

---

## Introduction to Part II: Soviet Russian Book Studies from the 1920s

Anne O. Fisher

---

As we mark the centenary of the eventful decade of the 1920s, this issue of *Lingua Franca* presents the first English translations of works written in that period by Boris Eikhenbaum and Iurii Tynianov, two key theorists of the Formal method.

In Soviet Russia, the 1920s — or more specifically the era of NEP (the New Economic Policy of 1921-1928, when economic regulations and centralization were relaxed) — was a period of relative freedom and recovery sandwiched between a preceding period of chaos and destruction (World War I, revolution, and civil war) and a subsequent period of intensive industrialization and state consolidation of power (the First Five-Year Plan of 1928-1932). During NEP, groups such as LEF (Left Front of Art), OPOYAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language) and the Moscow Linguistic Circle — groups with shifting and occasionally overlapping memberships — sought new

*Lingua Franca*: The open access journal of the

Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP)

Editors: Cynthia Gabbay, Susan Pickford, Mariana Silveira

ISSN 2475-1367

Issue 8 (2022), Part II: Soviet Russian Book Studies from the 1920s

Guest editor: Anne O. Fisher

Cite: Anne O. Fisher, "Introduction to Part II: Soviet Russian Book Studies from the 1920s," *Lingua Franca*, Issue 8, Part II (2022),

<https://www.sharpweb.org/linguafranca/2022-IntroductionRussia>.

methodologies for interpreting the literary past and defining current literary tasks. In this post-revolutionary context, familiar words were given new connotations.<sup>1</sup>

The definition of “social command” ([sotszakaz], from [sotsial'nyi zakaz]) was contested: in theory, writers were meant to follow the “social command,” letting the needs and interests of the new Soviet society determine the forms and topics of the new Soviet literature, but the reality was a fierce ideological struggle over who got to decide what those needs and interests were. Writers and theorists talked not about the word, but about the “sign” [znak], examining the relationship between signifier and signified and describing the sign’s function within its aesthetic system. An especially loaded term was “fact” [fakt], essentially any “objective” feature of reality that had to be “objectively” dealt with.

The “literary fact” was crucial to the Formalist project of disentangling literary studies from other disciplines and grounding them instead in the analysis of relevant — that is, literary — facts. Literary theorist and historian Boris Eikhenbaum (1886-1959) described the origin and evolution of the Formal method over the past ten years in his 1926 apologia “The Theory of the Formal Method” [Teoria “Formal'nogo metoda”]:

History demanded from us a genuine revolutionary pathos: categorical theses, pitiless irony, a pugnacious refusal to come to terms on any basis whatsoever. In this state of affairs it was vital to counter the subjective-aesthetic principles inspiring the Symbolists’ theoretical works by propagandizing an objective-scientific attitude toward facts. Hence the new pathos of scientific positivism characteristic of the Formalists: the rejection of philosophical premises, of psychological or aesthetic interpretations, etc. The break with the aesthetics of philosophy and with ideological theories of art was dictated by the very state of affairs. It was time to turn to the facts and, eschewing general systems and problems, to start from the center — from where the facts of art confront us.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I thank Ainsley Morse and Nora Seligman Favorov for their feedback, which strengthened this introduction; remaining weaknesses are mine alone.

<sup>2</sup> Boris Eikhenbaum, “The Theory of the Formal Method,” trans. Irwin Titunik, in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Chicago: Dalkey Archive, [1971] 2002), 7. I have slightly adjusted Titunik’s translation.

Eikhenbaum doesn't go into specifics here about what actually constitutes a "literary fact," likely because Iurii Tynianov (1894-1943), Eikhenbaum's fellow Formalist and OPOYAZ member, had already discussed this at length in his 1924 article "Literary Fact" [Literaturnyi fakt]:

The definitions of literature that proceed from its "fundamental" features run up against living *literary fact*. Even as it becomes more and more difficult to give a firm *definition of literature*, any contemporary can tell you exactly what makes a *literary fact*. He will say that X has nothing to do with literature and is a fact of everyday life [byt] or of the poet's personal life, whereas Y is definitely a literary fact. An older contemporary, who has lived through one or two — if not more — literary revolutions, will point out that in his day, this or that phenomenon was not a literary fact, but has now become one; and vice versa. Literary journals and almanacs are nothing new, but only in our day have they come to be perceived as "literary works" and "literary facts" in their own right. *Zaum* [trans-sense language — AF] has always existed, in the language of children, sectarians, etc., but only in our day has it become a literary fact. Conversely, something that is a literary fact today may tomorrow become an ordinary fact of life and disappear from literature.<sup>3</sup>

