaum's ideas, then, becomes an *in nuce* example of what Bradley Gorski calls “a flat ontology of literature,” that is: “a view of literature that does not assign a priori primacy to any single aspect of the literary undertaking” and that teases out, context by context, the relevance of things as disparate as institutions, interpersonal relations, political situations, ideas, and social categories for the literary endeavor.²⁴ Differently put, Eikhenbaum's *literaturnyi byt* demonstrates the formalists' revolutionary reconceptualization of agency

21. Eikhenbaum, “Literaturnyi byt,” 431–32. Other formalists, most notably Iurii Tynianov, employed the same terminology elsewhere. For instance: Iurii Tynianov, “O literaturnoi evoliutsii” in his *Poetika, istoriia literatury, kino* (Moscow, 1977), 270–81.

22. Formalists were consistently interested in such genres. In the early 1920s, Shklovskii became interested in Vasilii Rozanov because he had constructed his novel *Opavshie listia* (Fallen Leaves, 1913–15) out of journalistic and very intimate material from everyday life that usually did not have a place in literature. See Viktor Shklovskii, *Rozanov: Iz knigi “Siuzhet kak iavleniia stilia”* (Petrograd, 1921). Eikhenbaum's own *Moi vremennik*, a hybrid genre straddling literature and scholarship, was constructed as a *vremennik* (annal), a type of periodical.

23. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI), fond (f.) 1527 (Boris Eikhenbaum), opis' (op.) 1, edinitsa khraneniia (ed. khr.) 34, list (l.) 9 (Kak vesti kurz? Zаметki k vystupleniiam na zasedaniakh seksii teorii i metodologii literatury instituta sravnitel'noi istorii literatury i iazykov Zapada i Vostoka. Prilozhen spisok chlenov seksii). I thank ASEES for its support through Dissertation Research Grant (2021) that allowed me to conduct research at RGALI.

24. Bradley A. Gorski, “The Bestseller, or The Cultural Logic of Postsocialism” *Slavic Review* 79, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 613–35, here 614.

whereby, to provocatively paraphrase Shklovskii, literature becomes the geometric locus of intersecting lines and forces born outside of it.²⁵

This is not to say that textual analysis loses its value. On the contrary, genesis opens up to analysis only retrospectively, after a given text has been placed in a homogenous, evolutionary series and significant changes in style, motifs, and devices have been established and traced back, when possible, to literary predecessors. Only through this can we then ask to what extent non-literary phenomena, whether intellectual or material, can be linked to these changes: “Genesis consists of those moments from byt that we can become conscious of through evolution.”²⁶ As an example, when Tynianov showed that Fedor Dostoevskii’s early works are Gogolian devices that take up new functions, he was tracing a purely homogenous series.²⁷ Had he gone further, he could have asked whether there are devices in Dostoevskii’s pages that mark a shift from previous literary traditions and that cannot be traced back to previous literature, but rather relate to the extra-literary sphere.

That is, to meaningfully speak of genesis, especially in its material and institutional sides, we need a “retrospective compass” pointing to what, in a given text, is of evolutionary significance. The mere material participation in literary life does not automatically entail that a given actor has made an impact in literary evolution. Not every salon where writers congregate is a literary salon. Similarly, the mere existence of a literary group is no guarantee that the group has had an impact on literary evolution. In Eikhenbaum’s words, there is a distinction between mere facts of life, that might have a link to literature but no real impact on its evolution, and *literaturno-bytovye* phenomena, which actively shape the course of literature.²⁸

The retrospective awareness of genesis through evolution introduces the question of the varying degree of agency in the network and marks yet another point of contact between Eikhenbaum and Latour, also differentiating between active and passive actors. Only mediators have an active, transformative role in the production of the collective endeavor, while intermediaries merely pass along “meaning” without changing it.²⁹ As a network can include both mediators and intermediaries, and because the same actor can act as a mediator at one point and as intermediary at another, Latour’s terminology can help us refine Eikhenbaum’s somewhat rudimentary distinction between facts of life and *literaturno-bytovye* forces.

25. Shklovskii’s original quote: “Но так в искусстве, искусство не создаётся единой волей, единым гением, человек—творец, только геометрическое место пересечения линий, сил, рождающихся вне его,” *Literatura i kinematograf* (Berlin, 1923), 22. On formalism and agency, see Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory*, 27.

26. RGALI, f. 1527, op. 1, ed. kh. 134, l. 32 (K dokladu v G.I.I.I ot 22/11/1927. Zaiavka na knigu Literatura i literaturnyi byt. Prospekt, zametki, vypuski iz raznykh istochnikov dlia raboty nad knigoi). The original Russian quote reads: “Генезис—это те моменты быта, которые можно осознать через эволюцию.”

27. Iurii Tynianov, “Dostoevskii i Gogol’: K teorii parodii” in *Poetika*, 197–227.

28. Boris Eikhenbaum, introduction to Mark Aronson and Solomon Reiser, *Literaturnye kruzhki i salony* (Leningrad, 1929), 4.

29. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 37–39.

The retrospective glance engenders a two-step analysis, where equal attention is devoted both to historically salient textual features and, later, to the embeddedness of these features in heterogeneous series. It is precisely this dual focus that provides the solution to the methodological issue I highlighted earlier. While scholarly works are not the same as works of literature, they are complex texts nonetheless, with a “plot,” specific argumentative structures, and, sometimes, even specific stylistic features. Also, scholarly works position themselves explicitly vis a vis other works on the same topic; they quote them, criticize them, and expand on their findings, thus engendering homogeneous, evolutionary series.³⁰ At the same time, they can incorporate intellectual stimuli from other areas and be dependent on a variety of factors for their material existence (thus intersecting heterogeneous, genetic series). Given a scholarly text, we can trace the evolution of the presentation of the topic by engaging with other works on the same issue and, only after this stage is complete can we embark on the study of the genesis to reveal the embeddedness of the work in question in a wider context.

We can now merge Latour and Eikhenbaum to conceptualize our new analytical tool, scholarly byt. Scholarly byt takes its cue from a scholarly work seen as assemblage whose material and discursive appearance is dependent on the cooperative activity of a set of actors. The activity of this network will be variously inscribed in the work, both in the text proper, in the paratext (acknowledgements, dedications), on the cover, or elsewhere, and these traces will give an initial indication on the possible venues of research to pursue. While the research must remain open to exploring any type of trace, the aim of the textual analysis is to lay out the salient organizational features of the work in order to retrospectively understand what nodes in the network had an active role in the assembling process. In Eikhenbaum’s words, we first follow homogenous relationships to then become aware of heterogeneous ones. Far from the product of the mind of a single author, the scholarly work becomes here the material vehicle that makes the activity of the network visible, thereby allowing us to retrospectively link this very activity to the historically salient organizational features of the text itself.

