

On the Significance of Historical Poetics: In Lieu of a Foreword

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Abstract This invited foreword to a cluster of four essays on historical poetics seeks to establish how the relevance of Historical Poetics is reclaimed today. Affinities, differences, and questions of commensurability and historical contextualization are raised as part of the discussion. The foreword also attempts to resituate Historical Poetics within current debates on “world literature.” In this light it reconsiders the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, suggesting that he performed a flight away from the largely Eurocentric tenor of the Russian Formalists.

Keywords world literature, Historical Poetics, literary theory, orality, Eurocentrism

The four thoughtful and deeply engaging articles in this cluster, different as they may be, share a determination to involve Historical Poetics in current debates on theory; they are marked by an ambition to unlock the potential of a past paradigm of thinking about literature and culture. How does one do that? How does one prolong the life of a current of thought that many would salute as a glorious but distant episode, a largely closed chapter? In what follows, I will briefly review the benefits, perhaps also some of the risks, flowing from this remarkable exercise in renewing the significance of historical poetics for our day.

1. Making Things Relevant

The four essays approach the task of reassigning value to Alexander Veselovsky's work in somewhat different ways. At its most insistent, renewal comes from aligning Veselovsky, the founder of Historical Poetics in Russia who began elaborating its methodology in the 1880s and was already using the term during the first half of the 1890s (in Germany the word combination "historical poetics" had been in evidence in one of Scherer's articles published in 1876; cf. Zhirmunskii 1940: 27), with a modern agenda in literary and cultural theory. This magisterial road is visible particularly in Kate Holland's and Ilya Kliger's essays. Underlying Holland's argument is the assumption, also present to some extent in the other essays, especially Boris Maslov's, that Veselovsky can be legitimately considered a forefather of comparative literature. In the Russian case this is certainly valid, as this is how Veselovsky was seen by many in Russia, not least by the enemies of comparative literature in the years after World War II. At the same time, casting Veselovsky in this role is bound to raise questions. To begin with, Veselovsky practices a method he himself would call "comparative-historical"; he is less interested in literature as an autonomous institution and discourse and more curious about its cohabitation with other institutions and discourses. *Comparative* here refers to the need to identify how literature evolves in comparison with myth and folklore rather than how one literature evolves in comparison with another. Veselovsky thus employs what he calls a "genetic approach" to literature; crucially, this makes him a thinker who largely—and deliberately—focuses on prenatal and premodern *literature* rather than on *literatures* in their nationally distinctive plurality. He is not a comparatist in the established Western understanding, for he chose most of the time not to work within the framework of national literatures nor indeed to direct his attention to modern cultural forms as such. A geneticist rather than a comparatist in our modern sense of the word, when it came to literature Veselovsky was beholden to a framework of analysis which in Russia gained currency as *vseobshchaia literatura* (universal literature).¹ For Veselovsky, this is often the premodern repository of shared images, motifs, plots, and rhetorical figures

1. On Veselovsky and *vseobshchaia literatura*, see Popova 2015: 22–25. Irina Popova is careful to point out the differences between Veselovsky's "vseobshchaia literatura" and the French paradigm of *littérature générale* (Popova 2015: 22–3). For a comprehensive account of Veselovsky's poetics and its historical principles in Russian see Shaitanov 2006; in English see Kliger and Maslov 2016; on the Russian school of Historical Poetics and Veselovsky's place in it, often from a comparative Russian-German perspective, see the contributions in Kemper et al. 2013. In Russia Veselovsky is sometimes seen as the progenitor of a specific Russian school of comparativism which is based on the typological study of cultures from the broader perspective of social evolution (see, e.g., Tiupa 2016).