As Daria Khitrova points out, "Tynianov uses 'literary fact' to mean any verbal construct that is perceived as literature."<sup>4</sup> Yet these perceptions are always changing, a point that, as Khitrova notes, Tynianov himself makes in his essay: "the fact of evolution sweeps away all firm and static definitions."<sup>5</sup> In "Literary Fact," Tynianov demonstrates how "the new pathos of scientific positivism characteristic of the Formalists" (to borrow Eikhenbaum's phrasing) is capable of processing the literary past as well as the literary present, when so much that had been "firm and static" was "swe[pt] away."

On the whole, Formalist theory — especially Tynianov's emphasis on change — was in direct conflict with the increasing rigidity of official ideology. After several attacks were made on the Formal method in print and at public debates, Eikhenbaum wrote

---

<sup>3</sup> Yuri Tynianov, "Literary Fact," in *Permanent Evolution: Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film*, trans., ed. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko, intro. Daria Khitrova (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 156.

<sup>4</sup> Daria Khitrova, "Introduction," in *Permanent Evolution: Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film*, trans., ed. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko, (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Tynianov, "Literary Fact," 156; quoted in Khitrova, "Introduction," 12.

“The Theory of the Formal Method” to defend the approach. “Theory,” a staple of theory courses, is widely anthologized (in either Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis’s translation from 1965 or Irwin Titunik’s from 1971). A few years after “Theory,” Eikhenbaum would publish another work that, while also available in English translation (again by Irwin Titunik, from 1971), tends to be known by a smaller circle: “Literary Environment” [Literaturnyi byt, 1929]. In “Literary Environment” Eikhenbaum moves away from explicating Formalist methodology, working instead toward a sociology of literature, a direction he would continue in his lifelong study of Tolstoy.

But “Literary Environment” was not a stand-alone article; it was written and published as part of a three-essay set comprising the “Science” section of Eikhenbaum’s formally experimental 1929 book *My Chronicle. Literature. Science. Criticism. Potpourri*. [Moi vremennik. Slovesnost'. Nauka. Kritika. Smes']. Upon opening the book, the reader discovers that the “Science” section has a subtitle, “Literary Studies” [Literaturovedenie]: clearly, Eikhenbaum’s pointed reminder of the early Formalists’ insistence that literary studies must be an independent branch of scientific inquiry. The three essays that appear together in the “Science: Literary Studies” section are “Literary Environment,” “Literature and the Writer” [Literatura i pisatel'], and “Literary Domesticity” [Literaturnaia domashnost'], but only “Literary Environment” has hitherto been available in English. This is a lacuna that should be filled: the three essays go together and should be read together. Eikhenbaum’s introductory note to *My Chronicle* sets up the reasoning for this:

To the Reader:

This book’s cover indicates that this is a book conceptualized as a journal. The reader has every right to expect an introduction from the editors.

I am not going to call on readers to subscribe and I am not going to release my chronicle periodically. I simply wanted to sift my material through the form of the journal, a form in which contemporary editors severely fail to succeed. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some writers published these kinds of journals, filling them with their own works.

The journal is a special genre, distinctly opposed to the almanac, the anthology, etc. It was interesting and pleasant for me to write and collect materials with this genre

in mind. Never mind that this is a flight of fancy. Life without such flight can sometimes get too boring.

B. Eikhenbaum

June 15, 1929<sup>6</sup>

In other words, Eikhenbaum wants us to read his book not according to the rules of the book, but according to the rules of the thick journal.<sup>7</sup> Why? It has to do with the lively conversation about the genre of the thick journal that Tynianov, Eikhenbaum, and their fellow OPOYAZ member Viktor Shklovsky (1894-1984) had been having for years.