To summarize, scholarly byt studies the relationship between evolution and genesis in the scholarly field. Its strength lies in the fact that the analysis will take into account a series of very diverse factors without relinquishing an in-depth textual engagement. While there are excellent works on the institutional and intellectual history of academia, scholarly byt differs from them in that no a priori primacy can be assigned to any category of inquiry. If the analysis touches on a specific institution, or on a particular idea, it is not to trace the history or the development of either, as scholarly byt only seeks to establish the evolutionary significance of the concerted action of a network of actors (whatever they are) for a specific scholarly assemblage.³¹

30. For instance, we speak of a body of scholarship on Russian formalism, made up of works on the subject and actively referring each other.

31. Some classic monographs on the history of the institution are: Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987); Andy Byford, *Literary Scholarship in Late Imperial Russia: Rituals of Academic Institutionalization* (London, 2007);

Further, scholarly byt trades diachronic depth (which usually characterizes intellectual and institutional history) for breadth of analysis: because the analysis can touch on so many different aspects, it is best to take one assemblage at a time and show the complex way in which it is embedded in a given historical reality. This approach is uniquely suited to tackle problems of scholarly reception, as it can to address both the place of a publication within a specific series on the topic and its dependence on a set of heterogeneous factors.

Russian Formalism

I now start the textual analysis leading to the construction of the compass that will serve me to orient all further steps. While pioneering from a western perspective, *RF* can be placed in a small homogenous series of scholarly works on formalism that had been published in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. Though quoting from them at times, Erlich did not seem overly interested in works printed in the Soviet Union.³² The lectures on Russian formalism that Jakobson gave in 1935 in Brno (or the ideas expressed therein that Erlich could have heard directly from his advisor), on the other hand, seem the most obvious predecessor for Erlich's monograph and its reconstruction of formalism's ties to nineteenth century scholars like Aleksandr Veselovsky and Oleksandr Potebnia and to poets like Andrey Belyi.³³ Indeed, the "plot" that Erlich develops for formalism constitutes a radicalization and expansion of some positions already expressed by Jakobson in the lectures.

In general, Erlich's presentation of formalism is quite narrow. Beyond Jakobson, *RF* privileges the Opoiaz triumvirate (Shklovskii, Eikhenbaum, and Tynianov), with Shklovskii invariably at the center of attention and criticism. Boris Tomashevskii is also present in the book, as the quasi-formalists (as Erlich refers to them) Viktor Zhirmunskii and Viktor Vinogradov. The story told in *RF* is well-known: a brief period of development in the late 1910s and early 1920s was followed by a deep crisis, caused both by formalism's own shortcomings and by external pressures, which led to its demise in the late 1920s. Some twenty-five years later, the legacy of formalism can finally be restored. While Jakobson had addressed the errors of the early period of formalism (and of Shklovskii) in front of his Czech students, he had done so explicitly only in the last lecture, where he also argued that formalism quickly corrected its initial shortcomings.³⁴ *RF*, by contrast, develops a complex, two-pronged narrative disentangling Russian formalism from its points of contact with Marxism and the broader Soviet milieu and positioning it at the inception of an evolutionary parable leading to the affirmation of structuralism outside

and Mikhail Robinson, *Sud' by akademicheskoi elity: Otechestvennoe slavianovedenie: 1917–nachalo 1930-kh godov* (Moscow, 2004).

32. Two notable monographs on the matter were written in the Soviet Union are Boris Engel'gardt, *Formal'nyi metod v istorii literatury* (Leningrad, 1927), and Pavel Medvedev, *Formalizm i formalisty* (Leningrad, 1934).

33. Roman Jakobson, *Formal'naia shkola i sovremennoe russkoe literaturovedenie* (Moscow, 2011), 29–32 and 41–51.

34. Jakobson, *Formal'naia shkola*, 64 and 76–84. On Jakobson on formalism, see also Merrill, "The North American Reception," 299.

of the Soviet Union. This bifurcated, clearly anti-Soviet narrative, which sets *RF* apart from Jakobson's position, revolves around Erlich's focus on "pure formalism."

Pure formalism is mostly drawn from the Opoiaz's (especially Shklovskii's) earliest publications and defends the full autonomy of literature and the consequent need for a special methodology for its study disregarding historical, social, or psychological notions. Even though Erlich argues that Shklovskii's insistence on the complete autonomy of is an exaggeration, he nevertheless stresses that his ideas are in dire need of revision. When discussing a work that at once tried to establish a genealogy for formalism and critically assess it, Erlich concludes that: "But whatever the shortcomings of [Pavel] Medvedev's positive program, he did accomplish an important negative task: he made a strong case for the necessity of going beyond the a-social poetics of pure formalism and the a-literary sociologism of crude Marxists."³⁵ The verdict is quite clear: pure formalism is untenable.

If a pure formalism exists, so must an impure one. Whatever was done by the formalists in the Soviet Union that cannot be included in the framework of pure formalism is branded by Erlich either as a theoretical failure or as a "retreat" from literary theorizing. Shklovskii and Tynianov's careers as writers and screenplay writers, as well as Eikhenbaum and Tomashevsky's textological and exegetic work, are all relegated to the ranks of second-choice occupations that formalists turned to once literary theory became impossible for them.³⁶ Hence, pure formalism works as a way to delimit the scope of formalism to that of a literary theory.

Pure formalism also provides stringent chronological boundaries to differentiate between respectable formalist texts and those which are not to be taken seriously. Erlich understands the "sociological turn" among Opoiaz members, and their admittance that literature is, after all, not totally autonomous, as a capitulation to Marxist demands: "The socio-biographical departure from the pure Formalist canon was complicated by what might be called an ideological deviation."³⁷ Thus, Erlich completely dismisses Shklovskii's and Eikhenbaum's more "sociologically-oriented" works, such as Shklovskii's study of Lev Tolstoi's *War and Peace* and Eikhenbaum's *literaturnyi byt*: "If Sklovskij's new emphasis on 'extra-esthetic factors' was bound up with his attempt at a theoretical justification of neo-Futurism, Ejxenbaum's theory of literary mores was frankly an effort to erect into a law of literary sociology the predicament of the Russian writer in the late twenties."³⁸

Erlich's criticism is not moderate here, it is trenchant. For instance, Erlich argues that, in the late 1920s, formalism was plagued by a sense of "inadequacy" that completely annihilated their previously "cocky self-assurance."³⁹ Erlich discusses Shklovskii's 1926 *Tret'ia fabrika*—one of the few instances

35. Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, 93.

