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### **A FORGOTTEN DETAIL IN THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: A UKRAINIAN VERSION OF RUSSIAN FORMALISM? NATIONAL IDENTITY, AVANT-GARDE AND IDEOLOGY IN LITERARY DISCUSSIONS IN SOVIET UKRAINE (1920s–1930s)**

*The 1920s in the Soviet Ukraine are characterised by significant variability of views on the meaning, social significance and mechanism of art and literature, however, all this theoretical and practical variety was limited by political restriction imposed by official communist ideology. Avant-garde groups and movements enriched modernist discussions by drawing attention to the fact that the revolution in arts and literature was of the same nature as political and social revolution. Numerous Soviet writers, poets, artists, philologists, etc. (including Ukrainian writers with their own national agenda) took part in these discussions; many of them were members of different literary movements, groups and organisations – and of course they had a different aesthetic orientation.*

*One of the most important topics of Soviet theoretical discussions in the 1920s was the dualism of “form” and “content” in literature and art. Such discussions were held in Soviet Ukraine as well. Even though we cannot speak about “Ukrainian formalism” as an organised and disciplined aesthetic school, it is important to determine the “Ukrainian version” of correlation between universalist ideas of Russian formalism, internationalist Soviet ideology (in relation to the culture), and forming Ukrainian cultural identity.*

*KEY WORDS: formalism, avant-garde, identity, Soviet Ukraine, national politics.*

## **Introduction**

An actual place of the development of Formalist theory in Ukrainian literature in the 1920s and its critical reflection on this decade are almost unexplored. A rare example of an attempt to depict this topic could be an academic collection of papers “Соло триває ... (Нові голоси)” published in Lviv in 2002. Contemporary Ukrainian historians of literature and literary theorists such as Svitlana Matvienko, Vira Ageeva, Olena Haleta, Hryhory Hrabovych, Mykola Ilnycky, Jaroslav Polishchuk and others participated in the project. Even though they explore different aspects of the problem, in general we could say that they

rather draw attention to this subject than offer a deep analysis. It should also be mentioned that the problem of formalism in Soviet Ukraine has never been viewed from the point of correlation between literary theory, Marxism and a rising wave of nationalism as universalist concept at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This article focuses on examining the influence of Russian formalism on Ukrainian literary theory through the analysis of literary discussions that were held in Soviet Ukraine during the period between 1920 and 1930. The research is built on reception theory that allows us to determine how the text was perceived, reconstructed, and appropriated by the recipient.

### **The problem of reception of Russian formalism in Ukrainian culture at the beginning of 1920s**

The issue of the reception of the ideas of Russian formalism in Ukrainian culture in the 1920s and 30s first of all is related to the problem of the relationship between the imperial culture (built on universalist principles) and national culture which for a long time developed within the framework of “high culture”<sup>1</sup> and was endowed with the status of being “secondary” and “backward”.<sup>2</sup> Also, the issue of the formation of a national culture simultaneously affects the problem of national identity and the existence of a nation in its unchanging desire to identify its territorial and cultural boundaries. Ernest Gellner, reflecting on the problem of nationalism, considers this question to be based on two concepts, i.e. “state” and “nation”. Thus, he writes that “the circumstances in which nationalism has generally arisen have not normally been those in which the state itself, as such, was lacking, or when its reality was in any serious doubt. The state was only too conspicuously present. It was its boundaries and/or the distribution of power, and possibly of other advantages, within it which were resented” (Gellner 2008: 6), also adding that “two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating” (Gellner 2008: 7).