(devices) that persist in modern writing. This “universal literature” (or even “common literature” if we are to capture the semantics of *shared* images, motifs, plots, and rhetorical figures) differs from “world literature” in its modern discursive articulation as surmounting, following both Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s and Karl Marx’s blueprints, the limitations of already developed national literatures. (I discuss the relevance of Veselovsky for current debates on world literature further below.) All this makes the question of Veselovsky’s significance for postcolonial theory, which is only one of the extremely important questions Holland asks in her essay, all the more relevant. Are his premodern and prenatal syncretism and hybridization of the same order as the processes of creolization that Édouard Glissant highlights? More generally, how can one render any substantive differences between them seminal for a discussion of historical poetics that acknowledges both the continuities and the discontinuities between Veselovsky and the array of thinkers Holland, Kliger, Maslov, and Jessica Merrill dwell on in their seminal essays? The temptation of turning Veselovsky into a contemporary is so understandably strong that it almost naturally defies attempts to point to mediation and the need to consider historically changing frames of commensurability. The four essays in this cluster are sometimes prepared to deliberately take the risk of arguing against the grain of precise historical contextualization to capture — or re-create afresh — the enduring impulses of historical poetics.

But these four essays also suggest an alternative approach: tracing the significance of historical poetics by arguing its importance for key formations in twentieth-century literary and cultural theory in the 1920s and 1930s (Russian Formalism and Mikhail Bakhtin), which in turn had an impact on developments closer to our own historical moment. I will discuss this alternative in the following two sections, but let me for now briefly draw attention to a vital episode, also from the 1920s–1930s, which elucidates the attempts of another mainstream formation, Soviet Marxism, to utilize Historical Poetics for its own goals. These attempts, largely neglected by scholarship, are linked to the Soviet Marxist concept of *literary process* (*literaturnyi protsess*), a term coined in the late 1920s at the Leningrad Institute for the Comparative History of the Literature and Languages of the West and East (ИЛЯЗВ).² It was here that a host of Marxist literary scholars began to weigh the option of marrying Marxism to Historical Poetics. One of them, Nikolai Iakovlev (1930: 47), insisted that the task of literary scholarship was to understand the “development,” the “movement” of literature, in other words “the literary

2. Indicatively, at its foundation in 1919 the institute was given the name of Veselovsky; his name was removed in 1921.

process.³³ A specific discipline had to be considered that would facilitate the study of the “literary process,” but, significantly, rather than inventing such a discipline from scratch, it was advisable, according to Iakovlev (*ibid.*: 78), to “reinstate in some measure the rights of literary *history* or *historical poetics*” (emphasis in the original).⁴ Just as Valentin Voloshinov was attempting at that juncture a methodological synthesis which in his 1926 article “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry” (“Slovo v zhizni i slovo v poezii”)⁵ he would term “sociological poetics,” Iakovlev (*ibid.*) believed that the time was ripe for a new doctrine resting on “the classics of Marxist methodology (especially Plekhanov) and the classics of literary science (of Alexander Veselovsky’s type).”⁶ Historical Poetics in the late 1920s was thus of notable significance not just for Russian Formalism but also for Marxism. In a sense the story of literary history as a discipline during the second half of the 1920s in the Soviet Union could be told as the story of a constant triangulation among Marxism, Formalism, and Historical Poetics with the complicating presence (though not comparable in strength or impact) of two more strands—psychoanalytic literary scholarship and civic-moralistic literary criticism.

2. Veselovsky and Russian Formalism

The essays in this cluster also pursue Veselovsky’s relevance by furnishing fascinating accounts of his lingering presence in the literary and cultural theory of the Russian Formalists. Merrill’s essay is particularly interesting in this respect. Merrill’s starting point is what she takes to be the retroactive obfuscation of the differences that obtained early on between Formalism and Structuralism: “If the amalgamation of Formalism with Structuralism led to an impasse—and even the death of literary theory in the 1970s—it is worth approaching the history of literary theory from another angle: connecting Russian Formalism not with what came after but with what came before.” To assert that this “amalgamation” led to the “death” of literary theory is perhaps to overstate, ever so slightly, the argument of my article on the birth and

3. Iakovlev’s text was first presented as a paper at a meeting of the Group on the Methodology of Literature at ILYAZV (Nauchno-issledovatel’skii institut sravnitel’noi istorii literatury i iazykov Zapada i Vostoka) on May 7, 1927 (1930: 78 n. 1) (cf. Iakovlev 1930: 78 n. 1). The article is dated 1927–1930 (cf. *ibid.*: 80).