36. *Ibid.*, 117. Shklovskii wrote a monograph on Tolstoi where he considered the author's work on historical sources and questions of class: *Mater'ial i stil' v romane L'va Tolstogo "Voina i mir"* (Moscow, 1928).

37. *Ibid.*, 107.

38. *Ibid.*, 104.

39. *Ibid.*, 108.

where he moves beyond literary theory proper—in similar terms and labels it as Shklovskii's desperate attempt to respond to external demands while clinging to previously held beliefs.

In general, Erlich is dismissive towards all those who attempted a synthesis of Marxism and formalism, and eyes with suspicion any harmonization of (pure) formalism with a more sociologically-oriented method. He does mention Boris Arvatov's attempts to find a middle ground between formalism and Marxism, but he mostly records the criticism directed against at him and claims that his ideas were designed to find a rationale for "Lef," which he defines as "An offshoot, but hardly a replica, of the pre-Revolutionary Futurist movement."⁴⁰ He also fails to mention openly Marxist critics and writers, like Sergei Tret'iakov and Nikolai Chuzhak, with whom the formalists cooperated closely. Any attempt to progress beyond pure formalism is presented by Erlich either as a capitulation to Marxist influences, or as an escape from literary theory into safer territory. Once pure, even if enthusiastically naive and polemical, formalism becomes "impure." Pure formalism basically "entraps" formalism within the thematic framework of a literary theory and within the chronological scope of the early Opoiaz years.

Outside of the Soviet Union, however, a revision of pure formalism becomes possible. The last chapter of the historical section, entitled "Formalism Revisited," claims that formalism's better insights were salvaged and developed outside of the Soviet Union. The doctrine section presents formalism's theory, but it does so in a peculiar manner. Already in the introduction, Erlich had felt obliged to justify his choice of topic—a little known Russian phenomenon—by pointing to its more rigorous successor, structuralism, which he calls the "final result of Formalist theorizing."⁴¹ By structuralism, Erlich understands the theories developed by the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1930s and the more recent efforts to lay out a theory of literature undertaken by the Austrian/Czech scholar René Wellek—himself a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1930s—and member of New Criticism Austin Warren in their well-known *Theory of Literature* (1949).⁴² The orientation towards structuralism has profound consequences for the argument of the doctrine section of the book, where Erlich systematically juxtaposes pure formalism with more advanced structural theories.

The first chapter of the doctrine half, "Basic Concept," presents a thorough introduction to Shklovskii's notion of estrangement. Once again, the verdict is trenchant: Shklovskii's idea is not as original as he would have cared to admit, and his early distinction between "poetry and prose" cannot really compete with Jakobson's later distinction of the functions of language.⁴³ Erlich takes Shklovskii's idea of literature's complete autonomy and contrasts it to Jakobson's proclamation (in the 1930s) of the "autonomy without separatism" of literature, which allows for a more complex study of the work of art.⁴⁴

40. *Ibid.*, 92.

41. Erlich, foreword to his *Russian Formalism*, x.

42. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949).

43. Erlich, *Russian Formalism*, 152.

44. *Ibid.*, 154

Similarly, the following chapter points out the “epistemological and esthetic fallacies” of pure formalism, and proceeds to introduce their more sound counterparts developed both by the Prague circle as well as in Wellek and Warren’s monograph.⁴⁵ Indeed, of the sixteen pages of the chapter, only four are devoted to formalism proper, while the rest articulate a critique of their mechanistic understanding of literature. For instance, Erlich takes issue with the formalists’ (alleged) denial of the role that emotions play in literature, and “corrects” their hasty generalizations by referring to Wellek and Warren.⁴⁶

The whole doctrine section is peppered with references to Jakobson and to *Theory of Literature*, with the clear intent of demonstrating first that their theories can meaningfully make up for formalism’s shortcomings, and secondly that there are evident parallels between them. Indeed, more than a presentation of the formalist theory, the section is a systematic translation of pure formalism in its more mature, structural counterpart.

In sum, what sets *RF* apart in a homogenous series populated by scholarly works on formalism, is its notion of pure formalism, which derives from but fundamentally radicalizes and expands on some positions already espoused by Jakobson. While Jakobson did say that some early formalist conceptions needed revisions, he did not suggest that whatever the formalists did in the late 1920s or outside of the domain of literary theory was marginal at best and ideologically contaminated at worst. He similarly did not suggest that the value of formalism lies in the fact that it can be sublimated in a universal theory of literature.

Pure formalism was an innovation of *RF*, and it resulted in a bifurcated narrative. On the one hand, the part of formalism that is worth investigating is Russian, as opposed to Soviet. The term “Russian” here is not an ethnic category but simultaneously denotes the geographical space where the theories developed, and acts as a counterpart to the designation “Soviet.” Even though Russian formalism was partly developed in the Soviet Union, it is not a Soviet theory. Anything produced by previous members of formalism in the late 1920s and beyond is either a retreat from literary theory or a capitulation to external pressures.

On the other hand, the only way to correct pure formalism is to extirpate it from the Soviet context and place it within a teleological narration of progress culminating in the modern literary theory that sprouted from the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1930s and was grafted onto American soil by Jakobson and in the 1940s, where it intersected with New Criticism. Formalism here is not Russian anymore, it must become universal: its value is a function of its relationship with—and ability to be subsumed into—a universal theory. The plot is now clear: Russian formalism in its pure form failed both because of its internal shortcomings and because of external pressures, but can now be resurrected if sublimated in a universal theory of literature. This structure will be my retrospective compass to judge the significance of any node that I will pursue in the analysis.

45. *Ibid.*, 164 ff.

46. *Ibid.*, 181.

After the textual analysis, we need to scout the monograph for more traces, and *RF*'s paratext does provide some interesting information. As mentioned before, *RF* first appeared in 1955 for Mouton's series SPR, edited by the Dutch linguist Cornelis Van Schooneveld. As the book acknowledges, the publication was partly subsidized by a certain Robert Gordon Wasson, the president of the Association for the Promotion of Advanced Slavic Cultural Studies (henceforth PROM). The monograph also included a short preface penned by René Wellek. All these elements point outside of the strictly homogenous series of scholarship on formalism and thus relate the work to a heterogeneous, genetic context.