Extrapolating these theses in the Ukrainian context of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can safely say the following: first, by the 1920s, in the territory of modern Ukraine there was a potential possibility to create an independent state: in fact, in 1918 the Western Ukrainian Republic and Ukrainian People’s Republic were proclaimed. Eventually, however, at the end of 1919 the Ukraine Socialistic Soviet Republic was founded.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, there

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<sup>1</sup> The term “high culture” here expresses the imperial culture that abides by certain laws that are related to the historical meaning of empire. According to Vladimir Kantor (Кантор 2008: 23), “an empire is a political, social and structural formation that is historically predestined to conquer and subjugate various tribes and nations of different confessions”.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ukrainians were perceived in the Russian Empire not as a distinct nation, but as a part of the pan-Russian, thus cultural and ethnographic differences were perceived as a regional variation of pan-Russian development (Дмитриев 2007: 123, Ільницький 2003: 9–11).

<sup>3</sup> In 1936, it was renamed to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

was an urgent need to refresh the national culture and mark its outlines and landmarks<sup>4</sup>, as evidenced by the emergence of a large number of literary groups and organisations, each trying to assert its vision for further development.<sup>5</sup>

It should also be noted that these processes took place in the background of the policy of Ukrainisation<sup>6</sup> and New Economic Policy (NEP).<sup>7</sup> This historical and political context served as an additional impulse in the search for national identity that took place through cultural choice. Hence, national culture turned out to be a landmark / ideological space-accumulator of internal integration processes.

Let us also note that the very possibility of the reception of Russian formalist ideas indicates, on the one hand, the level of development of Ukrainian culture (that Alexander Veselovsky (Веселовский 2006: 65) calls the “crosscurrent”: “the influence of a foreign element is always determined by its internal agreement with the level of the environment on which it has to act”), and on the other hand, the openness of the culture. And here we face the interaction of the “unfamiliar” (or foreign) and “familiar” elements, which firstly lead to a creative recycling of another’s experience, and secondly awake the creativity of the perceiving environment. At the same time, the “foreign” element is so logically in-built into another system that it is quite problematic to establish the boundaries between them. That process could be well illuminated by the analysis of the discussions that were held in Soviet Ukrainian literary periodicals in the 20s. They show not only the great interest to the Formal method and its intensive reception (Boris Eichenbaum’s article was also translated into Ukrainian), but also “uncover” many other discourses that unfolded in Ukrainian culture in the 1920s such as national, European, imperial, Soviet.

### Literary discussion in Soviet Ukraine in 1921–1923

First, we should briefly dwell on the very discussions of 1921–1923, which unfolded on the pages of such publications as *Червоний шлях*, *Шляхи мистецтва*, *Жовтень*, etc. The main participants were literary critics Volodymyr Koriak<sup>8</sup> and Jurij Mezhenko,

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<sup>4</sup> This process took place within the framework of the modernist movement, which began to develop in the Ukrainian culture as early as in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became the main impulse for the search for national identity and rethinking traditional culture.

<sup>5</sup> Here is the list of the main literary groups of the 20s: in 1921 the futuristic organisation “Aspanfut” appeared, which was led by Mychajl’ Semenko, in 1922 the Association of Peasant Writers “Plug” led by Serhij Pylypenko was formed. The Association of Proletarian Writers “Hart” headed by Vasyly’ Ellan-Blakytyn was founded in 1923, a year later the literary group “Lanka” headed by Mykola Zerov appeared (in 1926 it was renamed to “Mars”), in 1925 the “VAPLITE” (“Free Academy of Proletarian Literature”) was formed, organised by Mykola Khyvylovy and Maik Johansen. In 1925 Valerjan Polishchuk founded the literary group “Avant-garde”, etc.

<sup>6</sup> The programme of *Ukrainisation* was accepted in April 1923 in the 12<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress. The programme assumed the participation of Ukrainians in the governmental system and the Ukrainian language got an official status in the Soviet Ukraine.

<sup>7</sup> *New Economic Policy* or *NEP* (an acronym for Russian *Новая экономическая политика*) – was an economic policy of Soviet Russia proposed by Vladimir Lenin. NEP represented a more capitalism-oriented economic policy, deemed necessary after the Russian Civil War, which took place from 1917 to 1922, to foster the economy of the country, which nearly collapsed. NEP was being implemented until 1929.