4. The Russian original reads: “restavrirovat’ v izvestnoi mere prava *istorii* literatury ili *istoricheskoi* poetiki.” In the Russian text the emphases are signaled through spacing.

5. Voloshinov published his article “On the Borders of Poetics and Linguistics” (“O granitsakh poetiki i lingvistiki”), which he dedicated to Iakovlev (1930: 203), in the same 1930 volume in which Iakovlev’s article was published.

6. The Russian original reads: “klassikov marksistskoi metodologii i klassikov literaturnoi nauki (tipa Aleksandra Veselovskogo).”

death of modern literary theory (Tihanov 2004). There I assert that what led to the “death” of theory—and “death” is a precondition for enabling the questions of “legacy” and “afterlife” to be posed—was the fundamental change in the respective regimes of relevance that literature enjoyed at the time literary theory was born and at the time it came to an end. Reflection on literature never ceased, but what did cease was a regime of thinking about literature (literary theory) that was only possible so long as literature itself partook of a particular regime of relevance—that which would see it as an autonomous and specific institution and discourse. The retrospective obfuscation of differences between Structuralism and Formalism, which Merrill is absolutely right to emphasize, is a phenomenon of a lower order; it is not the condition for the “death” of theory. The reason for the disappearance of literary theory and its gradual dissolution in a broader cultural theory (of which semiotics was the first prominent exponent) is the disappearance of a particular and historically circumscribable regime of relevance, which—at least in the West—takes its origins in the last third of the eighteenth century with Romanticism’s insistence on the autonomy of art (located in the autonomy of the writer, correspondingly cast as marginal, a prophet or a madman, even a monster) and culminates in Formalism’s claim that this autonomy is grounded not in the personality of the author but in something impersonal and thus much more important: language. When this regime of relevance informed by belief in autonomy and specificity was no longer tenable, literary theory became an equally untenable proposition. Other forms of reflection on literature followed, with literary theory reemerging in some of them in a dispersed and dissipated manner (e.g., New Formalism).⁷

Be that as it may, Merrill believes that it makes more sense to connect “Russian Formalism not with what came after but with what came before.” This is an interesting and potentially productive move. Merrill constructs a fascinating scenario which sees Formalism (essentially the Moscow wing, especially Roman Jakobson) emerging from the Moscow Linguistic Circle’s interest in and practice of dialectology. This is a long overdue contribution to our knowledge of the *prehistory* of Russian Formalism. Whether it could also serve as a story of its genesis and whether genesis is what should be at stake here is perhaps an open question. Edward Said preferred to discuss beginnings rather than geneses, and maybe Merrill’s valuable contribution could be seen in that light too. The Moscow Linguistic Circle’s study of dialectology (although we do not seem to be told exactly what *dialect* meant for the Formalists, a geographic variety or another distinct variety of language whose

7. Among other seminal engagements with my argument on the birth and death of modern literary theory, see Rodowick 2014.

specificity is defined by social, psychological, or formal criteria) could be interpreted as one of the lines that converge in the compound prehistory of Russian Formalism. No less and no more than its *pre*-history, for, after all, Russian Formalism comes into its own when it leaves the domain of dialectology and works out its own account of language. Had Jakobson and his peers remained dialectologists for the rest of their careers, one wonders whether we would still be reading them today. To explain how theories are born is to trace their prehistories just as much as it is to point to how they break with these backgrounds and produce something qualitatively new.

Veselovsky here could indeed be of help, as Merrill rightly suggests. He clearly states that historical poetics is at least in part inspired by the application of the comparative-historical method in linguistics. Dialectology, the study of language variations that come before and/or survive the emergence of a codified standard literary language, was the natural counterpart of folkloristics within a paradigm of cultural history that explored verbal creativity prior to the emergence of literature as an autonomous institution and discourse. In a sense, then, it was the radical disassociation from this approach and the turn from a comparative-historical to a more synchronic linguistics that marked the launch of Formalism's own journey toward methodological distinctiveness.