What follows are the results of my research in two archives, the Cornelis Hendryk Van Schooneveld Archive at the University of Leiden and the Papers of Frank Altschul in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University.⁴⁷ While there is no way to know beforehand whether the research on a given node will yield results, in my case it turned out that most of the actors listed before (Jakobson, Wasson, Van Schooneveld, Mouton, Wellek, and *Theory of Literature*) were part of a tightly-bound network, and their activity can be meaningfully related to the textual structure of *RF*. It is to Gordon Wasson, the "Minister of Finance" as Jakobson defined him, and to PROM's relationship with Jakobson and Mouton, that we need to turn to better comprehend the scission of formalism from the Soviet context.⁴⁸ *Theory of Literature*, on the other hand, relates more prominently to the sublimation of formalism into a universal theory of literature.

PROM and Mouton

Robert Gordon Wasson (1898–1986), or simply Gordon Wasson. He had a background in literature and journalism and even served as a lecturer in English at Columbia (his alma mater) for some time, but ultimately chose a career

47. Henceforth, I will refer to the Papers of Frank Altschul as PFA, and to the Cornelis Van Schooneveld Collection as Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheek (UB), SCH 1. Both archives are organized in series. The documents relating to PROM are all kept in the "Organization" series of PFA, and occupy folders 72 to 77. As for Leiden UB, SCH 1, I will be mostly quoting from series 2, section 14, "Professional Correspondence." I will also draw from the George F. Kennan Papers (GFKP), which have been digitized by Princeton's Mudd Library. For the overall structure of PFA, see the dedicated page of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, <https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/rbml/units/lehman/guides/altschul.html>, accessed on November 4, 2023. For Leiden UB SCH 1, see <https://collectionguides.universiteitleiden.nl/repositories/2/resources/312>, accessed November 4, 2023. While the scope of the analysis of scholarly byt cannot be established beforehand, I find it likely that any research similar to this will have to draw on archival materials. I wish to thank Azat Bilalutdinov for scanning the PROM material when I could not access Columbia's library during quarantine, and I am grateful to Leiden's University Library for allowing me to work on the Van Schooneveld Collection.

48. Erlich wrote to Van Schooneveld that PROM would subsidize the book and referred to Wasson with a nickname invented by Jakobson, the "Minister of Finance," UB SCH 1, series 2, section 14 (Professional Correspondence), folder 200 (Erlich to Van Schooneveld, June 1, 1954).

in banking and worked at J.P. Morgan from 1934 to his retirement in 1963.⁴⁹ Notably, Wasson was passionate about two things that are rarely linked with finance: Russia and hallucinogenic mushrooms. His mycological interest culminated in the 1950s in the publication of a work published jointly with his wife Valentina Pavlovna Guercken, *Mushrooms, Russia, and History*.⁵⁰ In 1956, the two went on an expedition to Mexico that, as we now know, was part of the CIA-funded MK-Ultra subproject 58, which aimed to study the hallucinatory properties of several substances and their potential use during interrogation.⁵¹

By the late 1940s, Wasson started following the development of Slavic Studies in American academia and, in the fall of 1948, began lobbying to establish a committee to promote the advancement of Slavic cultural studies. On April 7, 1949, PROM's first meeting was held in New York, in Frank Altschul's apartment.⁵² After Gordon Wasson, its original members were Lazard Freres' banker and founder of Radio Free Europe, Frank Altschul (1887–1981), Professors Boris Bakhmeteff (1880–1951) and Philip Mosely (1905–1972) from Columbia University, and the Honorable George Kennan (1904–2005), the famous diplomat and historian who contributed significantly both to the theory and to the implementation of the organized politics of containment against the USSR.⁵³ The Committee also included three professors acting as consultants, Roman Jakobson, René Wellek, and Harvard historian Michael Karpovich (1888–1959).

Even if it was formally a separate organization, PROM can be described as a close affiliate of the better-known East European Fund (active from 1951 to 1956), a subsidiary of the Ford Foundation. PROM's closeness to the Fund is first demonstrated by the significant overlap of their two boards.⁵⁴ More

49. On Wasson's biography and on PROM, see Henryk Baran, "Roman Jakobson, Gordon Wasson, and the Development of American Slavic Studies" in Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, ed., *American Contributions to the 16th International Congress of Slavists. Vol. 2, Literature* (Bloomington, 2018), 1–4. Baran's account of PROM is based on Jakobson's MIT papers, and focuses mostly on Jakobson and Wasson. The broader Cold War context, and PROM's dependence on other association like the Eastern European Fund is hardly present. Similarly absent is the relationship between PROM and Mouton.

50. Valentina Pavlovna Wasson and R. Gordon Wasson, *Mushrooms, Russia, and History* (New York, 1957).

51. On MK-Ultra, see Michael Otterman, *American Torture: From the Cold War to Abu Ghraib and Beyond* (Melbourne, 2007), 24. On the Wassons' expedition, see Aureliano Tonet, "That Time the CIA tested Hallucinogenic Mushrooms," *Le Monde*, August 31, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/summer-reads/article/2022/08/31/that-time-the-cia-tested-hallucinogenic-mushrooms_5995365_183.html, accessed February 21, 2024.

52. PFA, "Organizations," folder 72 (Formal notice from R. Gordon Wasson to Frank Altschul from March 23, 1949).

53. On Frank Altschul see: Priscilla Roberts, "Frank Altschul, Lazard Freres, and the Council on Foreign Relations: The Evolution of a Transatlantic Thinker," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 1, no. 2 (September 2003): 175–213. On *Radio Free Europe* and its ties to the intelligence world, see A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond* (Stanford, 2010).

54. Other than the addition of Merle Fainsod (1907–1972), Professor at the Department of Government at Harvard, and Paul B. Anderson (1894–1985) from YMCA press in New York, the boards coincide. This information can be checked by looking at the "Annual Reports" of the Ford Foundation from 1951 to 1956, freely downloadable from the "Governance and

importantly, however, the Fund was PROM's most conspicuous source of financial support, transferring a total of \$50,000 (approx. \$650,000 today) to PROM in two tranches (\$20,000 in 1951 and \$30,000 in 1953).⁵⁵ Indeed, even if PROM was established two years before the Fund, it was only after the latter started injecting it with money that the former started to operate at a steady rhythm.