<sup>8</sup> In 1919–1920 he was the head of the literary and publishing department of the People’s Commissariat of Education in the Ukrainian SSR.

poet and literary critic Volodymyr Gadzinsky, writer Ivan Kulyk.<sup>9</sup> Even though all the participants talk about the “form and content” of a literary work, it would be rather difficult to consider the discussion as aimed at trying to solve this question, despite the fact that the headlines of the articles seem to appeal to the Formal theory.<sup>10</sup> In fact, almost all of them polemise rather about the form and content of proletarian literature, solving the issue from the point of vulgar socialism, following the theses of the main propagator of socialism in SSSR Alexander Bogdanov.<sup>11</sup> His logic leads from the understanding of literature as a subject subordinated to ideology: “if art is one of the ideologies of class, an element of class consciousness” and “<...> if the work reflects the worldview of only one class” (Богданов 1924: 26), then a priori the form is subject to content. According to A. Bogdanov, the content must be ideological and reflect the life of the proletarian class. As V. Koriak (Коряк 1922: 46) summed up in his article: “Formalism is an excellent weapon in the hands of our class enemies. <...> The problems of the form and content do not exist as such for proletarian art”. It could also be noted that the author was widely familiar with the theoretical works of *OPOYAZ*<sup>12</sup>; V. Koriak devoted a great part of the article to the analysis of Viktor Shklovsky’s *How Don Quijote is Made* (1921) and Viktor Zhyrmunsky’s *The Composition of Lyric Poems* (1921).

Jurij Mezhenko takes a more loyal position towards the Formal theory. Yet, at the same time he radicalises the formalists’ view on the correlation between form and content in a literary work: “Sound, image, theme, rhythms are all component parts of the form, and there is no content at all. The so-called content is an element of form” (Меженко 1923: 12).

However, despite the sharp tone of the polemic, Ukrainian periodicals of the first half of the 1920s show the inclusion of individual formalist terms in local critical discourse such as “device”, “material”, “texture”.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> He was the head of *All-Ukrainian Union of Proletarian Writers (VUSPP)* – (an acronym for Ukrainian *Всеукраїнська спілка пролетарських письменників*), after its reorganisation in 1932 became the head of the Union of Soviet Writers of Ukraine (ukr. *Спілка радянських письменників України*).

<sup>10</sup> The article by V. Koriak (Коряк: 1922) was titled “Форма і зміст”, V. Gadzinsky’s (Гадзінський: 1923) article was titled “Ще кілька слів до питання ‘форми й змісту’”, the article by I. Kulyk (Кулик: 1923) was titled “На шляхах до пролетарського мистецтва”.

<sup>11</sup> In 1918–1920 he was the ideologist of the *Proletcult* (Proletarian Cultural and Enlightenment Organization) – a communist cultural movement striving to develop culture and art with a focus on the proletariat.

<sup>12</sup> *OPOYAZ* (*Society for the Study of Poetic Language* – Russian acronym for *Общество по изучению поэтического языка*) also known as *Formal School*, which along with the *Moscow Linguistic Circle* was one of the precursor groups to Russian formalism. The group was formed in Saint Petersburg in 1916 by a group of students and professors working in literary and language studies. Its members included Victor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Jurij Tynianov, and Roman Jakobson. At different times *OPOYAZ* included Evgenij Polivanov, Leonid Jakubinsky, Osip Brik, Viktor Vinogradov, Viktor Zhyrmunsky, etc. The group was interested in uncovering the working mechanisms of literary technique, or more precisely, identifying the specific quality of language use that separated the literary text from the non-literary text. Subsequently, the Formal method had a great influence on the theory of structuralism and the movement of the so-called *New Criticism*.

<sup>13</sup> According to Aage Hansen-Love (Хансен-Леве 2001: 88), the term “texture” was taken from a cubo-futuristic painting to express the feeling of “convex surface” in order to refine the object. A. Hansen-Love refers in particular to the works of David Burluk and Sergej Zdanevich, who invented this term.