Ultimately, Merrill is right in posing the fundamental question about how formalism relates to earlier ways of thinking about literature, such as those nurtured by aesthetics and psychology. Following Ilona Svetlikova, Merrill is prepared to assign associationist psychology an important place in the genesis of formalism (and to link this to Veselovsky's own attention to the psychological aspects of verbal art). It seems to me necessary to stress that all major iterations of literary studies in Russia around World War I inherited aesthetics and psychology as unavoidable starting points. This is true of the Formalists, Bakhtin, and also Gustav Shpet, for whom — at the beginning of their careers — aesthetics was very much the only show in town. In the early 1920s Shpet's preference for discussing the verbal work of art in the framework of aesthetics paralleled Bakhtin's interest in categories such as form, author, hero, and dialogue from the point of view of aesthetics rather than from a perspective grounded specifically in literary theory. The same is also true of Victor Shklovsky's initial accounts of art's power to deliver estrangement, a power the early Shklovsky described in terms of wider aesthetic and even social utility (Tihanov 2005). In the latter half of the 1920s, however, Shpet continued to discuss literature in a fashion informed by and committed to aesthetics and a neo-Humboldtian philosophy of language, whereas Bakhtin's theoretical discourse gradually broke away from aesthetics and evolved toward philosophy of culture, and the Formalists' own move (earlier than

Bakhtin's) away from aesthetics and psychology took them to literary theory as a specific mode of thinking about literature. Thus while they all shared a common (in many ways fixed) starting point in aesthetics and psychology, the distinctiveness of Russian Formalism, Bakhtin, and Shpet was conditioned by whether they moved away from these frameworks and, if so, how and with what specific outcomes.

3. Veselovsky and Bakhtin

Other versions of relevance are offered in Maslov's and Kliger's respective essays. A slightly overgenerous comparison between Veselovsky and Friedrich Nietzsche ("the two intellectual giants") aside, Maslov has to be credited with drawing attention to the need to reread Veselovsky in light of current debates on world literature. He helpfully reminds us that Veselovsky also worked with data he could only access in translation (from Arabic, Chinese, etc.). Maslov builds up the problematic of translation by incorporating Erich Auerbach in his story, in which Bakhtin and Viktor Zhirmunsky are also central protagonists. Using existing research on the Bakhtin Circle's critique of Formalism (and also on Bakhtin's François Rabelais book, in which the boundary between self and other is removed), he offers a more nuanced view of Bakhtin's subsequent preparedness to work within the framework of Historical Poetics. Morphology and historicity for Maslov are not necessarily inimical toward each other. Even if the transition between "motif" and "motive" in Maslov's essay may not be traceable in all its steps, his is a pressing affirmation of copresence as a central idea of Historical Poetics. (*Copresence* here is interpreted both artistically, as earlier styles and conventions resiliently lingering in the presence, and ethically, as the copresence of voices and ethical concerns across chronological boundaries.)

It seems to me that the question of how Veselovsky's work relates to our present concerns over "world literature" (I place the words in quotation marks here to signal the fact that "world literature," in the currently prevalent Anglo-Saxon usage, is a construct that has its own baggage and limitations) is worthy of further attention. Significantly, we need to pose the question about orality and world literature or about the capacity of world literature to absorb folklore. This should test the legitimacy of world literature as a construct of modernity (and of the blindly secular alliance between world literature and globalization). A premodern world literature, grounded in the spread of global religions and zonal koines, compels us to rethink orality—less as a source and more as sublated presence. This is an anthropological perspective on world literature which could be facilitated by further engagement with Historical Poetics (see Schüttpelz 2005).

How premodern forms persist within modernity—and signal wholesome alternatives to its many discords—is the central preoccupation of Klinger’s elegant and wide-ranging essay. The term “ontology” in its title may make some readers nervous, but the stakes are high, and the courage it takes to insist on historicizing social ontology, and in a nonlinear fashion at that, is not insignificant. Klinger’s article proceeds from the notion of the “nonsimultaneity” (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*) of the contemporary. His main heroes are Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Fredric Jameson, but he could have just as easily mentioned Siegfried Kracauer, who named the principle of “non-simultaneity” I have referred to above. The political and ethical charge of Klinger’s piece is refreshingly leftist, but the seminal paradox here is that the conduit of these multiple reconstructions of the endurance of the archaic at the heart of modernity is Bakhtin, a thinker of changing persuasions who by the mid-1930s had moved away from his early liberal-dialogic stance. His Rabelais book retreats into a corporative vision of solidarity without an underlying liberal belief in the autonomy of the individual, without dialogue with the individual or respect for the individual’s private world.