The Fund entertained close ties with the intelligence world and the CIA. First, Ford's president at the time, Paul Hoffman (1891–1974), maintained close contacts with the CIA and was the previous director of the Economic Cooperation Administration, the agency that administered the Marshall Plan.⁵⁶ Second, George Kennan himself was tasked by the Foundation to oversee the establishment of the Fund, which met with the approval of both CIA and FBI.⁵⁷ Further, the Fund's most famous accomplishment, the establishment of the Russian-speaking Chekhov Publishing House in New York, was supported by the Agency.⁵⁸ However short-lived, the Fund has been rightly described as a peripheral node of what historian Eric Thomas Chester defined the "covert network," that is, the ensemble of institutions and foundations concentrically organized around the CIA that were active during the Cold War. By contiguity, PROM was a further, possibly more peripheral node of the same Cold War network.

Wasson's proposal for PROM addressed the dearth of valuable scholarly work plaguing Slavic cultural Studies, and called for the development of a series of tools to form future-day Slavists: "There is, in brief, a dearth of first-class text books, readers, advanced grammars, surveys, handbooks, lexicons and dictionaries, specialized encyclopedic works, atlases, up-to-date bibliographies, and generally all kinds of reference works."⁵⁹

Starting from this, it was PROM's academic advisors, and primarily Roman Jakobson's, role to redirect PROM's funding to projects they found significant. To this end, PROM bestowed donations to several academic journals: by the end of 1953, the committee had bestowed \$10,000 (approx. \$115,000 today) into Karpovich's *Novyi Zhurnal*, and another \$10,000 had been granted to Mosely for the *Annals of the Ukrainian Academy*.⁶⁰ Also, whereas the first volume of *Harvard Slavic Studies* (1953) had been subsidized by the CIA

Financial Statements" section of the Foundation's site, https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/about-ford/governance-and-financial-statements/?filter_document_type=annual-report (accessed November 28, 2023).

55. PFA, "Organizations," folder 74 (Annual Report of the Committee for the Promotion of Advanced Slavic Cultural Studies Incorporated 1954). After this initial external help, PROM started investing in short-term US Treasury Obligations. See PFA, "Organizations," folder 74 (Special Meeting of PROM from February 2, 1954).

56. Eric Thomas Chester, *Covert Network: Progressives, the International Rescue Committee, and the CIA* (Armonk, NY, 1995), 21.

57. Chester, *Covert Network*, 48.

58. Jan Goldman, ed., *The Central Intelligence Agency. An Encyclopedia of Covert Operations* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2015), 146.

59. PFA, "Organizations," folder 72 (A Proposal for the Advanced Slavic Cultural Studies, sent to Frank Altschul from Gordon Wasson, November 23, 1948).

60. PFA, "Organizations," folder 74 (Annual Report of the Committee for the Promotion of Advanced Slavic Cultural Studies Incorporated 1953).

Mid-European Studies Center of the National Committee for Free Europe, subsequent volumes were published through PROM.⁶¹ In the same year, it had also been instrumental in the appearance of Dmitry Chizhevsky's *Outline of Comparative Slavic literatures*.⁶² By 1958, they were also funding Jakobson's *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*. PROM also sponsored books that are considered seminal to this day, like Horace Lunt's *Old Church Slavonic Grammar*, and a significant selection of monographs devoted to very specific, niche literary and linguistics subjects.⁶³ By 1962, when the Association effectively ceased operations (though it was only dismantled in 1965), they had subsidized 77 projects through publications and grants.⁶⁴

In tracing the relationship between evolution and genesis, it would be reasonable to hypothesize a strong connection between PROM's patronage of RF and the latter's presentation of Russian formalism as a distinctly non-Soviet phenomenon. However, one must be cautious and thoroughly examine how the network operated. By PROM's rules, members did not commission any study but limited themselves to approving or rejecting manuscripts proposed by the advisors, provided that these manuscripts had already secured a publisher.⁶⁵ Beyond that, it is not easy to gauge how involved individual members were in PROM's affairs. From Kennan's correspondence to Wasson, it seems that they both were quite active, and that Kennan had "the last word" on some of PROM's projects.⁶⁶ In general, we need to be cautious not to overestimate or underestimate PROM's role: the members did not commission any works, but they could very well deny a manuscript funding for a variety of reasons, including politics.

In Erlich's case, finding a satisfactory publisher proved difficult. He originally intended to publish his manuscript with the University of California Press, however, the continuous requests to shorten the length of the text for reasons of "readability" and "manageability," combined with Erlich's sense

61. The National Committee for a Free Europe was founded in 1951 by Allen Dulles, who was later to become director of the CIA. For a good reference dealing with the Committee and its projects, see Katalin Kádár Lynn, *The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare: The Cold War Organizations Sponsored by the National Committee for a Free Europe / Free Europe Committee* (Saint Helena, 2013). Regarding the claim that PROM sponsored subsequent issues of *Harvard Slavic Studies*, one need only check the acknowledgments in the volumes.

62. PFA, "Organizations," folder 73 (Annual Report of the Committee for the Promotion of Advanced Slavic Cultural Studies Incorporated 1952).

63. For instance: Wiktor Weintraub, *The Poetry of Adam Mickiewicz* (The Hague, 1954), Morris Halle, *The Sound Patterns of Russian: A Linguistic and Acoustical Investigation* (The Hague, 1959), Morris Halle, ed., *For Roman Jakobson: Essays on Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday, 11 October 1956* (The Hague, 1956).