## Literary Discussion between 1925–1928 and the problem of national culture

From the second half of the 1920s, the intellectual vector of discussions changed as in the course of the Literary Discussion between 1925–1928 the question of the content of national Ukrainian literature became a focus along with a more sharply politicised tone. In this context we should consider the discussion initiated by the writer and leader of the literary association *VAPLITE* Mykola Khvylovy.

The subject of the discussion was the position of M. Khvylovy, expressed in a series of pamphlets *Про ‘сатану в бочці’, або Про графоманів, спекулянтів та інших ‘просвітян’*, 1925, *Думки проти течії*, 1926, *Апологети писаризму*, 1926, *Україна чи Малоросія*, 1926 (Хвильовий 2011). The main opponent in the discussion was the literary peasant organisation “Plug” represented by its leader and writer Serhij Pylypenko. He stood in the position of massism (massovizm) in literature: his idea was that everybody could create literature. Believing in this, he taught peasants how to write (Пилипенко, Панч 1923). On the contrary, Khvylovy’s critique was directed precisely at “education” and “massivism” in literature: “Workers and peasants could create a new art. Only provided they are intellectually developed, talented, ingenious people.” (Хвильовий 2011: 145)

In the cycle of pamphlets of 1925, the question of the artistic and aesthetic landmarks of Ukrainian literature was not yet pointed out sharply. Later M. Khvylovy had a rather categorical position: “It is true that Russian writing ranks among first-rate literatures. Our course, however, takes a different direction. Ukrainian poetry should run away from Russian literature and its styles as quickly as possible. Our orientation is on the Western European art, its style and techniques. Moscow today is the center of the pan-Union philistinism.” (Хвильовий 2011: 147)

In relation to *OPOYAZ* M. Khvylovy and his followers take a similar position: on the one hand, formalism is rejected because it is an “idealistic trend” in art, whose “root” lies in the “bourgeois worldview”, on the other hand, its terms and methods are used by them: “Talking about *OPOYAZ* it is necessary to say: if we try to embody an idea in a work of art, we are often at a loss how to convey it. Here, in a certain sense, the formalists help us as a technical school” (Хвильовий 2011: 152). And also: “neither do we follow the same path as Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson or Alexej Kruchenykh, nor do we follow it with the vulgar Marxists” (Хвильовий 2011: 152).

It is obvious that the expressed position indicates a very complex “relationship” with the “imperial” culture. On the one hand, we can see the reception of some ideas and concepts by way of “in-building” them into another system while occasionally changing their original functions.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the effort to insulate oneself from the influences of Russian literature and culture is indicated here as well.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Mychajl’ Semenko – the theorist and leader of the avant-garde movement, along with the concepts “destruction” and “construction” introduced such concepts as “texture” and “ideology” into the panfuturist discourse. In his conception of art, the “construction” and “destruction” describe the dynamics and development of art, “ideology” and “texture” describe its structure: “texture” appeals to external forms, “ideology” is equivalent to the content. The term “texture” also includes three elements – “material”, “form” and “content”. The components of “texture” could change and vary in different artistic forms. This means that the material for poetry is a not a single word, but a summary of words, motives, devises, and stylistics – all of them make up “texture” (Семенко 1924).

The dialogue on the Formal method continued on the pages of the journal *VAPLITE* which, according to Hryhory Hrabovych (Грабович 2004: 85), could be considered as a “programme repertoire” or “mission” of the magazine. In the first issue (1927) Illa Aizenshtok published the article “Десять років ОПОЯзу”. In the next issue, the magazine published the article by Roman Jakobson (Якобсон 1927) “Про реалізм у мистецтві” (with the note that the editorial does not accept the author’s too radical conclusions) and the article by Maik Johansen (Йогансен 1922) “Аналіз фантастичного оповідання”. In subsequent issues, Hryhory Maifet’s article “До питання композиції новел” and Jurij Smolych’s article “‘Nature-morte’ в художній літературі” were published. In that context, two texts by Maik Johansen should also be considered: “Елементарні закони версифікації” (1922) and “Як будується оповідання” (1926).