We already heard a snippet of this conversation back in 1924, in Tynianov's "Literary Fact" ("Literary journals and almanacs are nothing new, but only in our day have they come to be perceived as 'literary works' and 'literary facts' in their own right"). In 1928, Shklovsky picks up the thread again in "The Journal as Literary Form" [Zhurnal kak literaturnaia forma], where he claims that the genre of the journal, although increasingly irrelevant due to historical change, is still capable of generating meaning that exceeds the sum of its individual texts:

And so, the Russian journal was subjected to various influences of a social, economic, and literary nature. Many of those conditions have disappeared. [...] The journal — I'm talking about the thick journal — doesn't have a basis now for existing in the way it once did. [...] Now the journal can only exist as a special literary form. *It has to hold together not just because individual parts are interesting, but because the connection between them is.*<sup>8</sup>

Eikhenbaum's *My Chronicle* is in fact an elaborate response to Shklovsky's claim that the genre "doesn't have a basis now for existing in the way it once did." Eikhenbaum's aw-shucks "Never mind that [*My Chronicle*] is a flight of fancy," his pretense that the book is

---

<sup>6</sup> Boris Eikhenbaum, *My Chronicle*, in *"My Chronicle": Prose and Selected Articles of the 20s and 30s* ["Moi vremennik": Khudozhestvennaia proza i izbrannye stat'i 20-30-x godov] (St. Petersburg: INAPRESS, 2001), 26. Here and elsewhere all translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>7</sup> In the nineteenth-century Russophone tradition, journals ran along a spectrum from "thick" to "thin." Essentially, "thick journals" were serious periodicals publishing intellectually stimulating literary, cultural, and socio-economic work, while "thin journals" churned out light, sometimes crude entertainment.

<sup>8</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, "The Journal as Literary Form," in *The Hamburg Count* [Gamburgskii shchet] (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo pisatelei v Leningrade, 1928), 115-16.

a mere exercise in “sifting [his] material through the form of the journal,” is just a diversion. What Eikhenbaum is really doing is testing the genre, experimenting with what he clearly agrees is “a special literary form” in order to discover the nature of “the connection between [individual parts].”

Serguei Oushakine, in his foreword to a new edition of *My Chronicle* published in 2020, shows that the generative effect of the journal genre is naturally linked to *byt* (“environment” or “everyday life”), one of Eikhenbaum’s lifelong areas of inquiry:

*Byt* — fragmented yet flowing, melding the routine of habit with the succession of everyday random occurrences — demanded a suitable literary form. The format of journal-as-annals, of monograph-as-chronicle, was one that could accommodate both rigid structure and unforeseen events. “A book conceptualized as a journal” allowed Eikhenbaum to present his theory of literary *byt* as a kind of specific and arranged literary system, that is, as a kind of network of autonomous and/or isolated texts in a “journal,” texts that, despite their autonomy, can produce a cumulative effect.<sup>9</sup>

*My Chronicle* is sometimes seen as a sort of “consolation prize” making up for another project that had been under discussion since the mid-1920s but never materialized: a history of Russian literature written collaboratively by OPOYAZ. Tynianov and Shklovsky corresponded about it and Tynianov even discussed the project with a publisher.<sup>10</sup> But Oushakine points out that *My Chronicle* is not a failure; rather, it is “Eikhenbaum’s most original book, decades ahead of studies of the sociology of taste, style, and cultural production that would start appearing in Europe at the end of the 1960s.”<sup>11</sup> This issue of *Lingua Franca* offers the first English translations of the remaining two essays in the “Science: Literary Studies” section of *My Chronicle*, making the entire three-essay section available in English and allowing a wider audience to test the “cumulative effect” of the journal genre for themselves.

---

<sup>9</sup> Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “Foreword: Boris Eikhenbaum’s Single-Use Periodical [Odnorazovaia periodika Borisa Eikhenbauma. Predislovie],” in Boris Eikhenbaum, *My Chronicle. Literature. Science. Criticism. Potpourri*. (Ekaterinburg, Moscow: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2020), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Khitrova, “Introduction,” 21.

<sup>11</sup> Oushakine, “Foreword,” 14.

Writer and theorist Iurii Tynianov (1894-1943) is less well known in English translation than his fellow OPOYAZ members Eikhenbaum and Shklovsky. An excellent corrective to this neglect is *Permanent Evolution: Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film* (Academic Studies Press, 2019), an award-winning collection of Tynianov's articles and essays edited and translated by Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko with a visionary introduction by Daria Khitrova. Khitrova stresses that *Permanent Evolution* "does not offer a complete edition of Tynianov's scholarly works" and anticipates that "[m]ore translations will hopefully follow."<sup>12</sup> *Lingua Franca* is pleased to answer this call by publishing Morse and Redko's translation of Tynianov's 1923 article "Illustrations" [Illustratsii], a study of the relationship between illustrations and their text.