64. PFA, "Organizations," folder 77 (Report of the PROM Committee for the Calendar Year 1962).

65. Leiden UB, SCH 1, series 2, section 14, folder 776 (Wellek to Van Schooneveld, April 2, 1963).

66. GFKP, box 51, folder 2 (Wasson to Kennan, November 23, 1953), accessed on November 28, 2023 https://findingaids.princeton.edu/catalog/MC076_c00622. In the letter, Wasson asks Kennan's approval of a project. Even though I could not establish what project Wasson was referring to, his words clearly imply that Kennan would make the final decision.

that the editors lacked any real expertise in the field, led him to pull the manuscript.⁶⁷

Enter Cornelis Van Schooneveld, a young Dutch linguist trained at Columbia by Roman Jakobson thanks to a Rockefeller grant and a personal acquaintance with Erlich.⁶⁸ In the early 1950s, Van Schooneveld had just begun his work as the editor of the new Slavic series at Mouton, a typography founded in The Hague in the nineteenth century that converted to an international publishing house in 1953.⁶⁹ Competent and animated by a genuine interest in Russian formalism, Van Schooneveld decided to publish Erlich's bulky manuscript in his new series SPR and proved an attentive and engaged editor. Having secured a publisher, Jakobson could now pitch *RF* to Gordon Wasson, who granted \$400 (some \$4600 today) towards its publication, a standard sum for PROM. After Karpovich's death in 1959, Van Schooneveld joined the ranks of PROM's academic supervisors, a testimony to the importance of the PROM-Mouton collaboration throughout the years.⁷⁰

From the correspondence between Van Schooneveld and Erlich, we learn that the former was bothered by Erlich's anti-Soviet stance, which he perceived as a lack of academic neutrality. In one of the letters, he asked Erlich to remove a particularly nasty passage against Soviet literary policy. While agreeing to remove the passage, Erlich also replied that Van Schooneveld's uneasiness stemmed out of his lack of knowledge of American academic discourse, where such a position was completely appropriate. He also added that politics is only "objectionable" in the scholarly context when it is "forcibly injected" into the discussion, and we surmise that he thought that there could not be any apolitical discussion when the Soviet Union was concerned.⁷¹

One last notable fact is that Erlich was particularly uneasy about acknowledging PROM's grant and wrote to Van Schooneveld that he would consult with Jakobson on the matter.⁷² Without Jakobson's response to Erlich, I can neither offer conclusive details on this part of the story nor explain why Erlich ultimately decided to acknowledge the grant, but it seems that PROM's presence, while uninfluential in Erlich's choice of topic, was quite clearly felt and was the cause for tension for Erlich and Van Schooneveld. Interestingly,

67. Leiden UB, SCH 1, series 2, section 14, folder 200 (Erlich to Van Schooneveld, June 1, 1954).

68. Jan Paul Hinrichs, *The C. H. Van Schooneveld Collection in Leiden University Library. Editorial correspondence and documents relating to Mouton & Co., The Hague, and other papers in the field of Slavistics and Linguistics* (Leiden, 2001), 2. Van Schooneveld was at Columbia from 1946 to 1949, when he was awarded his PhD.

69. Johan van der Auwera, "Linguistics, the first fifty years . . . and a little more," *Linguistics* 51 (Jubilee Issue, August 2013): 1–8, here 1.

70. More precisely, of the 77 PROM subsidies, 21 were granted to Mouton, and many of them were spent towards monograph belonging to SPR. While Wasson's grants surely did not cover Mouton's entire publication costs, it was a valuable help. Indeed, when Wasson began thinking about ending the project, Van Schooneveld appeared visibly alarmed, Leiden UB, SCH 1, series 1, section 2 (Correspondence with Mouton Employees), folder 57/6 (Van Schooneveld to Peter De Ridder, November 26, 1962).

71. Leiden UB SCH 1, series 2, section 14, folder 200 (Erlich to Van Schooneveld, November 23 and December 21, 1954). Unfortunately, given the lack of specification in the letter, I could not establish what passage Van Schooneveld was referring to.

72. Leiden UB SCH 1, series 2, section 14 (Erlich to Van Schooneveld, January 19, 1954).

Kennan and Wasson too desired to keep the activity of the network as quiet as possible. As Kennan wrote: “It [PROM] has successfully avoided publicity and the attendant importunities, which has left it free to make its usefulness felt quietly and effectively at the most advantageous points.”⁷³

The publication of *RF* was made possible by the cooperation between the author, Jakobson, Van Schooneveld, and PROM. The correspondence between Erlich and Van Schooneveld reveals an interesting moment in the activity of the network: Van Schooneveld, acting as a mediator and trying to defend his own understanding of academic neutrality, tried to compromise with Erlich, who was both voicing his political views and operating on his own conception of academic non-neutrality. Politically, Erlich had been a member of the Jewish Labor Bund in his Polish years and was a socialist until the mid-1940s: later, he had grown dissatisfied with the Marxian approach to literature and had come to view the Soviet Union under Stalin as a gross distortion of the original Marxist ideas.⁷⁴ Until the 1950s, however, he would occasionally take part in debates organized by socialist organizations.⁷⁵ His surgical decoupling of Russian formalism from the Soviet context, then, is related both to his personal conviction and to his understanding of what was desirable from an émigré scholar writing on the 1920s (and one, we might add, with a somewhat red past).

As for Wasson, while he personally had no say whatsoever in the organization of the text and had no contact with the authors, the presence of people like him in networks sponsoring academic publications concretely shaped the boundaries of what was permissible. Indeed, Wasson was very much able to perform background checks on scholars. For instance, when Chizhevsky was appointed visiting Professor at Harvard in 1951, Wasson personally checked his political integrity at Kennan’s behest.⁷⁶ Similarly, when in 1948 a scandal broke out at Columbia after the Polish government sponsored the appointment of Manfred Kridl as Professor of Polish, he reassured the provost that Kridl was “first class.”⁷⁷ From the more restricted perspective of *RF*, Wasson was an intermediary, as he merely signed his approval for the grant. However, as the initiator of PROM, he was a mediator, actively mobilizing substantial financial resources toward a specific goal and imbuing the field he set out to sponsor with a clear political direction.

RF was assembled by different actors: Roman Jakobson, Erlich’s supervisor, pitched the manuscript to the association Wasson had put together after Erlich had found an editor willing to publish the manuscript. The study of the scholarly byt starts unearthing the relationship between evolution and genesis: it is now apparent how the presentation of Russian formalism as a

73. GFKP, box 51, folder 2 (Kennan to Wasson, March 19, 1952), accessed October 10, 2022 https://findingaids.princeton.edu/catalog/MC076_c00622.

74. Erlich, *Child of a Turbulent Century*, 31–33, 127 and 154.

75. *Ibid.*, 152–53.

76. FPA, “Organizations,” folder 72 (Wasson to Kennan, April 11, 1949).

77. Travis Beal Jacobs, “The Adam Mickiewicz Controversy, 1948: Eisenhower and Columbia” *Konteksty Kultury* 12, no. 4, (2015): 484. On Kridl see also Michał Mrugalski, “Formalism in Poland,” in Mrugalski, Schahadat, and Wutsdorff, eds., *Central and Eastern European Literary Theory*, 258–77.

specifically non-Soviet, non-Marxist phenomenon was the result of the network's complex activity. On the one hand, this presentation resonates with Erlich's political views, as well as with the expectations placed on academic writings and upheld by the nascent field's sponsorship by people like Wasson. On the other hand, Erlich met with resistance from Van Schooneveld, who operated in a different environment and insisted that Erlich renounce his most incendiary passages.