All this shows not only the desire to “adopt” the experience of the *Formal School*, but also the application of its tools and approaches to the analysis of literature. According to H. Hrabovych (2004: 85), such an attempt of writers “to fit into the way of talking and thinking of formalism is an interesting demonstration of formalist discourse in Ukraine”.

Subsequently, M. Khvylovy’s position became the reason for his accusation of nationalism, which resulted into the dissolution of *VAPLITE* in 1928 and led to the creation of the Pan-Ukrainian Union of Proletarian Writers. In 1934, that union became an umbrella organisation for the unification of all proletarian groups proclaiming socialistic realism as their method.

### **Discussion around Boris Eichenbaum’s article *Theory of ‘formal method’***

It is important to note not only a general interest in the experience of the Formal School, but also an attempt to develop a certain attitude towards it. Only in this context should we consider the polemic that arose around the article by Boris Eichenbaum “Теорія ‘формального методу’”. It was published in the journal *Червоний шлях* in 1926 with the note: “given the numerous requests of readers to cover the question of the “Formal method” in the pages of our journal, the editorial submits in this issue an article by B. Eichenbaum, and its criticism in the articles of Ahapij Shamraj and Zynovij Chuchmarov” (Ейхенбаум 1926: 182). The article by Vasyl’ Vojko “Формалізм і марксизм” was printed in the next issue.

However, before turning to these critical articles, let us dwell on this particular article by B. Eichenbaum and the context in which it arose. The article is, according to the author himself, “an essay on the evolution of the Formal method” (Ейхенбаум 1926: 184). Eichenbaum builds the historical retrospective of the Formal method from the question of “the sounds of verse” and “the opposition of the poetic and casual language” to the problem of “the evolution of genres and literary history” (Ейхенбаум 1926: 185). By exploring these issues, the author wants to emphasise the “evolutionary” nature of the method in response to its opponents who accused the formalists of “transforming the Formal method into a fixed system of Formalism” (Ейхенбаум 1926: 184). Here we are

talking about the polemics around the Formal method that were held in Russian periodicals in the period of 1924–1925.

As Victor Erlich (Эрlich 1996:10–25) notes in the early 1920s, Marxist critics preferred to “ignore” the sharp statements of the formalists. Later, with the growth of popularity of *OPOYAZ* in the circles of literary critics and writers, the situation changed: formalism began to be perceived as a serious competitor to *historical materialism*, which was considered to be the only true approach to the analysis of literature by the official soviet criticism.

The first one to criticise formalism was Lev Trotsky himself. In 1923 he published the article “Литература и революция”. Trotsky’s main criticism was directed towards formalism not as a scientific method, but as a “reactionary worldview” that opposes Marxism: “<...> the only theory that has defied Marxism on the Soviet soil over the past few years is the Formal theory” (Троцкий 1923: 21). There is no doubt that L. Trotsky’s attitude defined the subsequent critique of formalism as a “bourgeois science”.

A few months before the publication of the Eichenbaum’s article, on the 16–18<sup>th</sup> of April, he held three open lectures on the theory of the Formal method at Kharkiv National University. We can learn about the lectures from the article of V. Bojko, which is based more on their content: “<...> he outlined the essence of the formal method of studying literature, made critical observation of modern Russian literature from the formalist point of view and made a historical survey of the way of life of the Russian writer” (Бойко 1926: 141).

B. Eichenbaum’s article caused a great discussion among Ukrainian critics: first, it is necessary to delineate the positions of Z. Chuchmarov and V. Bojko in the opinion of A. Shamraj. The former two consider literature from the point of view of *historical materialism*. Therefore, their criticism was directed towards both the Formal method itself and the aesthetic position of the formalists. Secondly, their criticism possesses a rather superficial understanding of the essence of the formalist approach. Furthermore, they articulate facts taken out of the context. For example, Z. Chuchmarov (Чучмарьов 1926: 210–211) accuses the formalists and B. Eichenbaum in particular for the absence of a “ready-made system and doctrine”, naming such position as “home negligent philosophy”.