Klinger discusses Bakhtin together with the Russian Formalists through the prism of cultural memory (specifically the “memory of genre”). The Formalists are interpreted as a link between Veselovsky and Bakhtin. The continuities between the Formalists and Bakhtin have been disregarded for too long, including ultimately the most vital of these continuities: the fact that both the Formalists and Bakhtin seek an explanation for the specificity of particular literary genres that resides in the way language functions in them. After all, the novel has a unique status as a genre, because it is the site of heteroglossia. In the novel language works in a heteroglot fashion; in the epic it doesn’t (or so Bakhtin’s argument goes). A further point of affinity between the Formalists and Bakhtin: the marginal and the underdog can ascend to a position of supremacy in a kind of merry-go-round of genres, as in the fortunes of the novel in Bakhtin or the scheme of literary evolution outlined by Shklovsky and Yuri Tynianov.⁸ The concept of “memory of genre,” on which Klinger elaborates so persuasively, alludes to the great unspoken in this essay: the question of tradition. (This is a cardinal question—indeed a major source of anxiety—for Veselovsky, in the sense that he understood “the freedom of the personal poetic act” to be “constrained by tradition” and assumed, in a way that testifies to his post-romantic vantage point, that by studying tradition one might be able to grasp better the “boundaries and essence of *personal* creativity” [Veselovsky quoted in Zhirmunskii 1959: 121;

8. On the underlying continuities and differences between Bakhtin and the Formalists, see Tihanov 2016.

italics added].)⁹ Endurance of earlier cultural layers, semantic deposits surviving and being reactivated by the appearance of new works that rearrange the canon — all of this can be aligned with a conservative take on the power of art to reconfigure its own sequences in the wake of “great works” of literature (in the way Fyodor Dostoevsky was seen, both by Lukács and the younger Bakhtin, to have done — a process Klinger explores with subtlety and discernment). It is not necessarily the intersection between Russian/Soviet theory, on the one hand, and Western Marxism, on the other, that delivered this argument. T. S. Eliot, an undoubtedly conservative thinker, was an equally ardent defender of the idea that earlier writing can be inherited at a later stage. On his reading, what he called modern poetry had descended from John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets, even if the continuity was temporarily broken by John Milton and John Dryden. The cardinal difference is of course (as Klinger and the other contributors to this cluster rightly suggest) that Bakhtin in particular was less interested in great individual works. He was fascinated by the more profound and less personal process through which the writer becomes a mouthpiece, of which the memory of genre avails itself across “deep time.” Klinger is thus after a democratization of tradition that strips it of the potential overtones of elitism and grounds it in the ultimately anonymous work performed by the memory of genre.

Here Bakhtin is another resource for the conversation on historical poetics and world literature that is bound to gather pace thanks to this excellent cluster of articles. Strange as this might appear at first sight, Bakhtin is a thinker who resists and flees Eurocentrism. The bulk of his work appears to rely on a Western canon to validate his theses. The Rabelais book begins with a comparison of Rabelais with Voltaire, William Shakespeare, and Miguel de Cervantes, for example. But in truth Bakhtin (Veselovsky is indeed a powerful predecessor here) is more interested in the literature and culture of premodernity, the time when Europe was not yet a dominant force, before the Continent began to see itself as the center of the world. Bakhtin is thus a thinker much more fascinated by the subterranean cultural deposits of folklore, of minor discourses, of ancient genres, of anonymous verbal masses — all of which long predate European culture of the age of modernity (beginning roughly with the Renaissance), which is the only dominant European culture we know. Even Rabelais’s novel interests him for its more traditional, pre-modern, folklore-based layers. Bakhtin’s flight away from Eurocentrism is thus the outcome of writing on cultures that are non-European by dint of