Literature is One, as Art and Humanity are One

Together with Jakobson, Wellek and Warren are the most widely cited authors in *RF*'s doctrine section. Even though in 1935 Jakobson too had pointed out that some of formalism's "errors of youth" needed revision, it is to *Theory of Literature* that one must turn to understand the sublimation of formalism into structuralism. In 1955 the act of transforming a regionally defined theory into a universal mode of literary analysis was inextricably related, for the North American reader, to the ideas expressed in *Theory of Literature* as a culmination of a specific reformatory project led by New Criticism, and not so much to Jakobson, who, by that point, was working at MIT and Harvard on linguistics and cybernetics.⁷⁸ The link between *RF* and New Criticism was also strengthened by the presence of Wellek's preface. I will show here how the monograph, an actor in its own right that, much like *RF*, cannot be reduced to its authors alone, provided the basis for one of the key structuring axes of *RF*.

American New Criticism was a heterogeneous group of writers, literary critics, and scholars who began their activity in the late 1920s. By the 1940s, many of them had climbed up to important positions in American universities and started pushing for reforms in the way literature was taught in classes at the undergraduate level. Between 1938 and 1943, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks published two handbooks that later became staple items in undergraduate literary teaching for thirty years, *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, where they argued for heightened attention to the formal characteristic of literature and refused psychological and strictly biographical interpretations of the text.⁷⁹

By the mid-1940s, the New Critics started seeing results in their quest to reform academic literary teaching. For instance, the guidelines contained in Harvard's 1945 report, *General Education in a Free Society*, for reforming curricula in post-war universities was modeled after New Critics' ideas.⁸⁰ At the graduate level, the reformatory impetus of the New Critics concretized in a series of initiatives, like summer schools of creative writing and criticism

78. On Jakobson's work at MIT, see especially Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, "From Information Theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the Cybernetic Apparatus" *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (2011): 96–126.

79. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York, 1938); Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (New York, 1943).

80. Graff, *Professing Literature*, 162.

supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.⁸¹ *Theory of Literature*, a complex assemblage itself published by New Critic Austin Warren and émigré scholar René Wellek in 1949 thanks to a Rockefeller grant, thus summarizes a set of theoretical tenets and reformatory principles that the two authors and New Criticism at large had been promoting for a decade.⁸²

What the monograph proposes is an organon of methods for the production of literary scholarship of high quality derived from the principles expressed by various literary schools across Europe and America, even though the book mostly testifies to the synthesis between the Prague Linguistic Circle and New Criticism.⁸³ Throughout the book, the authors touch on several key problems of textual interpretation, and argue against merely psychological and biographical approaches to the study of literature, all the while defending the broadly speaking structuralist view that the text is a stratified system of norms which can be studied in their combinations “just as the phoneme can be studied.”⁸⁴

More important from my standpoint is the notion of comparative literature advanced in the book, inspired by a true universalist pathos aiming to establish a universal literary history going beyond linguistic and national differences, for: “. . . literature is one, as art and humanity are one: and in this conception lies the future of historical literary studies.⁸⁵ In the last section of the book, “The Study of Literature in the Graduate School,” the end-point of this academic reform, is spelled out. Far from a mere textual practice, a “literary theory” should result in a new type of scholar, a “professional man of letters,”⁸⁶ a “Professor of Literature” *tout court*, able to write on any topic, provided they have the necessary linguistic skills, and operating in a restructured academia where national departments have been substituted by a single Department of (Comparative) Literature. Notably, this restructured academia would have to be geographically located in the US: “One cannot yet anticipate the way in which European literary scholarship will be reconstructed. But it seems probable that, in any case, the leadership has been passed to the United States. Here the material bases have been unimpaired.”⁸⁷

One perceives that these ideas have a clear political significance. They speak directly to the new, hegemonic role that American academia wanted to occupy in the western world after WWII and propose a novel way to assign value to literary scholarship. The restructuring of the literary curriculum should provide the basis for a new type of universalist scholarship able to progress beyond national boundaries toward a theory applicable to all kinds of texts, regardless of production context. The value of a scholarly work on literature, consequently, would now be judged by its ability to “sublimate”

81. For a discussion on Rockefeller and New Criticism, see Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville, TN, 1988): 113–42.

82. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation*, 127.

83. Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 127.

84. *Ibid.*, 155.

85. *Ibid.*, 42.

86. *Ibid.*, 292.

87. *Ibid.*, 288.

a nationally or geographically defined theory or work into a universal, more perfect and refined discourse.

A direct offshoot of this project was the journal *Comparative Literature*, established in 1949 and continuing to this day.⁸⁸ Early issues of the journal hosted contributions by a variety of important scholars, like the above-mentioned Polish philologist Manfred Kridl, the proponent of an “integral” method that tied in quite well with Wellek and Warren’s ideas.⁸⁹ In general, even if the journal hosted articles of a more traditional mold, the early issues of *Comparative Literature* had a clear theoretical direction. The journal also regularly devoted space to articles on Slavic literature, thus providing much-needed space for contributions of this type to appear and circulate. As a matter of fact, the first article published by Erlich on formalism, which appeared in 1954 in *Comparative Literature*, followed Wellek and Warren’s ideas quite closely and carved a space for Russian formalists to be fully included in the group of the best international theorists worthy of being “sublimated” into the new conception of (comparative) literature.⁹⁰

Unsurprisingly, in his preface, Wellek stressed precisely the universal value of the theories of Russian formalism by asserting that *RF* should be read by all students of literature. From this perspective, Russian formalism’s sublimation into a universally applicable theory of literature through its systematic transformation into structuralism finds its *raison d’être* as the strategy that allowed Erlich to give meaning and value to the study of an unknown group of authors in the Soviet Union. The genealogical relationship between formalism and structuralism, which was crucial both in *RF* and for further academic discussions of formalism, was in 1955 constitutively dependent on the New Criticism-led post-War reformative project as expressed in *Theory of Literature*. In other words, the book as the locus where the decade-long reformatory project of New Criticism found its theoretical apex, acted as a powerful mediator in the assemblage of *RF*. More than the transformation of an early “Shklovskiiian” formalism into a mature “Jakobsonian” one, as Merrill suggests, *RF* aimed to create out of pure formalism analytical tools that would contribute to a universal model.⁹¹ As for René Wellek as a flesh and blood individual, he was invested enough in *RF* to agree to Jakobson’s request to write a preface of the book, thus strengthening the link between *RF* and New Criticism.⁹²

88. Wellek and Warren were among the members of its board, and Wellek published reviews and articles at an indefatigable rhythm.