Ahapij Shamraj speaks from the position of literary historian, whose aim is to study the “historical perspective and the role of *OPOYAZ* in the overall development of formalism as a movement in criticism and literature” (Шамрай 1926: 239–240). In this sense, his position seems to be the most interesting. The first part of the article is devoted to the review of those critical and literary works of Ukrainian authors<sup>15</sup>, whose approaches continue a theoretical line of the Russian formalists. At this point he talks about the reception of the *OPOYAZ*’s works, which gave an impulse to the revision of the very “sense of the literary fact” in Ukrainian literature, as well as raising the level of a professional literary criticism.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, A. Shamraj mentions the articles on Semenکو’s and Chuprynka’s poetry published in *Літературно-критичний альманах*, the article by A. Nikovsky “Vita Nova” on Tychnyna’s poetry, the critical articles by J. Mezhenko, the article B. Jakubovsky “До питання Шевченкових творів”, etc.

Shamraj not only notes the popularity of the Formal theory (“everywhere, even in the province far from the centre, the circles of ‘formalists’ began to appear”), but he also emphasises that literary studies transcended the “textbooks on literary theory” (Шамрай 1926: 248).

In the second part the author attempts to “reconcile” the theory of “figurative thinking” of Alexander Potebnia and Alexander Veselovsky’s theory of plot with the method of “maximalists-formalists”, concluding that since “a literary work consists of two moments – formal and ideological”, a scientific study must operate with “those methodological instruments that are inherent in the nature of each of these series” (Шамрай 1926: 255). In the final part A. Shamraj analyses the picture of the autumn landscape from Mychailo Kotsubynsky’s novel *Fata Morgana* using the Formal method. That by itself could serve as a vivid example of an application of the formalist approach to the analysis of the national literature.

## Conclusion

The discussions about the national content of literature that unfolded throughout the 1920s on the pages of Ukrainian periodicals indicate an attempt to fence off the influence of the Russian “imperial” metropolitan culture and create an independent national version of literature and the humanities. At the same time, even a superficial analysis of the literary and philological material of this period shows the adaptation of certain theoretical and artistic ideas of the Formal School.

In conclusion, these discussions show that during the 1920s three universalist models – Marxism, nationalism and formalism competed with each other. If in the first half of the 1920s, these projects (each of them had its own universalist vision of the place of literature in a system of social and political relations) still coexisted as evidenced by the policy of *Ukrainisation* and the *New Economic Policy* (NEP), the development of the avant-garde movement and the ability to lead open discussions, then from the mid-1920s the aesthetic and pragmatic paradigms in Soviet art gradually began to merge into one vision. From the end of the 1920s onwards, both the national project and all the theories that competed with Marxism gradually ground to a halt. As a result, the diversity and multi-layered Soviet culture of the 1920s came to an end to be replaced by a more monolithic culture: the vector of the national politics changed; the participants of the discussions were forced to repent publicly.<sup>16</sup> In 1934, the Union of Soviet Writers was created and the method of socialist realism was proclaimed as the only method of Soviet literature.

In general, the 1920s became the boundary that marked, on the one hand, the contours of the national Ukrainian culture and raised the question of the national identity. On the other hand, we can talk here about the phenomenon of border as a certain “space” for rethinking

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<sup>16</sup> On 27 January 1930 a note by V. Shklovsky “Памятник научной ошибке”) was published in the *Literary News*. On 20 January 1931 the decree on the dissolution of “New Generation” (an avant-garde organization led by M. Semenko in 1928–1930) appeared.

the tradition and at the same time for the emergence of new meanings. It is symptomatic that this process occurred against the backdrop of historical and political changes, which was itself a borderline state marked by special dynamics of search, both historical and cultural.

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