Tynianov's general thesis in "Illustrations" is that "[t]he concreteness of a work of verbal art does not correspond to its concreteness when transposed into a visual medium. [...] More precisely, the specific concreteness of poetry is diametrically opposed to the concreteness of pictorial art."<sup>13</sup> In other words, Tynianov's interest here is not in exploring how a sign can be translated from one sign system (verbal) to another (visual), a question touched on later by structural linguist (and, by some counts, fellow Formalist) Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) in "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." Rather, Tynianov is interested in why concrete signs, in particular, cannot be so translated.

Marietta Chudakova explains Tynianov's focus as a side effect of the categorical OPOYAZ approach and indicates that over time, Tynianov would grow less stringent: "The pathos of the article is the urge to define the individual language of each art, emphasizing differences and drawing attention away from similarities (cf. Tynianov's subsequent approach to film in comparing it with theater). This goes back to the general 'specifying' methodology of Opo Yaz."<sup>14</sup> It's also true that Tynianov puts his thumb on the scale, so

---

<sup>12</sup> Khitrova, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>13</sup> Iurii Tynianov, "Illustrations," trans. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko, in *Lingua Franca* 2022, Part II: Soviet Russian Book Studies from the 1920s, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Marietta Chudakova, "Commentary [Kommentarii]," in Iurii Tynianov, *Poetics. History of Literature. Film*. [Poetika. Istoriiia literatury. Kino.], (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 546.

to speak, by concentrating on cases with the greatest possible incommensurability between verbal and visual concreteness, such as *zaum* [trans-sense language] or Nikolai Gogol's story "The Nose" [Nos]. But in rejecting the possibility of illustrating concretized language, Tynianov is not rejecting the possibilities of concretized language itself. Quite the opposite: he later doubles down on verbal concretization à la "The Nose" in his 1927 satirical novella *Lieutenant Kizhe* [Podporuchik Kizhe], about an error in a handwritten army document that takes on a life of its own, serving a long and distinguished career in the Imperial Russian army and even fathering a child. Khitrova suggests two overall conclusions to be drawn from Tynianov's oeuvre:

First, Tynianov's method is to examine the literary text as a process. He is interested in drafts, preliminary work, crossed out sections, typos, misattributions, misunderstandings, mishandlings, and everything else that happens to a text in the course of its creation and subsequent life [...]. The second conclusion is that what is possible does not always come to be. [...] Things that have been cast aside (by the author, or by history as written by the victors) can turn out to be more productive. Mistakes and accidents can be systemic.<sup>15</sup>

It's no stretch to see *Kizhe* as emblematic of Tynianov's interest in "typos," in what "happens to a text in the course of its creation and subsequent life," in the productivity of "mistakes and accidents." But "Illustrations" is emblematic of this interest too, as an explanation of what happens when texts are "mishandled" by publishers of extravagantly illustrated gift editions. By offering the first English translation of "Illustrations," *Lingua Franca* is helping recover something Tynianov himself "cast aside" so that it may continue to reach new audiences and "be more productive."

It is appropriate in closing to pause and reflect on this year's grim centenaries. In 1922, the Bolsheviks forcibly deported over 200 intellectuals on the so-called Philosophers' Ships. The first major Soviet show trial, against twelve Socialist Revolutionaries, also took place in 1922; the trial scared Viktor Shklovsky, who had participated in illegal SR activities, so much that he voluntarily left the country in 1922 (though he was allowed to return in September 1923 after pleading his case in a startling

---

<sup>15</sup> Khitrova, "Introduction," 21.

note to the authorities at the end of his autobiographical book *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* [*Zoo, ili pis'ma ne o liubvi*]). It's impossible not to note that now, a century later, large numbers of Russians are again leaving the country. Some leave to find work; some to avoid being forced to support — or fight in — Putin's war; some to protect their children from institutionalized indoctrination in Russian schools; some, especially members of the LGBTQ+ community, because their views or identities make them likely to be attacked or imprisoned if they remain. Many dissenters who left Russia now find themselves in challenging circumstances, while those who remain are in a bleak situation indeed. These problems are real, and it is urgent that we face them. But as I write these words on November 15, 2022, Russian Federation forces continue to occupy Ukrainian territory and shell Ukrainian cities. Ukrainian homes are being destroyed. Ukrainian civilians are being killed. Stopping the Russian Federation's killing and destruction must be the first concern.