89. Manfred Kridl, “The Integral Method of Literary Scholarship: Theses for Discussion” *Comparative Literature* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1951): 18–31.

90. Vitor Erlich, “Limits of the Biographical Approach,” *Comparative Literature* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1954): 130–37.

91. Merrill, “The North American Reception,” 299.

92. Erlich never mentions Wellek in his correspondence with Van Schooneveld, and I do not think that he was very close to Wasson either, unlike Jakobson. Wellek is mentioned a handful of times in Erlich’s autobiography: apparently was well disposed toward Erlich when the latter applied for a position at Yale in 1961 by virtue of the affinity he felt for the topic of *RF*, though it does not seem to me that the two were in direct contact. See Erlich, *Child of a Turbulent Century*, 188. It was Jakobson who asked Wellek to write the preface, as

Through scholarly byt, I have tried to open up the formalist legacy to new fields of inquiry and, at the same time, show the radical historicity of the conception of Russian formalism presented in 1955 by *RF*. An analysis of *RF* against the backdrop of a homogenous series of scholarly works on formalism revealed the evolutionarily salient feature of the book, its bifurcated plot resting on the idea of pure formalism: first, Russian formalism was stripped of its connections to the Soviet reality, and, secondly, it was placed at the inception of the development of structuralism. Starting from these features, and conceptualizing the monograph as a Latourian assemblage, the analysis opens to genesis and to the activity of a broad network of actors.

As it turns out, the publication of a 300+ page monograph on a niche topic was made possible by a transnational network of actors comprised of bankers, political personalities, Dutch editors, and American monographs. The scholarly byt reveals *RF* embeddedness in the network: the severing of formalism from its Soviet ground is the result of a complex compromise between the political views of the author, his understanding of the academic discourse in the 1950s, the academic values of the editor, and the presence of PROM. The stringing of formalism to the structural parable was mediated especially by the Comparative Literature project of *Theory of Literature*.

Much has changed since 1955, and scholarly contributions on formalism are now numerous. Whereas in the 1960s and in 1970s the structuralist perspective was still dominant in western scholarship, different perspectives quickly appeared.⁹³ As early as 1969, Jurij Striedter had analyzed the points of contact between formalism and *Rezeptionsästhetik*, something he expanded on in the 1980s.⁹⁴ In 1984, Peter Steiner questioned the unity of formalism as a coherent literary theory and problematized its relationship to structuralism.⁹⁵ However, the idea of pure formalism and its corollaries was not so easily discarded in the Anglophone sphere, especially in encyclopedic entries and other introductory materials on formalism, a problem diagnosed by Steiner, Striedter, and later Merrill.⁹⁶

The history of the reception of formalism in western countries is complex. An exhaustive discussion of this history is beyond the scope of this article,

I gathered from the letter from Erlich to Van Schooneveld, from December 21, 1954 already referenced in footnote 68.

93. The juxtaposition between formalism and structuralism is explicit in an influential anthology of texts published at the beginning of the 1970s: Krystyna Pomorska and Ladislav Matjeka, eds., *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). The idea of the “evolution” or “restating” of formalist ideas in Structuralist terms also informs Pomorska’s own monograph: Krystyna Pomorska, *Russian Formalist Theory and Its Poetic Ambiance* (The Hague, 1968).

94. Jurij Striedter, “Zur formalistischer Theorie der Prosa und der literarischen Evolution,” in Jurij Striedter, ed., *Russischer Formalismus: Texte zur allgemeinen Literaturtheorie und zur Theorie der Prosa* (Munich, 1979); and Jurij Striedter, *Literary Structure, Evolution, and Value: Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism Reconsidered* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

95. Peter Steiner, *Formalism: A Metapoetics* (Ithaca, 1984).

96. Merrill, *The Origins of Russian Literary Theory*, 34; Striedter, *Literary Structure*, 4; Peter Steiner, “Russian Formalism,” in Raman Selden, ed., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 11–29.

as is a discussion of RF's influence on this history. What I want to suggest is that the notion of the scholarly byt could be applied to further the study of this topic. While Russian formalism was confined to Slavic departments in the 1950s, the concerted action of Roman Jakobson and several other actors around the world made it possible to export it onto European soil and, contextually, to broaden its resonance in the US beyond the Slavic bubble.⁹⁷ In 1965, Lee Lemon and Marion Reiss published the first English language anthology. In the same year, Jakobson and Tzvetan Todorov authored a French anthology of formalist texts.⁹⁸ Erlich's monograph was translated into German and Italian at about the same time.⁹⁹

By considering key texts in the reception of formalism from the perspective of scholarly byt, we could at once trace the evolution of the discourse on the topic and then retrospectively relate this plane to its genesis. By investigating given publications as assemblages produced by various networks, this methodology would reveal how the academic discourse on formalism was dependent on a variety of different actors at different times. In true formalist spirit, scholarly byt would show the full complexities of how formalism was made and remade.

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97. On Jakobson and the establishment of French (structural) theory in the 1950s and 60s, see Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory* (Durham, NC, 2023), 114–22.

98. Tzvetan Todorov, ed., *Théorie de la littérature : Textes des formalistes russes réunis, présentés et traduits par Tzvetan Todorov; Préface de Roman Jakobson* (Paris, 1965). Lee Lemon and Marion Reiss, eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln, NE, 1965). Some interesting work has been carried out on the reception of Russian formalism in the 1960s in France: Frédéric Matonti, "Mezhdu Moskvoi i Pragoi: Pervonachal'noe vospriiatie russkogo formalizma frantsuzskimi intellektualami-kommunistami," in Tat'iana Kruglova, ed., *Politizatsiia polia iskusstva: Istoricheskie versii, teoreticheskie podkhody, esteticheskaia spetsifika* (Ekaterinburg, 2015), 214–39.

99. Victor Erlich, *Il formalismo russo*, trans. Marcella Bassi (Milan, 1966); Victor Erlich, *Russischer Formalismus*, trans. Marlene Lohner (Munich, 1964).