9. In the original Russian: “Svoboda lichnogo poeticheskogo akta ogranichena predaniem: izuchiv eto predanie, my, mozhet byt’, blizhe opredelim granitsy i sushchnost’ lichnogo tvorchestva.”

being pre-European—cultures that occupy the old shared territory of folklore, rites, and epic narratives before Europe even began to emerge as an entity on the cultural and political map of the world. His is an anti-Eurocentric journey not in space but in time. His contemporary Nikolai Marr, of whom Bakhtin thought highly, did something similar in his work on semantic paleontology.¹⁰

Importantly, in this respect Bakhtin moved further away from the Formalists. It is true that Shklovsky could be regarded as an early practitioner of “world literature” in the sense that he was a great believer in analyzing literature (in his case prose) in translation. His work on Laurence Sterne, Cervantes, and others is embedded in a different understanding of literariness. While the Formalists agreed that literariness is the quality that separates literary from non-literary texts, they disagreed on where literariness should be located and how its effects are to be studied. Unlike Jakobson, Shklovsky believed that literariness does not reside solely at the micro level of language. Consequently, to capture its effects one does not necessarily have to read in the original. Literariness, for Shklovsky, is to be located also on the levels of composition or even style (parody), which are neutral with respect to the divide between the original language and translation. One of the famous discoveries of Formalist poetics—the differentiation between plot and story as a constitutive feature of literary prose—works just as well when we read a story in translation, and provided we have some knowledge of the cultural and historical background, we don’t need to read *Don Quixote* in the original to appreciate its parody of the chivalric novel. This great divide within Russian Formalism on the question of literariness opened up the space for the approach to literature we today call “world literature,” in which the insistence on the legitimacy of working in translation is paramount.¹¹

Yet the Formalists tested their concept of literariness solely on European (very occasionally also North American) material. In this sense they were unapologetically Eurocentric, blissfully (or willingly) unaware of the need to confront historically different norms of literariness in which estrangement, originality, and departure from the didactic did not play such a significant role as in Western literatures. The most trenchant critique of Russian Formalism by far is not that coming from Soviet Marxism (as we have been inclined to think during six long decades since the publication of Victor Erlich’s authoritative study) but the one voiced at the time by Soviet orien-

10. On Bakhtin and semantic paleontology, see Tihanov 2012.

11. This split within Russian Formalism on how literariness should be understood and captured was noted as early as 1938 by Dawid Hopensztand, a hugely talented recipient of the ideas of Marxism and Russian Formalism who perished in 1943 in the Warsaw ghetto (for a passable English translation of Hopensztand’s article, see Hopensztand [1989: 107–19]).

talists. Still a young PhD student in 1930 but later to emerge as the preeminent Soviet specialist on Korean language and culture, Alexander Kholodovich severely questioned the claim to universal validity that Formalist literary theory had staked out. How could Formalist literary theory and poetics hold such universal validity, Kholodovich (1930: 242) asked, given that the formalists, “brought up on samples of [various] European poetics and poetic schools, omit the most basic phenomena of the poetic life of the ‘East.’”¹² It is this crying need to obviate Eurocentrism that Bakhtin’s work (and also that of Ol’ga Freidenberg and Nikolai Marr) responds to in the 1930s by embracing the study of pre- (and thus also non-) European verbal masses. Of course this flight into the recesses of folklore, myth, and the epic was itself the result of a complex negotiation over the boundaries (and desirability) of modernity that took place in Soviet (and Western) culture during the 1930s. The Formalists too would study folkloric material but never to suggest a methodologically consequential opposition between European and pre- (non-) European culture.

This is a fine collection that brings together four learned and engaging essays. What is more, these essays, at their best, do talk to one another, not least through the idea of “copenesence” which they articulate and name in different ways. This cluster is bound to advance the discussion of Historical Poetics and its wider significance, of the benefits and limits of its rediscovery, but also of the extent to which historical poetics could contribute to present debates on world literature, orality, and non-Eurocentrism.

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12. The Russian original reads: “vospitannye na obraztsakh poetik i poeticheskikh shkol Evropy, upuskaiut samye proste yavleniia poeticheskoi zhizni ‘Vostoka.’”

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